GARNER’S MODERN ENGLISH USAGE
Other Books Written or Edited by Bryan A. Garner

Black’s Law Dictionary
(Thomson Reuters, 10th ed. 2014)

The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation
(Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016)

The Chicago Manual of Style, ch. 5, “Grammar and Usage”
(Univ. of Chicago Press, 16th ed. 2010)

Garner on Language and Writing
with preface by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (ABA, 2009)

HBR Guide to Better Business Writing

Quack This Way: David Foster Wallace and Bryan A. Garner Talk Language and Writing
(RosePen, 2013)

Garner’s Dictionary of Legal Usage
(Oxford Univ. Press, 3d ed. 2011)

The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage & Style
(Oxford Univ. Press, 2000)

Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts
with Justice Antonin Scalia (Thomson/West, 2012)

Making Your Case: The Art of Persuading Judges
with Justice Antonin Scalia (Thomson/West, 2008)

The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style
(West, 3d ed. 2013)

Legal Writing in Plain English
(Univ. of Chicago Press, 2d ed. 2013)

The Winning Brief
(Oxford Univ. Press, 3d ed. 2014)

The Elements of Legal Style
(Oxford Univ. Press, 2d ed. 2002)

Guidelines for Drafting and Editing Legislation
(RosePen, 2016)

Ethical Communications for Lawyers
(LawProse, 2009)

The Winning Oral Argument
(West, 2009)

The Rules of Golf in Plain English
with Jeffrey Kuhn (Univ. of Chicago Press, 3d ed. 2012)

A New Miscellany-at-Law
by Sir Robert Megarry (Hart, 2005)

Texas, Our Texas: Remembrances of the University
(Eakin Press, 1984)

Securities Disclosure in Plain English
(CCH, 1999)

Basic Law Terms
(West Group, 1999)

Criminal Law Terms
(West Group, 2000)

Family Law Terms
(West Group, 2001)

Business Law Terms
(West Group, 1999)
GARNER’S MODERN ENGLISH USAGE

FOURTH EDITION

Bryan A. Garner
To my beloved brothers,

Bradley Alan Garner  
Cincinnati Conservatory of Music  
Cincinnati, Ohio

Blair Arthur Garner  
America’s Morning Show  
Nashville, Tennessee

and

In memory of my late friends and mentors,  
all of whom I dearly miss

Professor Sheridan Baker (1918–2000)  
The University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Dr. Robert W. Burchfield (1923–2004)  
Editor in Chief, The Oxford English Dictionary Department  
The University of Oxford

Hon. Thomas Gibbs Gee (1925–1994)  
United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit  
Houston, Texas

Professor Alan M. F. Gunn (1906–1989)  
Texas Tech University Department of English  
Lubbock, Texas

Tex Lezar, Esq. (1948–2004)  
Former colleague at Carrington, Coleman, Sloman & Blumenthal  
Dallas, Texas

Vice-Chancellor of the Supreme Court (U.K.)  
Lincoln’s Inn, London

Professor Roy M. Mersky (1925–2008)  
Tarlton Law Library, The University of Texas  
Austin, Texas

Professor Pat Sullivan (1924–2008)  
West Texas A&M Department of English  
Canyon, Texas

Professor John W. Velz (1930–2008)  
The University of Texas Department of English  
Austin, Texas

David Foster Wallace (1962–2008)  
Pomona College Department of English  
Claremont, California

Professor Charles Alan Wright (1927–2000)  
The University of Texas School of Law  
Austin, Texas
“Usage . . . is the surest pilot in speaking, and we should treat language as currency minted with the public stamp. But in all cases we have need of a critical judgment.”
—Quintilian, ca. a.D. 88

“Modern faults of usage have two causes: indifference or rebellious recklessness, spurning rules; and half study, which finds specious justification for forms that are not really sound.”
—Edward N. Teall, 1940

“To treat the sick, you must have a good knowledge of the healthy. But it is even better to know something about the disease. If the writer means to fight for the best possible use of language, he must be forever on his guard against the ailments that words are prone to.”
—Konstantin Fedin, ca. 1950

“Presumably a youngster should be able to distinguish between good and well, between done and did, and if youngsters do not learn this naturally, as those in literate homes do, they must be taught the usage in school. There is at least as much reason to teach them to say, ‘He invited Mary and me’ as there is to teach them how to brush their teeth, to shift gears, or to ride in an airplane.”
—Charlton Laird, 1970

“Language must take its place alongside diet, traffic safety, and the cost of living as something that everyone thinks about and talks about.”
—Dwight Bolinger, 1980

“Standard American English—the English of our dictionaries and grammar books—is a great, messy deluge of words, some of which overlap in meaning, many of which have multiple meanings, and many of which can be used as various parts of speech. . . . Everyone who chooses to use Standard English must make an endless series of decisions about the language, and thereby has a say in how it develops.”
—Barbara Wallraff, 2000
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GARNER’S MODERN ENGLISH USAGE

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With this new edition, Oxford University Press has decided to rename the book *Garner's Modern English Usage*—using *English* instead of *American*. That change restores what had been the idea behind the first edition. The implied global emphasis of *English* makes more sense today than ever before, given the book’s broadly inclusive approach to World English, not just to American English and British English.

Through the Internet, we have access to the largest database for corpus linguistics ever compiled: the Google database of English-language books printed throughout the world. The use of big data in these pages doubtless makes *GMEU* the most thoroughly empirical work of its kind. I am grateful to the legal department of Google for arranging for me to be the first author explicitly licensed to reproduce results from the Google Ngram Viewer, which shows graphs depicting the relative frequency of specified sequences of words within the corpus of English-language books as compared with other sequences. From this big-data resource, it has become possible to calculate ratios on word frequency and phrase frequency in World English and in the two major subtypes: American English and British English. These ratios, found at the end of many entries, provide some fascinating data: the frequency of one form (the prevalent one) as contrasted with another (a variant).

Of course, the ngram data can hardly be viewed as infallible. There may be a false sense of precision in a ratio such as 4,376:1 (the idea that one word appears in print precisely 4,376 times for every one time that its variant appears). It may well be that the most current ratios available—for the year 2008—are not as fully reliable as those for earlier years because the books having been scanned are a smaller proportion of the whole universe of candidates. (Still, the corpus includes 206,272 books just for 2008.) There may be other shortcomings. Nevertheless, on balance it seemed better to provide the data than not to, on the stipulation that readers mustn’t view the ratios as immutable truth. Instead, these snapshots of the language, especially when viewed in their relationship to usage over time, can provide a sound basis for understanding linguistic developments and usage trends.

To arrive at accurate numbers, I used Google ngrams with contextualized searches within the 2012 Google corpus. The power of these ngrams would have astonished earlier lexicographers—just as it astonished me at first. They take much of the guesswork out of linguistic assessments of Standard Written English. Their reliability was confirmed to me time and again when I compared the results against other major corpora.

We can now determine that the phrasal verb *to home in on* arose in English print about 1932. (The original metaphor related to homing pigeons.) We’re also able to know that the variant form *to hone in on* emerged about seven years later and has never been as frequent a choice in published books. It now trails by a nearly 1.7-to-1 ratio. That’s in printed books throughout the English-speaking world. In British books, it’s a 4-to-1 ratio. In American books, the ratio is 1.6 to 1. So in American English the variant has gained more ground. Anyone who attentively listens to American speech will notice that most people (perhaps 80%?) say *to home in on*. Who are they? Mostly ordinary people. And who says *to hone in on*? Mostly well-read people—subscribers to *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, or the like. That’s supportable only by anecdotal evidence—one observer having tested this hypothesis on thousands of audiences over a 20-year period. Yes, the question fascinates me, and I’ve had the good fortune of being able to administer quizzes containing this issue to over 50,000 people on three continents. The evidence isn’t entirely anecdotal, except that I’ve had to take people at their word about their reading habits.
Preface to the Fourth Edition

The phrasing to hone in on began as a simple error—an example of word-swapping, in which a term gets replaced by its near-homophone. Professional editors tend to stick to the original formulation, but in this instance the speech habits of English speakers, especially American ones, are increasingly at odds with what appears in well-edited English. At some point the editorial preference for the original phrasing (to home in on) will probably shift. But we’re not yet to that point.

Ascertaining the facts about usage with ngrams is trickier than it might seem: you can’t just search home in vs. hone in. You’d get many false positives for every reference in English-language books to a home in Malibu, etc., with hundreds of thousands of misleading results, if not millions. So I contextualized the searches, usually by inflecting a verb: homed in on vs. honed in on. (Google ngrams allow you to use up to five consecutive words for the purpose of contextualizing.) In that search, we’ve inflected the verb and included a terminal preposition to achieve precise results. A little ingenuity was required to arrive at many of the ratios displayed throughout the text.

With some phrases, big-data research is exceedingly difficult. With as such, for example, its rightness depends entirely on what has been said in the preceding sentence: what is the antecedent of such? A Google ngram can’t tell you that. So with some words and phrases for which useful ngram data couldn’t be gathered, no comparative information could be supplied. Either the ratios wouldn’t be meaningful (as with shapable [AmE] vs. shapeable [BrE], or supervisory [one sense] and supervisory [different sense]), or else no suitable search could be framed (as with the adverbial forms supplyly vs. supply [the latter, of course, being much more frequent as a noun or verb], or solon [as contrasted with what?]). A fair amount of thought went into these decisions throughout. Where ratios do appear, it should be clear to you what is being compared against what (prevalent form vs. variant)—for which you may need to read the words within the entry just above. Where desirable, the search terms are supplied within parentheses, as when a reader might have reasonable doubts about what’s being compared.

One of the advantages of big data is that outlier instances become trivial. In saying that Christmas bazaar is standard and *Christmas bizarre a solecism (marked here by the asterisk), it matters not that a certain writer might have written, “I thought Christmas bizarre that year.” In the larger scheme of big data, that odd instance becomes unimportant as against the others in which writers have mistakenly used the noun phrase *Christmas bizarre in place of the standard phrase to refer to a seasonal marketplace.

A pessimist might well wonder why it’s useful to record a 25,000-to-1 ratio (a few such huge discrepancies in usage are noted). The answer is one that you could hardly appreciate until you’re suddenly in an argument with someone who insists that the outlier usage is correct. One of the virtues of a reliable usage guide is to settle debates between language aficionados, or between editor and author. The empirical evidence here marshaled reduces the degree of opinion involved in such matters.

How you think about the ratios is central to decisions about good usage. The ngrams give you diachronic evidence of usage (over, let’s say, the past 300 years). They also allow you to calculate ratios for any given year within the span, up to the year 2008. That’s the most recent time for which reliable statistics are available. Hence all my mentions of the “current ratio” refer to materials published in 2008. The ratios show a snapshot of usage as it existed in that year.

For those wishing to replicate my research results, the “smoothing” for the ngrams was set at 3, the database was English worldwide, and the year was 2008 (unless specified otherwise). Simply use the Google search engine to find “Ngram Viewer,” and you’ll soon discover the many delights that ngrams have to offer.

Let me illustrate the lexicographic utility of big data by citing what is in itself a point of only slight importance. When did the standard hark back start morphing into *hearken back? (Again, the asterisk marks a nonrecommended variant.) According to
Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage (1989)—and repeated in its update of 2002—the variant just doesn’t appear in BrE: “We have no evidence that *hearken back is establishing itself in British use, though it has occasional use in the U.S.” That statement is an extrapolation based on the impressive Merriam-Webster lexicographic files compiled over the years through its reading program.

But with a few seconds of research using ngrams, it’s possible to see that the variant *hearken back first appeared in published British books in 1860 and occurred in other British writing throughout the 20th century. It didn’t appear in American books with any appreciable frequency until 1887. In both varieties of English it began increasingly significantly about 1960. In 1989, when Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage was first published, the phrase hark back outranged *hearken back in AmE by a 10-to-1 ratio, and in BrE by a 28-to-1 ratio. So the inroads have indeed been greater on the American side. It’s also possible now to see that *harken back occurred more frequently in print than *hearken back from 1965 to 2000 in AmE, and from 1985 to 2000 in BrE—but only during those periods. In any event, both *hearken back and *harken back are variant phrases that have never seriously rivaled the standard phrase (hark back) in Standard Written English.

So the earlier usage commentators cited negatively by Merriam-Webster—Theodore Bernstein (1970) and Roy Copperud (1980)—were actually correct in their editorial recommendations against the variants. “They think it must be a mistake,” intones the Merriam-Webster book. Well, yes. A variant newcomer that’s just a by-form of an established term is going to be viewed as an editorial mistake. When Bernstein and Copperud were writing, it was probably a Stage 1 misusage, possibly Stage 2. The fact that Merriam-Webster’s files contained a few instances of the linguistic interlopers hardly confirmed their full acceptability. In fairness, though, the Merriam-Webster editors were trying to extrapolate from the relatively sparse evidence they had.

Let’s consider another simple yet even more obscure example: is the word for a wheelbarrow or dumpcart designed for farm use spelled tumbril or tumbril? The word dates from the 14th century in English. The OED and most other dictionaries record the primary entry under tumbril, and that was indeed the predominant spelling through the 18th century. But beginning about 1800, the spelling tumbril began to dominate. By 1830, its prevalence as the leading form in print sources was unquestioned, and the -el spelling has never again seriously rivaled the -il spelling. We know this from Google ngrams. Yet the dictionaries would lead you to conclude otherwise. This is an infinitesimal microcosm of the valuable information now available to us all.

It’s interesting to speculate about why the change from tumbril to tumbril occurred when it did, at the beginning of the 19th century. The fourth edition of a dictionary called The Complete Farmer, published in the 1790s, lists only the spelling tumbril and defines it as “a dung-cart.” There must be clues elsewhere.

The 1938 edition of the Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language lists as one meaning of tumbril: “A type of cart in which victims were carried to the guillotine during the first French Revolution [1787]: an erroneous use.” Webster’s Second New International Dictionary (1934) contains a similar definition (it’s missing from the OED). Mentions of the word tumbril spiked in the late 1780s and 1790s. The switch to the spelling tumbril occurred in 1800 in AmE and in the early 1820s in BrE. Could it be that farmers, especially those who wrote about farm-related subjects, wished to avoid, in their ordinary mentions of dumpcarts, associations with the bloody guillotines of revolutionary France and therefore chose the other spelling? That’s just speculation. But such little discoveries hold the possibility of many new avenues of research.

Hark back and tumbril are just two tiny instances. Multiply those by 5,000 (for a usage guide)—or, ultimately, by a million (for a truly unabridged English dictionary). The degree of ascertainable knowledge about the language is greater than ever before.
In the past, lexicographers (including me) were playing a guessing game: presented with seven instances, four of them going one way and three another, the dictionary-writer would have to make an educated guess about what forms predominated in print. Their evidence was scanty and often unrepresentative. Now lots of guesswork has been eliminated by the powerful tool of big data; lexicography is being revolutionized. Certainly this book has been revolutionized. Every page has been reworked or confirmed by using the extraordinary help of big data.

Mind you, from its very inception in the late 1990s, this book has made copious use of many linguistic corpora. It's just that the corpus now available is incomparably more vast than what was available when the previous editions were written.

Have my editorial recommendations changed because of big data? Yes—a few of them. But on the whole, ngrams have borne out the overwhelming majority of judgments expressed in my earlier usage books. Used carefully, with sophistication, the ngrams allow much greater certainty about usage: dates, changes over time during the full period of Modern English, relative frequencies, and geographic limitations. These possibilities make it an exciting time to be a lexicographer.

One recurrent finding bears note. All varieties of English are powerfully influenced by American English. When my late friend Robert W. Burchfield was editor in chief of the Oxford English Dictionary Supplement in the 1970s, he noted that the center of gravity for the English language had shifted to North America. He was right. Again and again, one sees British English and World English following the lead of American usage, often with a lag time of 10 to 50 years. You'll see this trend noted in many entries throughout the book—but of course it's hardly a universal rule.

In this new edition, I've used the same basic techniques and sensibilities that I've always used: given the evidence that I have before me, what judgments would such eminent predecessors such as H.W. Fowler and Theodore Bernstein have made? That's what guides me. But you can read more about that in the rest of the front matter, if you care to—and as I'd encourage you to.

Bryan A. Garner
Dallas, Texas
15 November 2015
Preface to the First Edition

Not long ago, while I was standing at a rental-car counter in Austin, a young clerk told me that a free upgrade to a Cadillac might be available. She would have to see whether any Cadillacs were on the lot just then.

Two minutes passed as she typed, got on the telephone, twirled her hair around her index finger, and then typed some more. Finally, I said, “Can I get the upgrade?”

“You mean, ‘May I get the upgrade?’ ” she responded.

I thought I had imagined it. “What?”

“You said, ‘Can I get the upgrade.’ What you mean is, ‘May I get the upgrade.’ ”

As it happens, I had been working on the manuscript for this book only minutes before, so I couldn’t help thinking how surreal the experience was. I felt a twinge of indignation on the one hand—the kind that almost anyone feels when corrected. But I also thought that her remark was charming in a way. She was doing her best to uphold good English.

But she was wrong, and I gently told her so: “I’m not asking for your permission. I want to know whether you have a Cadillac on the lot. I want to know whether it’s physically possible for me to drive one of them. So: ‘Can I get the upgrade.’ ”

“Oh, I guess you’re right,” she said with resignation.

Experiences like that one give me hope: they show that some people still care about what happens to our language, however misplaced their concern might occasionally be.

The State of the Language

Do I contend that the language is decaying? That it was once in a pristine state and has been sliding ever since? That the glory days are over?

No, I don’t. In many ways, writing today is better than ever. Our best journalists today are as talented a group as has ever worked in the language.

But a great deal of mediocre writing appears in print nowadays, and both written and oral assaults on the language do seem to come at high velocities. The speed comes from mass communications. Turn on the TV and listen to commentators on football, tennis, or golf, and you’ll be treated to the heights of inarticulacy. Then imagine all the millions of viewers whose linguistic perceptions are affected by this blather.

There are good, clarifying forces at work on the language. There are also bad, obscuring forces at work. One language, many realities.

The reality I care about most is that some people still want to use the language well. They want to write effectively; they want to speak effectively. They want their language to be graceful at times and powerful at times. They want to understand how to use words well, how to manipulate sentences, and how to move about in the language without seeming to flail. They want good grammar, but they want more: they want rhetoric in the traditional sense. That is, they want to use language deftly so that it’s fit for their purposes.

This book is for them.

First Principles

Before going any further, I should explain my approach. That’s an unusual thing for the author of a usage dictionary to do—unprecedented, as far as I know. But a guide to good writing is only as good as the principles on which it’s based. And users should naturally be interested in those principles. So, in the interests of full disclosure, here are the ten critical points that, after years of working on usage problems, I’ve settled on:
1. **Purpose.** The purpose of a usage dictionary is to help writers, editors, and speakers use the language effectively: to help them sound grammatical but relaxed, refined but natural, correct but unpedantic.

2. **Realism.** To guide users helpfully, recommendations on usage must be genuinely plausible. They must recognize the language as it currently stands, encourage reasonable approaches to editorial problems, and avoid refighting battles that were long ago lost.

3. **Linguistic Simplicity.** If the same idea can be expressed in a simple way or in a complex way, the simple way is better—and, paradoxically, it will typically lead readers to conclude that the writer is smarter.

4. **Readers’ Reactions.** Generally, writing is good if readers find it easy to follow; writing is bad if readers find it hard to follow.

5. **Tightness.** Omitting needless words is important. As long as it’s accurate, the briefest way of phrasing an idea is usually best because the brevity enhances speed, clarity, and impact.

6. **Word-Judging.** A word or phrase is somewhat undesirable if it has any one of the following characteristics, and is worse if it has two or more:
   
   - (a) it sounds newfangled;
   - (b) it defies logic;
   - (c) it threatens to displace an established expression (but hasn’t yet done so);
   - (d) it originated in a misunderstanding of a word or its etymology;
   - (e) it blurs a useful distinction.

7. **Differentiation.** If related words—especially those differing only in the suffix—begin to take on different senses, it’s wise to encourage the latent distinctions when they’re first emerging and then to follow them once they’re established.

8. **Needless Variants.** Having two or more variant forms of a word is undesirable unless each one signals a distinct meaning.

9. **Conservatism.** If two constructions are current, and one of them has been widely condemned by authorities whose values are in line with those outlined in #6, the other construction is better.

10. **Actual Usage.** In the end, the actual usage of educated speakers and writers is the overarching criterion for correctness. But while actual usage can trump the other factors, it isn’t the only consideration.

   Reasonable though these points may seem to the professional writer or editor, they’re likely to induce hissy fits among modern linguists, for whom #10 is the only valid concern (and only after deleting the word *educated*). The problem for professional writers and editors is that they can’t wait idly to see what direction the language takes. Writers and editors, in fact, influence that direction: they must make decisions.

   And a good usage dictionary should help in those decisions. H.W. Fowler’s groundbreaking *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* did that in 1926 and for generations after; Theodore M. Bernstein’s book *The Careful Writer* did it in 1965; and Wilson Follett’s *Modern American Usage* did it in 1966. That has traditionally been the job of the usage dictionary: to help writers and editors solve editorial predicaments.

### The State of the Genre

Somewhere along the line, though, usage dictionaries got hijacked by the descriptive linguists, who observe language scientifically. For the pure descriptivist, it’s impermissible to say that one form of language is any better than another: as long as a native speaker says it, it’s okay—and anyone who takes a contrary stand is a dunderhead. That has become something of a dogma among professional linguists.

Essentially, descriptivists and prescriptivists are approaching different problems. Descriptivists want to record language as it’s actually used, and they perform a useful
function—though their audience is generally limited to those willing to pore through vast tomes of dry-as-dust research. Prescriptivists—not all of them, perhaps, but enlightened ones—want to figure out the most effective uses of language, both grammatically and rhetorically. Their editorial advice should accord with the predominant practices of the best writers and editors.

For the pure descriptivist, it’s silly to say that infer shouldn’t be “misused” for imply. Presumably, it’s also silly to say that Hobson’s choice is the correct phrase and that Hobbesian choice is an ignorant error, because much evidence can be found for the latter. Likewise, we shouldn’t prohibit any other example of what is here called word-swapping. The extreme view is that even spell-checkers are a bad force because they ensure uniformity and stifle linguistic experimentation in spelling.1

Although there’s little new to be said about this debate, this book does something quite new: it gathers reams of current linguistic evidence to show the many confusions into which writers fall. And they’re constantly falling into them. As Joseph Epstein, the longtime editor of The American Scholar, has observed, “The English language is one vast San Andreas fault, where things are slipping and sliding every moment.”2 English usage is so challenging that even experienced writers need guidance now and then.

Quotations and Citations

This book contains thousands of quotations from published sources. Most are from newspapers, but many are from books and scholarly journals. These quotations came to my hand in various ways.

First, they came from my own reading. For many years, I’ve traveled a good deal, and whenever I go somewhere I make a point of reading and marking at least one local newspaper, usually more. When I return, I enter those sentences into my database.

Second, I have dozens of allies—members of the H.W. Fowler Society, an informal organization I founded—who send me clippings from newspapers. These Fowlerians, who are spread throughout the English-speaking world, have contributed enormously to the book with hundreds of examples.

Third, I’ve supplemented entries with examples gleaned from two online databases: nexis and westlaw. For two decades, they have provided full-text searchability for millions of published documents—a luxury that earlier lexicographers never enjoyed.

But before delving further into online sources, I should address a question that many readers will wonder about. Should I really name names? Should I give full citations in the way that I do? Won’t it mortify a journalist to find some badly written sentence frozen in a reference book for all the world to see?

Well, I hope it isn’t mortifying, and for me it’s nothing new. I used the technique in the second edition of my Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage (1995). The citations appear for three reasons. First, they show that the examples are real, not fabricated. Second, they show the great variety of evidence on which the judgments in this book are based. And third, they’re lexicographically noteworthy: they reflect how the language is being used in our culture in our time.

I have tried to be dispassionate in choosing examples. More of them come from my favorite newspaper, The New York Times, than from any other source: nearly 400 of the some 5,600 illustrative quotations. But a glance at the text will show that they’re from all over the country. And many are British.

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1See Sidney Landau, “Of Lexicography, Computers, and Norms,” 64 Am. Speech 162, 163 (1989) (“I detest even the idea of spelling-correction programs. If they do not serve any heuristic purpose, they are pernicious by artificially limiting the range of spelling choices . . . . We thus artificially limit language change . . . and push all our students toward a common center of officially endorsed usages.”).

Why should British quotations be included, given that this is a dictionary of American usage? Most often the reason is that it seems useful to record differences and similarities between British and American English. It’s sometimes surprising to learn that a given error occurs much more frequently in British English (see, for example, **hark back** (b)).

Yet the book is American, both in its scope and in its point of view. During the mid-20th century, the English language’s center of gravity shifted from England to the United States. And with that shift comes a certain responsibility on the part of those who speak and write American English.

**Lexicographic Methods**

It’s fair to say that the guidance given here is based on a greater corpus of current published writings than any usage guide ever before published. For contemporary usage, the files of our greatest dictionary makers pale in comparison with the full-text search capabilities now provided by *nexis* and *westlaw*. So the prescriptive approach here is leavened by a thorough canvassing of actual usage in modern edited prose.

When I say, then, that **ethicist** is 400 times more common than **ethician**, I have searched vast databases of newspapers and journals to arrive at this round figure. As for those particular terms, the *nexis* databases (as of December 1997) contain 10,138 published documents in which **ethicist** appears, but only 25 documents in which **ethician** appears. (The ratio in *westlaw*’s “allnews” database is 7,400 to 6.) So much for the dictionaries that give the main listing under **ethician**. They’re out of step: the compilers might have 5 or 10 citation slips in their files, but that’s a paltry number when compared with mountains of evidence that the searching of reliable databases can unearth. [Fourth-edition update: Google’s ngrams show that the ratio in English-language books as of 2008 was 148 to 1.]

And when I say that **self-deprecating** (traditionally viewed as incorrect) is 50 times as common as **self-depreciating** (traditionally viewed as correct), I have searched those same databases to give this conservative figure. From 1980 to 1997, **self-deprecating** appeared in 16,040 *nexis* sources, and **self-depreciating** in only 353. (The ratio in *westlaw* is 9,860 to 159.) So much for the usage books that continue to recommend **self-depreciating**: that battle is lost. [Fourth-edition update: Google’s ngrams show that the ratio in English-language books as of 2008 was 23 to 1.]

In this respect—the consideration of voluminous linguistic evidence to back up judgment calls—this book represents a radical departure from most other usage dictionaries.

**Value Judgments**

As you might already suspect, I don’t shy away from making judgments. I can’t imagine that most readers would want me to. Linguists don’t like it, of course, because judgment involves subjectivity. It isn’t scientific. But rhetoric and usage, in the view of most professional writers, aren’t scientific endeavors. You don’t want dispassionate descriptions; you want sound guidance. And that requires judgment.

Essentially, the ideal usage commentator needs to be both a scholar and a critic. The poet Robert Bridges knew that, when it comes to language, value judgments are crucial:

> Scientific philologists will often argue that phonetic decay is a natural process, which has always been at work, and has actually produced the very forms of speech that we value most highly; and that it is therefore a squeamish pedantry to quarel with it at any particular stage, or to wish to interfere with it, or even to speak of decay or corruption of language, for that these very terms beg the question, and are only the particular prejudice of particular persons at a particular
time. But this scientific reasoning is aesthetic nonsense. It is absurd to pretend that no results of natural laws should be disapproved of because it is possible to show that they obey the same laws as the processes of which we approve. The filthiest things in nature are as natural as the loveliest; and in art also the worst is as natural as the best: while the good needs not only effort but sympathetic intelligence to attain and preserve it. It is an aesthetic and not a scientific question. 3

At the same time, though, aesthetic judgments aren’t enough. Bridges overstated the case: when we analyze language, scientific concerns should certainly enter the equation. But he was right, in this little-known passage, to skewer the doctrine on which descriptivism is largely based:

[I]t is no fancy to see a beauty in human speech, and to prefer one [form of] language to another on account of such beauty, and to distinguish the qualities that make the beauty. Learning that forbids such an attitude is contemptible. 4

Yet this willingness to judge should be tempered by scholarship. H.W. Fowler best embodied the qualities of the scholar-critic. He was a lexicographer, true, but he was also a literary critic. He wasn’t exclusively one or the other. His interests were those of the professional editor more than those of the professional linguist. He shared that quality with Theodore Bernstein and Wilson Follett, but he knew more about linguistics than either of those writers. That knowledge was something he had in common with Bergen Evans, but he had better literary and editorial judgment than Evans, and he was confident in exercising that judgment. No one else has quite matched Fowler’s blend of interests and talents: though not infallible, he was the most formidable prescriptive grammarian of the 20th century.

The touchstone for commenting on usage, then, is a mixture of scholarship and criticism. Whether I’ve reached it or not, that has been my goal.

An Autobiographical Note

What possesses someone to write a dictionary of usage? People frequently ask me that question about my Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage. I’ll try to give an answer.

I realized early—at the age of 15—that my primary intellectual interest was the use of the English language. The interest might be partly genetic. My grandfather, Frank Garner of Amarillo, had more than a passing interest in language. This was magnified three or four times in my father, Gary T. Garner of Canyon, a true language aficionado. And then, as my father tells it, his interest seemed to be magnified a hundredfold in me. It became an all-consuming passion.

This passion has taken various forms at different times in my life. When I was 15 it consisted primarily in building my vocabulary. Then I discovered general semantics—the works of S.I. Hayakawa, Wendell Johnson, Stuart Chase, and Alfred Korzybski. Because I grew up in a university town—small though it was—these and other books were readily accessible. I read everything I could find on the subject.

Then, on a wintry evening while visiting New Mexico at the age of 16, I discovered Eric Partridge’s Usage and Abusage. I was enthralled. Never had I held a more exciting book. I spent hours reading his advice on the effective use of words and his essays on everything from Johnsonese to précis writing. He kept mentioning another author, by the name of Fowler, so when I got back to Texas I sought out Fowler’s Modern English Usage. And that book turned out to be even better.

Suffice it to say that by the time I was 18, I had committed to memory most of Fowler, Partridge, and their successors: the Evanses, Bernstein, Follett, and Copperud.


4Id. at 16.
I knew where they differed, and I came to form opinions about whose positions were soundest on all sorts of questions. I knew the work of those writers then better than I do today.

Yet my linguistic influences weren’t just in books. Dr. Pat Sullivan of the English Department at West Texas A&M encouraged me from a very early age; from him I learned both transformational and traditional grammar. And my brother’s godfather, Professor Alan M.F. Gunn of the English Department at Texas Tech University, nurtured my literary interests during his twice-yearly visits with our family.

College presented a wealth of opportunities. While at the University of Texas, I studied the history of the English language (in the English Department) and the Latin and Greek element in English (in the Classics Department), as well as Latin and French. Though I never mastered Old English, I acquired a passing knowledge of the Middle English of Chaucer and Gower. Two summers at Oxford University—where I studied Chaucer and T.S. Eliot—deepened my appreciation of how language and literature intersect. It was at Oxford that I first got to know Robert W. Burchfield, the editor of the Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary (then underway), and Christopher Ricks, one of the great modern literary critics.

While at Texas and Oxford, I attended many lectures by noted linguists (who, not being positive influences, shouldn’t be named). The second most bothersome thing, in my view at the time, was that they were dogmatically descriptive in their approach. The most bothersome thing was that they didn’t write well: their offerings were dreary gruel. If you doubt this, go pick up any journal of linguistics. Ask yourself whether the articles are well written. If you haven’t looked at one in a while, you’ll be shocked.

At any rate, I gravitated away from the Linguistics Department and toward English and Classics. I ended up writing a thesis on the Latin influences in Shakespeare’s language, excerpts from which made their way into learned journals. My mentors were John W. Velz, a Shakespearean of the first rank, and Thomas Cable, whose history of the English language (with Albert Baugh) is a classic.

Velz made many suggestions about what to publish, and where. As a 22-year-old budding scholar, I was honored to have an article published alongside one by Velz himself in an issue of Shakespeare Studies. Unfortunately, that very article of mine contains a linguistic gaffe that has found its way into the pages of this book: see bequest.

In any event, by the time I was an undergraduate—emboldened by Professor Velz’s assurances that my work was worthy of publication—I knew that I would one day write a book in my favorite genre: a dictionary of usage.

This one is my second. The first, Modern Legal Usage, I wrote between 1981 and 1986; the first edition was published by Oxford University Press in 1987. In 1991, Oxford asked me to undertake this book, and I finished it at the beginning of 1998.

It is the product of a warped sense of fun: the idea that there’s nothing more delightful than passing the hours chasing down linguistic problems in dictionaries and other reference books.

You know my approach. You know my influences. Discount the advice as you think advisable. No usage critic is infallible—certainly not I. But be assured that I have tried to know the literature in the field, to examine great quantities of linguistic evidence, and to use my best judgment as a professional writer and editor.
Acknowledgments

As with each previous edition of this book, I’ve been fortunate to have help from many quarters. At LawProse, Inc., my colleagues Karolyne H.C. Garner, Jeff Newman, Tiger Jackson, Becky R. McDaniel, Ryden McComas Anderson, and John S. Adams have provided invaluable help in suggesting and researching entries, finding illustrative examples, calculating and verifying ratios of frequency, and proofreading the manuscript. Others who performed valuable tasks were my project assistants, Mia Taylor and Esther Lee, and the Garner Law Scholars at two law schools: at Southern Methodist University School of Law, Jessica L. Kirk and William K. Knisley; and at Texas Tech University School of Law, Elizabeth Nanez.

At Oxford University Press, Casper Grathwohl, Damon Zucca, and Maxwell Sinsheimer provided valuable insights at many steps in the evolution of this new edition. At the composition house in Cleveland, Jeff Lachina and his staff produced beautifully set, accurate page proofs that made the final product clean and readable. Special thanks go to Chris Black, who managed the prepress operation with remarkable deftness.

I’ve had excellent suggestions along the way from any number of readers—thousands of them, in fact. Among the most prolific contributors were the late Sheridan Baker, Robert Ballou, Isabel Barzun, Charles Harrington Elster, Alexandra B. Garner, Caroline B. Garner, Gary T. Garner, Shmuel Gerber, Mark Halpern, Joseph Kimble, Karen Larsen, Nicholas Lemann, Thomas B. Lemann, Karen Magnuson, Jonathan McCall, John E. McIntyre, Brian Melendez, Alison Parker, Sir Christopher Ricks, Justice Antonin Scalia, Merrie Spaeth, Randall Tietjen, John R. Trimble, the late John W. Velz, Edward T. Wahl, Richard S. Walinski, Barbara Wallraff, Jeffrey S. Westbrook, and the late Charles Alan Wright. At Google, Jon Orwant (the deviser of Google’s ngrams) and Darryl Chiang (of the legal department) proved enormously helpful.

It has been gratifying over the years to hear from so many people who are interested in English usage. This new edition has benefited from their support and enthusiasm.

B.A.G.
This book contains essentially two types of entries: (1) word entries, which discuss a particular word or set of words; and (2) essay entries, which address larger questions of usage and style. For ease of reference, the essay entries—which appear throughout the book in small capitals—are listed below.

**List of Essay Entries**

This book contains essentially two types of entries: (1) word entries, which discuss a particular word or set of words; and (2) essay entries, which address larger questions of usage and style. For ease of reference, the essay entries—which appear throughout the book in small capitals—are listed below.

### Abbreviations

- Acronyms and Initialisms
- Resulting Redundancies
- Initials
- Plurals

### -able

- Choice of -able or -ible
- Attaching -able to Nouns
- Attaching -able to Intransitive Verbs
- Converting -ate Verbs into -able Adjectives
- Dropping or Retaining the Medial -e-

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- Definition
- Noncomparable Adjectives
- Coordinate Adjectives
- Proper Names as Adjectives
- Adjectives vs. Adverbs
- Past-Participial Adjectives
- Phrasal or Compound Adjectives
- Modification of Adjectives Ending in -ed
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- Adjectives That Follow the Noun
- Dates as Adjectives
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- Adjectives as Nouns
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### Alliteration

- Pleasant Examples
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- Generally
- Americanisms Invading BrE
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- Mistakes Caused by Archaisms

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### -c; -ck-

### Cannibalism

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- Overcapitalizing
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- Names

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- Shortened Forms
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### Century Descriptions

### Chronology

### -cide

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### Clichés

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- Attaching to Noun Phrase
- When Unnecessary

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B. Noun–Pronoun Disagreement
C. Subject–Complement Disagreement: Mismatched Number in Cause and Effect
D. Relative Pronoun–Antecedent Disagreement
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F. Possessive Noun as Antecedent

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B. Correlative Conjunctions
C. As Prepositions

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B. Ill-Advised Forms
C. Miscue with Contracted is
D. Mispronounced Contractions

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B. Present-Participial Danglers
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D. Dangling Gerunds
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F. Ending Sentences with Danglers

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B. Month and Year
C. As Adjectives
D. 2010s vs. 2010’s
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B. -(c)ule; -culus
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D. -elle; -ella
E. -en
F. -et; -ette
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C. Adjectives as Nouns
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F. Prepositions as Adverbs or Particles
G. Conjunctions as Prepositions
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B. Past-Participial Adjectives No Longer Used as Verb Forms
C. AmE vs. BrE
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LITERARY ALLUSION
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C. Dormant Metaphors
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C. Clear Referents
D. Failure to Hyphenate Phrasal Adjectives
E. Misleading Phraseology
F. Ill-Advisedly Deleted that
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C. Pronunciation of Foreign Names
D. Names with Particles
E. British Practices with American Place Names
F. Proper Names as Adjectives
G. Pluralizing Proper Names
H. Names for Place Residents and Natives
I. Other Sources
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C. Periphrastic Negatives
D. Not . . . all
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C. Round Numbers
D. Decades
E. Votes and Scores
F. Cardinal and Ordinal
G. Repetition
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D. Duration or Amount
E. The Compound Conundrum
F. Proper Nouns
G. Phrasal Adjectives Following the Noun
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C. Pronunciation of Foreign Names
D. Names for Residents and Natives
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B. A Plain-Language Library
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B. Borrowed Words
C. Nouns Ending in -f
D. Nouns Ending in -o
E. Nouns Ending in -y
F. Proper Names
G. Compound Nouns
H. Differentiated Forms
I. Acronyms and Abbreviations
J. Mass (Noncount) Nouns
K. Numbers and Decades
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C. Absolute Possessives
D. Double Possessives
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G. Possessives of Names Made with Possessives
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K. Possessives Followed by Relative Pronouns
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F. Overeager Pronouns
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O. Semicolon
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E. Ellipses

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REMOTE RELATIVES
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   B. The Exceptional which

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SENTENCE ENDS

SENTENCE LENGTH

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E. Equivalences
F. Statute of Limitations
G. Bibliography

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B. Awkward Repetition

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B. Doubling of Final Consonants in Inflected Forms
C. Words with -ie- or -ei-
D. Compounds

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C. Justified Splits
D. Awkwardness Caused by Avoiding Splits
E. Ambiguities

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B. False Attraction to Noun Intervening Between Subject and Verb
C. False Attraction to Predicate Noun
D. Compound Subjects Joined Conjunctively
E. Misleading Connectives
F. Plural Units Denoting Amounts
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H. Thing after thing (is) (are)
I. More than one is; *more than one are
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K. One in five; one of every five
L. Decades
M. An Unusual Plural
N. Nouns of Multitude
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P. One of those who (is) (are)
Q. Each as Subject
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C. Never Split a Verb Phrase
D. Never Begin a Sentence with And or But
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F. Never Use between with More than Two Objects
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K. Never Use you in Referring to Your Reader

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B. Sequence of
C. Threatened Obsolescence of Perfect Tenses

TITULAR TOMFOOLERY

TMESIS

UNDERSTOOD WORDS

VERBAL AWARENESS

VOGUE WORDS

VOowel CLUSTERS

WEASEL WORDS

WELLERISMS

-WISE

WOOLLINESS

WORD PATRONAGE

WORD-SWAPPING

-WORTHY

ZEUGMA
**List of Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adj. = adj.</td>
<td>adjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adv. = adv.</td>
<td>adverb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHD = The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (5th ed. 2011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am. = Am.</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AmE = AmE</td>
<td>American English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arch. = arch.</td>
<td>archaic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.S. = Anglo-Saxon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aus. = Aus.</td>
<td>Australian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBBM = Charles Harrington Elster, The Big Book of Beastly Mispronunciations (2d ed. 2005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Br. = Br.</td>
<td>British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BrE = BrE</td>
<td>British English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. = c.</td>
<td>century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ca. = (circa)</td>
<td>around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can. = Can.</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cap. = cap.</td>
<td>capitalized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cf. = (confer)</td>
<td>compare with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collocq. = collocq.</td>
<td>colloquial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conj. = conj.</td>
<td>conjunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAEU = Margaret Nicholson, A Dictionary of American-English Usage (1957)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARE = Dictionary of American Regional English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCAU = Bergen Evans &amp; Cornelia Evans, A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage (1957)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ed. = ed.</td>
<td>edition; editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. = (exempli gratia)</td>
<td>for example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eng. = Eng.</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>esp. = esp.</td>
<td>especially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ex. = ex.</td>
<td>example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fig. = fig.</td>
<td>figuratively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMEU1 = H.W. Fowler, A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (1926)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMEU3 = R.W. Burchfield, The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage (1996)</td>
<td>fr. = from; derived from; found in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.B. = G.B.</td>
<td>Great Britain (i.e., England, Scotland, and Wales)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ger. = Ger.</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gk. = Gk.</td>
<td>Greek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ibid. = (ibidem)</td>
<td>in the same source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.e. = (id est)</td>
<td>that is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irl. = Irl.</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ital. = Ital.</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. = L.</td>
<td>Latin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l.c. = l.c.</td>
<td>lowercase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lit. = lit.</td>
<td>literally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.J. = L.J.</td>
<td>Law Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Rev. = L. Rev.</td>
<td>Law Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ME = ME</td>
<td>Middle English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n. = n.</td>
<td>noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. = no.</td>
<td>number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norw. = Norw.</td>
<td>Norwegian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obs. = obs.</td>
<td>obsolete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OE = OE</td>
<td>Old English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OED = OED</td>
<td>The Oxford English Dictionary (2d ed. 1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OF = OF</td>
<td>Old French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OGEU = OGEU</td>
<td>The Oxford Guide to English Usage (1983)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Abbreviations

orig. = originally
p. = page
phr. = phrase
pl. = plural
pmbl. = preamble
pp. = pages
p.pl. = past participle
prep. = preposition
pron. = pronoun
pr.pl. = present participle
pt. = part
quot. = quotation
repr. = reprinted
rev. = revised by; revision
Russ. = Russian
Scot. = Scottish
sing. = singular
Sp. = Spanish
specif. = specifically
s.v. = (sub verbo) under the word
trans. = translator
U&A = Eric Partridge, *Usage & Abusage* (1942)
U.K. = United Kingdom (i.e., Great Britain and—since 1922—Northern Ireland)
U.S. = United States
usu. = usually
vb. = verb
v.i. = intransitive verb
v.t. = transitive verb
W2 = *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* (2d ed. 1934)
W3 = *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1961)
WNNCD = *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (5th ed. 2014)
### Pronunciation Guide

- a: for all the vowel sounds in amok, burger, but
- a: as in fact, vat
- ah: as in calm, father
- ahr: as in bar, start
- air: as in flare, lair
- aw: as in tall, law
- ay: as in page, same
- b: as in balk, job
- ch: as in chief, bench
- d: as in deck, red
- e: as in leg, ferry
- ee: as in flea, tidy
- eer: as in mere, tier
- f: as in fence, off
- g: as in go, mug
- h: as in harp, hold
- hw: as in which, while
- i: as in rib, akin
- i: as in time, eye
- j: as in jump, magic
- k: as in calm, keep, quit, school
- l: as in lever, pill
- m: as in muck, drum
- n: as in note, clown
- ng: as in long, plank
- o: as in hot, posh
- oh: as in loan, home
- oi: as in join, ploy
- oo: as in rule, tomb
- oor: as in poor, lure
- or: as in board, court
- ow: as in plow, loud
- p: as in poem, drop
- r: as in rank, hear
- s: as in cite, seek, pass
- sh: as in sharp, trash
- t: as in time, boot
- th: as in thin, math
- th: as in there, bathe
- uu: as in took, pull
- v: as in vague, shiver
- w: as in witch, away, suede
- y: as in year, union
- z: as in zone, please
- zh: as in measure, vision
Stage 1: A new form emerges as an innovation (or a dialectal form persists) among a small minority of the language community, perhaps displacing a traditional usage.

Stage 2: The form spreads to a significant fraction of the language community but remains unacceptable in standard usage.

Stage 3: The form becomes commonplace even among many well-educated people but is still avoided in careful usage.

Stage 4: The form becomes virtually universal but is opposed on cogent grounds by a few linguistic stalwarts (die-hard snoots). See the entry for snoot, p. 756.

Stage 5: The form is universally accepted (not counting pseudo-snoot eccentrics).

Expressions that are invariably poor usage are marked with an asterisk (✳). For a more expansive explanation of the index, see pp. l–li.

If the index were not measuring change, but instead were expressing static linguistic phenomena, many serviceable analogies would come to mind. I list ten of them here simply to help readers envision the levels of acceptability intended to be conveyed by the idea of stages. We begin with the notation that appears at the bottom of each right-hand page, and then have the ten analogies.

**Key to the Language-Change Index**

**Literal Shorthand**

| Stage 1: | R | ejected |
| Stage 2: | W | widely shunned |
| Stage 3: | W | widespread but . . . |
| Stage 4: | Ub | ubiquitous but . . . |
| Stage 5: | F | fully accepted |

**School-Grade Analogy**

| Stage 1: | F | |
| Stage 2: | D | |
| Stage 3: | C | |
| Stage 4: | B | |
| Stage 5: | A | |

**Golf Analogy**

| Stage 1: | Quadruple bogey |
| Stage 2: | Triple bogey |
| Stage 3: | Double bogey |
| Stage 4: | Bogey |
| Stage 5: | Par |

**Olfaction Analogy**

| Stage 1: | Foul |
| Stage 2: | Malodorous |
| Stage 3: | Smelly |
| Stage 4: | Vaguely odorous |
| Stage 5: | Neutral |

**Skill-Level Analogy**

| Stage 1: | Bungler |
| Stage 2: | Hack |
| Stage 3: | Rank amateur |
| Stage 4: | Amateur |
| Stage 5: | Professional |

**Military-Discharge Analogy**

| Stage 1: | Dishonorable discharge |
| Stage 2: | Bad-conduct discharge |
| Stage 3: | Discharge for the good of the service |
| Stage 4: | General discharge |
| Stage 5: | Honorable discharge |

**Etiquette Analogy**

| Stage 1: | Audible flatulence |
| Stage 2: | Audible belching |
| Stage 3: | Overloud talking |
| Stage 4: | Elbows on table |
| Stage 5: | Refined |

**Traffic-Penalty Analogy**

| Stage 1: | $500 fine and jail time |
| Stage 2: | $300 fine |
| Stage 3: | $100 fine |
| Stage 4: | Warning ticket |
| Stage 5: | No stop |

**School-Discipline Analogy**

| Stage 1: | Expulsion |
| Stage 2: | 2-month suspension |
| Stage 3: | 2-week suspension |
| Stage 4: | 1-hour detention |
| Stage 5: | No disciplinary action |

**Moral Analogy**

| Stage 1: | Mortal sin |
| Stage 2: | Capital sin |
| Stage 3: | Venial sin |
| Stage 4: | Peccadillo |
| Stage 5: | Virtue |

**Parliamentary-Discipline Analogy**

| Stage 1: | Expulsion |
| Stage 2: | Censure |
| Stage 3: | Reprimand |
| Stage 4: | Warning |
| Stage 5: | No action |
Making Peace in the Language Wars

Bryan A. Garner

“This battle between linguistic radicals and linguistic conservatives continues unabated.”
—Robert W. Burchfield

Shortly after the first edition of my Modern American Usage appeared in 1998, a British reviewer—the noted linguist Tom McArthur—remarked about it: “Henry Watson Fowler, it would appear, is alive and well and living in Texas.”¹ This might have seemed like the highest praise possible. After all, in the American press in the 1980s and 1990s, Fowler had been hailed as “immortal” (Fortune), “urbane” (Boston Globe), and even “saintly” (L.A. Times). Meanwhile, his 1926 Dictionary of Modern English Usage had been called “classic” (New York Times) and “indispensable” (Christian Science Monitor)—“one of the great works in and of the language” (L.A. Times).

But McArthur didn’t intend much, if any, praise in his comment. Fowler, you see, was a prescriptivist: he issued judgments about linguistic choices.² McArthur, like almost every other linguist, is a descriptivist: he mostly disclaims making judgments about linguistic choices.³ And the describers and the prescribers (if I may call them that) haven’t been on speaking terms for a very long time.

The Wars

Prescribers seek to guide users of a language—including native speakers—on how to handle words as effectively as possible. Describers seek to discover the facts of how native speakers actually use their language. An outsider might think that these are complementary goals. In fact, though, insiders typically view them as incompatible. And the battles have been unpleasant, despite being mostly invisible (or irrelevant) outside academic linguistic circles. Hence David Foster Wallace’s apt query: “Did you know that probing the seamy underbelly of U.S. lexicography reveals ideological strife and controversy and intrigue and nastiness and fervor on a nearly hanging-chad scale?”⁴

Prescribers like to lambaste their adversaries for their amoral permissiveness:

• 1952: “Some of the vigilantes who used to waylay your themes to flog each dangling participle and lynch every run-on sentence now seem to be looking for a chance to lay the language on your doorstep like a foundling and run like hell before you can catch them and ask them how to rear the brat. They’re convinced that it’s healthy, that it will grow up very well-adjusted provided it’s never spanked or threatened or fussed over. They’re perfectly willing to furnish you with its past history, and even help you keep records on its day-to-day development, but they’ll only tell you what it has done, not what it should or should not do. The English grammar textbook of

³See “Descriptive and Prescriptive Grammar,” in The Oxford Companion to the English Language 286 (Tom McArthur ed., 1992) (“a descriptive grammar is an account of a language that seeks to describe how it is used objectively, accurately, systematically, and comprehensively.”).
the future may approach its subject in the same spirit in which the Kinsey report tackled sex.”

- **1965:** “The ideal philologist regards the ‘misuse’ of language as a psychiatrist regards murder: just one more phenomenon of human behaviour.”

- **1967:** “The linguists . . . are urgently, even fanatically, storming the classroom in order to persuade the old-fashioned grammar teacher that she, too, should be dispassionate in her attitude toward language so that the attitude of linguisticism can prevail: let her just accept the view that there are merely ‘different’ levels of usage—not ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’—and all will be well.”

- **2000:** “Modern-day linguists who insist on a ‘nonjudgmental’ approach to language like to belittle Fowler. They are fools.”

Descriptors, meanwhile, like to denounce prescribers as priggish, often ignorant, authoritarians prepared to fight to the death over nonissues such as split infinitives and terminal prepositions:

- **1960:** “Should one say ‘None of them is ready’ or ‘None of them are ready’? The prescriptive grammarians are emphatic that it should be singular. The Latinists point out that nemo, the Latin equivalent, is singular. The logicians triumphantly point out that none can’t be more than one and hence can’t be plural. The linguist knows that he hears ‘None of them are ready’ every day, from people of all social positions, geographical areas, and degrees of education.”

- **1970:** “Those who fancy themselves preservers of standards in language, most of whom would hotly deny the appellation ‘purist,’ believe quite sincerely that their stand is highly traditional and regard as dangerous subversives those scholars who devote themselves to the objective description of their first-hand observations. Many who righteously maintain that split infinitives and terminal prepositions are cardinal sins regard themselves as forward-looking men of liberal temperament . . . .”

- **1982:** “The eighteenth-century grammars, and more importantly the views of language and class which underpinned them, continue to terrorize English speech.”

- **1999:** “There is hardly any other area in life in which people so badly informed can actually be proud of their ignorance while still proclaiming themselves to be guardians of truth and saviors of others from error.”

At least one describer, Edward Finegan, has conceded that “linguists have not afforded the guardians [i.e., prescribers] a fair hearing,” adding that “this imbalance is exacerbated by the bad press the guardians have in turn inflicted on linguists, a bad press that has bruised the credibility of the linguistics profession.” Indeed, the Lin-
guistic Society of America long ago conceded what remains true today: “a fair portion of highly educated laymen see in linguistics the great enemy of all they hold dear.”14

In short, there’s long been bad blood between the two camps. It continues to this day. Even when contemporary describers propose a rapprochement, it typically consists simply in having prescribers concede the error of their ways. For example, in their new Cambridge Grammar of the English Language (2002), Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum airily note that “although descriptive grammars and prescriptive usage manuals differ in the range of topics they treat, there is no reason in principle why they should not agree on what they say about the topics they both treat.”15 That might seem like a promising statement, but in fact it’s disingenuous—rather like a warring spouse who quarrlesomely proposes a “reconciliation” by insisting that all the fault lies with the other side. For in the very next sentence, we find our two conciliators claiming that prescribers (1) overrely on personal taste; (2) confuse informality with ungrammaticality; and (3) appeal to “certain invalid arguments”16 (unspecified). That’s it. In their view, it’s all the fault of prescribers.

But the fault lies at least equally at the feet of the describers, many of whom (1) insist that their methods are the only valid ones; (2) disclaim any interest in promoting the careful use of language, often denouncing anyone who seeks to do so; and (3) believe that native speakers of English can’t make a mistake and that usage guides are therefore superfluous.

You may think that’s just hyperbole. Sadly, it isn’t. True enough, there may not be such a thing as a “pure describer,” since every commentator has at least some predilections about usage, however covert. But many describers also dogmatically oppose value judgments about language. That in itself is a value judgment—and a very odd one, in the eyes of ordinary people. Here’s a sampling of what “pure describers” have said in the literature:

Lakoff: “For change that comes spontaneously from below, or within, our policy should be, Let your language alone, and leave its speakers alone!”17

McWhorter: “Descriptive grammar . . . has nothing to do with the rather surreal notion of telling people what they should say. The other grammar, which is about counterintuitive, party-pooping bizarrie, . . . is called prescriptive grammar and is neither taught to nor discussed by linguists, except as the persistent little scourge that seems to have gotten hold of the Anglophone world.”18

Trudgill: “Language change cannot be halted. Nor should the worriers feel obliged to try to halt it. Languages are self-regulating systems which can be left to take care of themselves.”19

These writers see language as if it were merely a series of events to be duly recorded. They don’t see it—or don’t want to see it—as the product of human conduct and human decision, or its use as a skill that can either be left rudimentary or be honed.

Meanwhile, describers themselves write exclusively in Standard English. If it’s really a matter of complete indifference to them, why don’t they occasionally flout (or should that be flaunt?) the rules of grammar and usage? Their writing could militate (or is it

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16Id. at 6–7.
19Peter Trudgill, “The Meanings of Words Should Not Be Allowed to Vary or Change,” in Language Myths 8 (Laurie Bauer & Peter Trudgill eds., 1999).
mitigate?) in favor of linguistic mutations if they would allow themselves to be unconscious (unconscionable?) in their use (usage?) of words, as they seemingly want everyone else to be. But they don't do this. They write by all the rules that they tell everyone else not to worry about. Despite their protestations, their own words show that correctness is valued in the real world.

Why should linguists believe—as many certainly do—that language, of all human tools, is uniquely incapable of being misused or abused? Why should language alone be immune to ignorant or careless handling? It's hard to imagine professionals in any other field of human endeavor making an analogous argument.

One surprising aspect of descriptivist doctrine is that it's essentially anti-education: teaching people about good usage, the argument goes, interferes with the natural, unconscious forces of language, so leave speakers alone. This doctrine relieves English teachers of the responsibility to teach standard English. And it dooms us all to the dialect of the households in which we've grown up. One result is rigidified social strata. After all, you're unlikely to gain any responsible position—such as that of a linguistics professor—if you can't speak and write standard English. So much for egalitarianism.

I'm mostly in the prescriptive camp (although, as I'll explain in a moment, I'm a kind of descriptive prescriber). The prescriptive camp explicitly values linguistic decisions and informed standards of correctness. It's a Fowlerian sensibility that Sir Ernest Gowers summed up as having five bases: “first the careful choice of precise words, second the avoidance of all affectations, third the orderly and coherent arrangement of words, fourth the strict observance of what is for the time being established idiom, and fifth the systematization of spelling and pronunciation.”20 Gowers and I are hardly alone among Fowler's successors:

Pei: “Don't be afraid to exercise your power of choice. If you prefer ‘telephone’ to ‘phone,’ or ‘greatly’ to ‘very much,’ don't be afraid to use them. It's your language as much as anyone else's. At the same time, try to have a good reason for your choice, because language is one of the finest products of man's intelligence, and should be intelligently employed and intelligently changed.”21

Safire: “Some of the interest in the world of words comes from people who like to put less-educated people down—Language Snobs, who give good usage a bad name. Others enjoy letting off steam in a form of mock-anger, treating their peeves as pets. But most of the interest, I think, comes from a search for standards and values. We resent fog-giness; we resist manipulation by spokesmen who use loaded words and catch phrases; we wonder if, in language, we can find a few of the old moorings. We are not groping for the bygone, we are reaching for a firm foothold in fundamentals.”22

Marenbon: “It is far easier to destroy a standard language than to create one. A standard language requires a body of speakers who have been trained to distinguish correct constructions from incorrect ones, usual forms from those which are unusual and carry with them special implications. Such training is neither short nor easy; and it is unrealistic to expect that English teachers can give it to their pupils if, along with teaching standard English (as one form of the language, appropriate for certain occasions), they are expected to encourage speech and

21Mario Pei, All About Language 9 (1954).
writing in dialect and to attend to the multiplicity of other tasks with which modern educationalists have burdened them. By devaluing standard English, the new orthodoxy is destroying it.”

Prescribers want to evaluate linguistic change as it occurs. They endorse the changes they consider fortunate and resist the ones they consider unfortunate—often with little success in the long run.

Explaining the Rift

The opposing views aren’t easily reconciled. Prescribers like established forms in grammar and word choice. They encourage precision and discourage letting one word usurp another’s meaning (infer–imply, lay–lie, like–as). They dislike the indiscriminate use of two forms, especially opposed forms, for one meaning (categorically–uncategorically, couldn’t care less–could care less, regardless–irregardless). They value consistency and historical continuity (preferring home in over hone in, just deserts over just desserts, and slough off over stuff off).

Describers, meanwhile, remind us that linguistic change is a fact of life—and conclude that it’s therefore not worth opposing. As one has asked: “If language is going to keep changing anyway—and it is—what is the use of posting the little rules and making people uncomfortable only to see them eventually blown away by the wind?”

In one of the most mind-blowing descriptivist passages ever penned, Donald J. Lloyd talked about linguistic change by allusively adopting a notoriously invidious view of rape: “There is no point in tiresome carping about usage; the best thing is to relax and enjoy it.”

Yet not all describers endorse fatalistic or optimistic views of change. Dwight L. Bolinger, a describer with impeccable credentials, has staked a position that most prescribers would find satisfactory: “If rules are to be broken, it is better done from knowledge than from ignorance, even when ignorance ultimately decides the issue.”

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24John McWhorter, *The Word on the Street* 85 (1998). But see Peter Farb, *Word Play* 84 (1974) (“One justification sometimes heard for freedom in breaking the rules of the language game is that languages change with time anyway. But that argument is beside the point. Even though the rules may change tomorrow, they are still binding while they are in force today.”).
28Dwight L. Bolinger, *Language: The Loaded Weapon* 55 (1980). Cf. Louis Foley, *Beneath the Crust of Words* 83 (1928) (“Ignorance has had considerable effect in the development of language. Many changes which have been made in the forms, uses, and meanings of words would certainly not have occurred if the language had been used only by those who knew it thoroughly.”).
One major difference between the prescriber and the describer, and their views toward change, has to do with the relative immediacy of linguistic perspective. The prescriber cares about how language is used here and now. The describer views language more distantly, observing that linguistic change is inevitable. After all, Latin evolved into French, Italian, and other Romance languages—and the French, Italians, and others haven’t been adversely affected by linguistic evolution. This is like a geographer arguing that seismic disruptions along the San Andreas Fault hardly matter in the larger scheme of things, since continents and seas will come and go: in the history of the earth, an earthquake in Los Angeles doesn’t amount geographically to a blip on the big screen. But of course earthquakes do matter to the people who experience them. And how language is used today—here and now—does matter to people who speak it, hear it, write it, and read it. Invoking the inevitability of linguistic drift doesn’t help someone who is unsure about how to say *irrevocable*, what preposition to use after *oblivious*, or whether the verb after *a number of people* should be singular or plural. The linguistic choice that a speaker or writer makes will affect how others react. Linguists may take the long view, but good usage depends on the here and now.

Because usage constantly evolves, so must judgments about usage. Much of what Theodore Bernstein, an eminent *New York Times* editor, said in 1965 about the careful writer30 endures to this day; some of it doesn’t. That’s the way usage is. The test of good usage has little to do with what endures, although good usage is fairly stable and tends to endure. It has more to do with what works for today’s readership, distracting as few readers as possible. It’s a test of credibility among contemporaries. Good usage reflects how a careful writer of today approaches linguistic questions.

One common tack of describers is to question all the assumptions about what is meant by “careful writers,”31 “the best writers,”32 or “respected people”—the abstractions that prescribers postulate for establishing a standard of good usage. When it’s impossible to identify exactly who these people are, describers claim victory by concluding that no such standard exists.34

But this idea that “careful writers” (etc.) are unidentifiable is a fallacious position for two reasons.

First, we say that usage is judged good not because the *best writers* employ it, but because it helps writers use words successfully.35 Likewise, we say that apples are healthful not because wise people eat them, but because of their observable effects on the human body. The fact that we eat apples doesn’t make them “good food.”

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31William Strunk Jr. & E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* 59 (3d ed. 1979) (“The careful writer, watchful for small conveniences, goes which-hunting, removes the defining whiches, and by so doing improves his work.”); Maxine Hairston, *Successful Writing* 118 (2d ed. 1986) (“Although the verb *to be* in all its forms (is, am, was, were, will be, have been, and so on) remains the central verb in our language, careful writers use it sparingly.”).
32William Strunk Jr. & E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* 72 (3d ed. 1979) (“It is no sign of weakness or defeat that your manuscript ends up in need of major surgery. This is a common occurrence in all writing, and among the best writers.”); Thomas R. Lounsbury, *The Standard of Usage in English* vi (1908) (“The best, and indeed the only proper, usage is the usage of the best.”); John F. Genung, *Outlines of Rhetoric* 9 (1893) (“A most valuable habit to cultivate . . . is the habit of observing words, especially as seen in the pages of the best writers; of tracing fine shades of meaning, and noting how suggestive, or felicitous, or accurately chosen they are. It is by keeping their sense for words alert and refined that good writers constantly enlarge and enrich their vocabulary.”); Brainerd Kellogg, *A Text-Book on Rhetoric* 17 (1881) (“Rhetoric . . . has only usage as authority for what it teaches—the usage of the best writers and speakers. And this is variable, changing from generation to generation.”).
33Bergen Evans & Cornelia Evans, *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* v (1957) (“Respectable English . . . means the kind of English that is used by the most respected people, the sort of English that will make readers or listeners regard you as an educated person.”).
Second, the careful writer may exist for the language in the same sense as the reasonable person exists for law, or (in other fields) the average voter or the typical consumer: it’s a pragmatic construct that allows for assessing and predicting behavior. The careful writer is essentially good usage anthropomorphized. It’s irrelevant that you can’t point to a particular person as a “careful writer,” just as it’s irrelevant to the law that no one is on every occasion a “reasonable person.” This doesn’t mean that a real standard doesn’t exist. Even Richard W. Bailey of Michigan, a thoroughgoing describer, acknowledges that the linguistic standard exists: “Linguists who pretend that there is no consensus about the elite forms of English confuse their egalitarian ideals with the social reality that surrounds them.”

Still another difference between the camps is that describers want comprehensive descriptions of languages, while prescribers unapologetically treat only a selective set of linguistic problems. Describers have been known to criticize prescribers for this selectivity: “The normative tradition focuses on just a few dots in the vast and complex universe of the English language.” Because describers are “scientists” who seek to record and catalogue all the observable linguistic phenomena they can, they will go into great detail about matters that have minimal interest to everyone else—for example, why in English we don’t say House brick built is. Prescribers, by contrast, who write for a wide audience, deal mostly with issues that can taunt even seasoned writers—to take examples from just one small span of entries from this book, the difference between hearty and hardy; whether the correct form is harebrained or hairbrained; or whether the predominant phrase is hark back, harken back, or hearken back (perhaps harp back?). So prescribers tend to assume that their readers already have some competence with the language.

Yet another major difference has to do with the use of evidence. Describers have always tried to amass linguistic evidence—the more the better. Prescribers are often content to issue their opinions ex cathedra. In fact, inadequate consideration of linguistic evidence has traditionally been the prescribers’ greatest vulnerability. But the better prescribers, such as H.W. Fowler and Eric Partridge, have closely considered the facts underpinning their judgments. In this book, I’ve taken the descriptivist tack of citing voluminous evidence—perhaps more than some readers might think necessary. But those readers should consider how useful it is to see the contextual use of words, not in made-up examples but in published passages.

While prescribers view language as involving a multitude of decisions, describers often discuss language as if its use were all a matter of instinct. “To a linguist or psycholinguist,” writes Steven Pinker of MIT, “language is like the song of the humpback whale.” He tenaciously pursues this odd comparison, ridiculing prescribers as if they were essentially the same as naturalists claiming that “chickadees’ nests are incorrectly constructed, pandas hold bamboo in the wrong paw, the song of the humpback whale contains several well-known errors, and monkeys’ cries have been in a state of chaos.

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38Cf. Samuel Johnson, Preface, A Dictionary of the English Language (1755) (“Authorities will sometimes seem to have been accumulated without necessity or use, and perhaps some will be found, which might, without loss, have been omitted. But a work of this kind is not hastily to be charged with superfluities: those quotations, which to careless or unskilful perusers appear only to repeat the same sense, will often exhibit, to a more accurate examiner, diversities of signification, or, at least, afford different shades of the same meaning.”).
and degeneration for hundreds of years.”40 He caps it off with this: “Isn’t the song of the humpback whale whatever the humpback whale decides to sing?”41

The analogy is deeply fallacious in all sorts of ways. First, although the capacity for language may indeed be instinctive—and Pinker makes a good case for this in his book—the specifics of any given language (for example, why we call one object a hat and another a table) aren’t instinctive at all. Words are arbitrary symbols that are learned, and there are lots of nuances. Second, human beings must make myriad decisions when forming sentences and paragraphs, whereas other animals aren’t known to make the same kinds of decisions in following their instincts. Third, Pinker’s line of reasoning would eliminate any means for judging the effectiveness of human expression. Yet we all know—and Pinker knows very well—that some human beings communicate more effectively than others.

So much for the describers’ misplaced scientism: it can lead to astounding instances of muddled thought.

Reconciling the Camps

A greater sense of balance and impartiality—of where the truth lies—could end the age-old debate between describers and prescribers, if only both sides would acknowledge certain principles. More about these in a moment.

First, I should declare that I am a prescriber who uses descriptivist methods—in effect, a descriptive prescriber. I don’t doubt the value of descriptive linguistics—up to the point at which describers dogmatically refuse to acknowledge the value of prescriptivism. Each side in this age-old debate should acknowledge the value of the other.

Before stating three principles that might allow for this reconciliation, I should draw attention to the danger of acknowledging my prescriptive tendencies. I may be playing into describers’ hands by adopting this inflammatory label. Maybe I should instead take a lesson from D.J. Enright: “Many people without the benefit (as they see it) of a decent education still want to know how to use words. And since prescriptivism is the only brake we have on the accelerating spread of chaos, let’s find some other name for it, one less reminiscent of the National Health Service.”42 Yet no new label readily suggests itself. Besides, changing the label probably won’t change the reality.

Now to the fundamental principles.

1. Linguistically, both speech and writing matter.

When modern linguists focus exclusively on speech, they’re overreacting to their predecessors’ preoccupation with writing. Describers have a bias toward studying speech; prescribers have a bias toward studying writing.

Both are important. In any language, speech precedes writing. It accounts for the overwhelming majority of linguistic events. Yet writing is a form of language worth studying in its own right. For some reason, though, many linguists refuse to recognize this. As Roy Harris, the Oxford linguist, put it some years ago: “One of the sophistries of modern linguistics is to treat scriptism, which has probably dominated the concept of a language in literate societies for at least several millennia, as some kind of theoretical heresy.”43

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40 Id.
41 Id.
43 Roy Harris, The Language Makers 7 (1980).
Writing endures and therefore helps stabilize the language. Universal literacy helps temper linguistic entropy. As more and more people become literate, the written and spoken forms of language influence each other—even while remaining distinct.

For the readers of this essay, a stable language is doubtless a desirable thing. Otherwise, the English language wouldn’t be worth much as a lingua franca. Samuel Johnson rejected the idea of embalming the language, and no one seriously wants to halt all change in a living language. “It is not a question of banning all linguistic changes,” as F.L. Lucas put it. “Since language cannot stand still, the main thing for the public interest is that alterations in vocabulary and idiom should not become too rapid, reckless, and wanton . . . .”

The study of writing—like the very fact that writing exists—serves as a conservative, moderating influence. Our literary heritage has helped form our culture. The means by which we record words on paper has an enormous influence on readers and on the culture as a whole.

One aspect of the writing-vs.-speech distinction is what linguists call “register”: a user’s style of language according to the subject, the audience, and the occasion. No one writes a job-application letter in the same style as a love letter; and no one speaks to an interviewer in the same way as to a pet. Most of us have five basic registers: (1) intimate, for conversations between family members and close friends; (2) casual, for everyday conversations; (3) consultative, for communicating with colleagues and strangers in conducting everyday business; (4) formal, for published essays and serious lectures; and (5) frozen, for religious and legal rituals. Those who study oral communication (describers) incline toward 1–2 (occasionally 3); those who study written communication (prescribers) incline toward 3–4 (occasionally 2, sometimes 5). If describers and prescribers alike were more overt about the registers they’re dealing with, many of their squabbles might wither away.

2. Writing well is a hard-won skill that involves learning conventions.

To educate people about the conventions of writing is good for them. Why? Because writing well requires disciplined thinking. Learning to write is a part of anyone’s education.

What are the conventions that aspiring writers need to learn? Among other things, those who write expository prose must learn cognitive skills—how to:

- Summarize complicated matter.
- Maintain a cohesive train of thought.
- Support ideas with adequate evidence.

To communicate the material, the writer must also learn mechanical skills—how to:

- Vary sentence structure.
- Vary sentence length.
- Vary paragraph length.
- Connect ideas from sentence to sentence, and paragraph to paragraph.

Finally, to make certain that the communication is clear to the reader and free of distractions, the writer must learn stylistic skills—how to:

- Adopt a relaxed, natural tone.
- Omit unnecessary words.

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44See the Preface to his Dictionary of the English Language (1755).
• Observe recognized grammatical niceties (subject–verb agreement, parallel constructions, logically placed modifiers, and so on).
• Distinguish between similar words that are easily confused, such as *affect* and *effect*, *principle* and *principal*, and the like.

Only the last three, for some reason, seem to trouble most describers, who overstate their objections. They like to caricature prescribers as insisting on such fripperies as *It's I* and *none is*, and as prohibiting all split infinitives, all prepositions as sentence-enders, and all conjunctions as sentence-starters. The truth is that informed prescribers didn’t take any of those positions at any time in the 20th century—and certainly not in the 21st. In fact, prescribers have been just as severe as describers in ridiculing such superstitions.

Back to the main point: writing is a learned activity, no different in that regard from hitting a golf ball or playing the piano. Yes, some people naturally do it better than others. But apart from a few atypical autodidacts (who exist in all disciplines), there’s no practical way to learn to write, hit a golf ball, or play the piano without guidance on many points, large and small. And everyone, even the autodidact, requires considerable effort and practice in learning the norms. The norms are important even to those who ultimately break them to good effect.

3. *It's possible to formulate practical advice on grammar and usage.*

Although 18th- and 19th-century grammarians’ work was too often corrupted by whimsy and guesswork, their basic instincts were sound: we can indeed help writers on critical questions of grammar and usage.

Usage and style operate differently in writing and in speech. In oral communication, inflection and body language and interaction help convey meaning. And a speaker can perceive cues that invite immediate clarifications. But in writing, these aids to communication are absent: you rely exclusively on marks on a page (words and punctuation). A writer rarely gets a second chance to communicate effectively, so clear writing requires much more forethought. It’s no wonder that publishers have produced thousands of books designed to teach people how to improve their writing.

Authorities on the written word echo each other in stressing how difficult good writing is: “Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it’s because it is hard.” Writers must learn to have a point, to deliver it efficiently, to cut the extra words that inevitably appear in any first draft, and to maintain a clean narrative line, among many other skills. These things trouble even professionals.

Prescriptive usage guides deal with many of the small points that writers grapple with. These manuals are pedagogical books intended to be browsed in as much as consulted. In this book, for example, many entries deal with emerging confusions in diction that

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47See the quotations accompanying notes 9, 10; see also Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* 373–74 (1994) (“Most of the hobgoblins of contemporary prescriptive grammar (don’t split infinitives, don’t end a sentence with a preposition) can be traced back to . . . eighteenth-century fads.”).


49William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* 12 (6th ed. 1998). Cf. Alexei Tolstoy, “Advice to the Young Writer” (1939), in Maxim Gorky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexei Tolstoy, and Konstantin Fedin on the Art and Craft of Writing 231, 231–32 (Alex Miller trans., 1972) (“Nobody has ever found that writing comes easy, that it ‘flowed’ from the pen. Writing is always difficult, and the more difficult it is, the better it turns out in the end.”).
threaten to spread: disburse for disperse, expatriot for expatriate, fruit melody for fruit medley, heart-rendering for heart-rending, marshal arts for martial arts, presumptious for presumptuous, reign in for rein in. Other entries deal with plural forms that, for now, most careful writers want to maintain in plural senses, such as criteria, paparazzi, and phenomena. Still other entries urge wider acceptance of disputed usages, such as the singular media.

The focus is on the particular: these are the words and phrases that writers and editors must make considered choices about daily. There aren’t just a few dozen trouble spots in the language, or even a few hundred. There are several thousand of them. Given the critical acumen of many readers, for a writer to remain unconscious of these pitfalls and write whatever sounds close enough will inevitably lead to a loss of credibility. Vague intelligibility isn’t the touchstone; precision is.

As a field of study, usage doesn’t hold much interest for modern linguists, who are drifting more and more toward quantitative psychology and theory. Their leading theorist, Noam Chomsky of MIT, has acknowledged, with no apparent regret, the pedagogical irrelevance of modern linguistics: “I am, frankly, rather skeptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology.”50 An equally august prescriptivist, F.W. Bateson of Oxford, said just a few years later: “The professional linguist has very little to contribute to style considered as the best words in the best order.”51 If you want to learn how to use the English language skillfully and gracefully, books on linguistics won’t help you at all.

Yet people want normative rules of language. Linguistic relativism, though valuable on some levels, has its limitations. True, it’s probably helpful for students to hear insights such as this from Charlton Laird: “Nothing in language is essentially vulgar or genteel, barbarous or elegant, right or wrong, except as the users of the language want to feel that the locutions have those qualities.”52 But of course most writers believe that words and phrases can have right and wrong qualities. In a given social setting, those widely shared views matter enormously. And Laird—a sensible describer—recognized this:

We must have standards. After all, who makes the language? You and I and everybody make the language. And what does this hydra-headed language-manufacturer want in his product? Obviously, he wants a number of things; he wants flexibility and versatility, but he also wants standards. He may not know just what standards he wants, nor how rigidly he wants them applied, but he does want them in spelling, in punctuation, in diction, in usage, in all aspects of language, and on the whole he relies on people of our sort [English teachers] to inform him which are the best standards and what he should do about them. We had better be prepared to tell him, and to know what we are talking about when we do so.53

Despite the describers’ decades-old campaign to convince us that no uses of language are inherently better than others, literate people continue to yearn for guidance on linguistic questions. With great acuity half a century ago, an English teacher—Louis Salomon—characterized what remains the current state of affairs:

The public may not care whether English teachers eat or not, but if there is any sentiment in favor of feeding them I’m willing to bet that the idea is to keep them


51F.W. Bateson, The Scholar-Critic 100 (1972).


53Id. at 47–48.
alive as English teachers, that is, as a kind of traffic cop to tell the average person when to stop and when to move on, where he may park and where he may not. If English teachers don’t want to be traffic cops—if they just want to stand on the corner and count the cars that try to beat the red light—then they might as well turn in their badges. Because sooner or later the taxpayers will (a) begin to wonder why the accident rate keeps going up, and (b) discover that a machine with an electric eye can do the counting more cheaply and more efficiently.54

Yet several linguists assert, essentially, that there is no right and wrong in language. Consider what one well-known linguist, Robert A. Hall Jr., famously said: “There is no such thing as good and bad (or correct and incorrect, grammatical and ungrammatical, right and wrong) in language. . . . A dictionary or grammar is not as good an authority for your speech as the way you yourself speak.”55 Some of the better theorists in the mid-20th century rejected this extremism. Here, for example, is how Max Black responded:

This extreme position . . . involves a confusion between investigating rules (or standards, norms) and prescribing or laying down such rules. Let us grant that a linguist, qua theoretical and dispassionate scientist, is not in the business of telling people how to talk; it by no means follows that the speakers he is studying are free from rules which ought to be recorded in any faithful and accurate report of their practices. A student of law is not a legislator; but it would be a gross fallacy to argue that therefore there can be no right or wrong in legal matters.56

One might have thought that this no-right-and-no-wrong fallacy had long since been laid to rest. But it’s very much with us, at least in academia. Through the latter half of the 20th century and still today, there has been an academic assault on linguistic standards. Today the remark “That’s not good English” would likely be met with the rejoinder, “Says who?” This is because people are increasingly hearing the dogma that no use of language is better than any other.

Today the teaching of standard English is being labeled discriminatory. An essay published in 1998 by a University of Michigan linguist, James Milroy, says this: “In an age when discrimination in terms of race, color, religion, or gender is not publicly acceptable, the last bastion of overt social discrimination will continue to be a person’s use of language.”57

In other words, the spirit of the day demands that you not think critically—or at least not think ill—of anyone else’s use of language. If you believe in good grammar and linguistic sensitivity, you’re the problem. And there is a large, powerful contingent in higher education today—larger and more powerful than ever before—trying to eradicate any thoughts about good and bad grammar, correct and incorrect word choices, effective and ineffective style.

Terms of the Truce

Prescribers should be free to advocate a realistic level of linguistic tidiness—without being molested for it—even as the describers are free to describe the mess all around them. If the prescribers have moderate success, then the describers should simply describe those successes. Education entailing normative values has always been a part of literate society. Why should it suddenly stop merely because describers see this kind of education as meddling with natural forces?

56 Max Black, The Labyrinth of Language 70 (1968).
Meanwhile, prescribers need to be realistic. They can't expect perfection or permanence, and they must bow to universal usage. But when an expression is in transition—when only part of the population has adopted a new usage that seems genuinely undesirable—prescribers should be allowed, within reason, to stigmatize it. There's no reason to tolerate *reckless driving* in place of *wreckless driving*. Or *waistband* in place of *wasteband*. Or *correlation* when misused for *corollary*. Multiply these things by 10,000, and you have an idea of what we're dealing with. There are legitimate objections to the slippage based not just on widespread confusion but also on imprecision of thought, on the spread of linguistic uncertainty, on the etymological disembodiment of words, and on decaying standards generally.

As Roy Harris has remarked: “There is no reason why prescriptive linguistics should not be 'scientific,' just as there is no reason why prescriptive medicine should not be.” Harris went even further, denouncing the antiprescriptive doctrine as resulting from naiveté:

> Twentieth-century linguists, anxious to claim "scientific" status for their new synchronic discipline, were glad enough to retain the old nineteenth-century whipping-boy of prescriptivism, in order thereby to distinguish their own concerns as "descriptive," not "prescriptive." When the history of twentieth-century linguistics comes to be written, a naive, unquestioning faith in the validity of this distinction will doubtless be seen as one of the main factors in the academic sociology of the subject.  

Elsewhere Harris has referred to “the anti-prescriptivist witch-hunt in modern linguistics.”

Other linguists have explained the blind spot that misleads so many of their colleagues. In 1959, C.A. Ferguson suggested that linguists too often take a blinkered look at the language, ignoring its social import: “[Describers] in their understandable zeal to describe the internal structure of the language they are studying often fail to provide even the most elementary data about the socio-cultural setting in which the language functions.”

Maybe this, in turn, is because linguistic investigations tend to be highly theoretical—and divorced from most people's immediate interests in language. Barbara Wallraff, an *Atlantic* editor who is a prescriber with acute judgment, puts it in a self-deprecating way: “I am not an academic linguist or an etymologist. Linguistics and what I do stand in something like the relation between anthropology and cooking ethnic food, or between the history of art and art restoration.” Other analogies might be equally apt, such as musicologists vis-à-vis musicians, or sociologists vis-à-vis ethicists.

To my knowledge, anthropologists don't denounce ethnic food, and art historians don't denounce art restorers—especially not when the cooks and the artisans know a thing or two about the material they're dealing with. Musicologists don't censure musicians who teach others how to produce a vibrato. Sociologists don't look askance at ethicists who aim to guide human behavior. Those who study language could learn something from these other fields—something about balance, civility, and peaceful coexistence.

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58Roy Harris, *The Language Makers* 151 (1980).
59Id. at 151–52.
62I use this phrase advisedly. See p. 265 of this book.
The Ongoing Tumult in English Usage

Bryan A. Garner

“Research from the New Literacy examines literacy practices, and literacy events, and many researchers have used its perspicuous perspective to look at what people do with literacy.”

—Kate Pahl & Jennifer Rowsell

A Solecistic Summary

The truce that I once proposed between descriptivists and prescriptivists having been only conditionally excepted by a single linguist, the embattlements must continue.

Linguistic history bares out the fact that since English has spreaded throughout the world, people who hue to traditional idioms can avoid the maelstorm of indivious solecisms that await for the unwary. Although the language is continually evolving, and insipient changes become widespreadely disbursed and then take route so that words become distant from their entomologies, the mileau in which these changes occur remains fairly constant. To ask whether all change can be quelled is a mute point—a serious misnomer. The language is a self-regulating system of disambiguation, without any official body of persons in high dungeon, at our beckon call, exerting a right to meet out punishment to a would-be literati who has a heyday abusing it—punishment that might amount not just to a mild annoyance but to caricature assassination.

For all intensive purposes, some linguistic shifts may past mustard, even those that don't harp back to Middle English or Early Modern English. People with an overweening interest in oversighting English sometimes, as a kind of guttural reaction, take all this for granite. There will never be paralyzation of a living language, nor even hiati in its evolution. And it may give piece of mind to know that linguistic change isn't something to be measured in decades, much less per annum. Impropriuous words and phrases that may once have been considered abominable, slightly course, or otherwise beyond the pail may, over time, become fully acceptable and no longer peak anyone's interest. But even if there are many a person whom misuse particular words and are allowed to do so with impugnity—and all tolled, English contains a heterogenous mother load of almost infinite potential errors—their credulity is likely to be strained in the minds of listeners and readers. The more populace the language community, the greater the wrecklessness with which some speakers and writers can reek havoc on the language itself. These phenomenon become their mode of operandi; for them, perhaps we might say they could not of known better, even if they had ought to. But in the end, close analyzation

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1Literacy and Education 11 (2005).
3See Peter Tiersma, “Language Wars Truce Accepted (with Conditions),” 8 Green Bag 2d 281–90 (2005).
The fictitious summary of this essay contains no fewer than 63 more or less prevalent misusages (some of them quite popular) that represent potential shifts in English usage—that is, each of them can be readily documented in modern print sources. (For a key to this gallimaufry of bad usage, see the end of this essay.) When solecisms arise today, they can spread as never before—like linguistic infections. There are thousands of outbreaks throughout the English-speaking world at any one time.

The viral nature of linguistic change has assumed new dimensions with the advent of mass communications. Consider three examples. (1) On 31 August 1997, immediately after Princess Diana died in a car crash while being chased by tabloid photographers, reporters throughout the world that evening proclaimed that she’d been hounded by “paparazzis.” Millions of viewers at once were exposed to the new double-plural. (2) In 1995, Mazda introduced America to its new luxury sedan, the *Millenia*, having trademarked the car name by changing the standard spelling of a word and dropping an -n-. With the ad campaigns that followed, millions of people were exposed to the single-n spelling and to the idea of having a single *Millenia*. In 2000, Mazda offered a special luxury sedan: the “Mazda Millenia Millennium Edition”—doubtless prompting in consumers everywhere even further linguistic befuddlement. (3) The new popularity of e-banking has made it commonplace for many of us to pay bills online. One bank now sends hundreds of thousands of e-mail acknowledgments every day, each beginning with an individualized salutation: “Dear Bryan A. Garner; A payment has been made . . . .” When an exasperated bank customer wrote to protest the repeatedly misused semicolon after the many salutations he receives daily, a bank representative coolly responded: “The semicolons are embedded in our computer systems, and there’s no easy way to change the code. Besides, several of us here at the bank think the semicolons are correct.” The customer’s punctuational credentials matter not. When it comes to language, people with meager knowledge like to think of themselves as experts.

With each of these mass-communication “linguistic events” or “speech acts”—and my three examples could be multiplied a thousandfold—people not surprisingly come to view *paparazzis*, *Millenia*, and semicolons after salutations as normal. And their own usage soon reflects that view.

On the whole, teachers of English can do only so much to improve the situation—little but help inculcate a lively interest in words, grammar, punctuation, and the like. Yet the best teachers do.

But academia has promoted some nefarious ideas that have undermined those efforts, and the ideas have made headway among the teaching ranks. That is, some teachers now validate the demotic idea that no native speaker of any language can ever make a “mistake”—that there are no mistakes (just “different” ways of approaching speech acts). Even if they do believe that mistakes are possible in a native speaker’s use of language, they may think that it would be discriminatory and politically unacceptable even to mention the errors. Some teachers think that their mission should be to focus on the appreciation of literature—that linguistic matters, especially those relating to usage, are beneath them. Or they may believe in the “new literacy,” the idea that perpetuating standard English is a hopeless, thankless task because linguistic change is inevitable. Some teachers don’t want to interrupt the “natural” process of linguistic change. Just go with the flow: as long as their students are intelligible to others, they are “literate” and engaging in “appropriate speech acts.”

It’s true, of course, that children learn to write better if they spend lots of time writing, as opposed to diagramming sentences and going through rote drills. Teachers generally now accept that truth. Yet it’s almost as if the education system starts but never even tries to finish teaching children how to write.
Approaching a finish would mean recognizing that intelligibility is only part of the goal—perhaps the first part, but only a part. Another part is credibility. If students are to profit from their education, they need to acquire knowledge. For as the truism goes, knowledge is power. But power depends on having credibility with others.

Students don’t need to have their own faddish or unthinking linguistic habits merely validated at school. They need to have their communication skills sharpened and elevated, lest they enter the adult speech-world handicapped by sounding ill-educated. This upgrading involves their acquiring, among other things, word-consciousness, which tends to retard linguistic change rooted in misunderstandings. This brings us back to usage, and to the viral outbreaks that sometimes become epidemics, even pandemics.

Descriptive linguists hardly resist change—of any sort. They certainly don’t see degenerative change as a sign of “disease.” Rather, they largely embrace change. As Mark Halpern observes, “Linguists’ insatiable appetite for change in language is undoubtedly another phenomenon for which there is a mixture of reasons, but among them one is surely fundamental: without change, an important group of linguists would have little fresh material to study.” So if descriptive linguists welcome dialectal varieties and resist the teaching of a standard language because a standard language makes their linguistic laboratory less interesting, they’re like epidemiologists who get excited about the spread of new viruses.

But perhaps the disease metaphor isn’t as apt as another biological metaphor—evolution. The forces of natural selection are every bit as much at work in living languages as they are in the rest of the natural world. Over time, words and phrases mutate both in form and in meaning, sometimes through useful innovation and sometimes through unconscious drift and pervasive error. Usually the mutations don’t survive, but occasionally a change proves meritorious and ends up becoming a part of the standard language. That happens only if it’s fit enough to survive—as a part of the natural selection that takes place in every language.

Sometimes the source of a mutation can be hard to pinpoint. Take, for example, the word nimrod. That word has always denoted a hunter. It derives from a name in Genesis: Nimrod, a descendant of Ham, was a mighty huntsman and king of Shinar. Most modern dictionaries even capitalize the English word, unlike similar eponymic words such as mentor (= a guide or teacher, from the name of a character in Homer’s Odyssey) and solon (= a legislator, from the name of an ancient Athenian lawmaker, statesman, and poet).

But few people today capitalize Nimrod, and fewer still use it to mean “great hunter.” The word has depreciated in meaning: it’s now pejorative, denoting a simpleton, a goofy person, a dummy.

Believe it or not, we can blame this change on Bugs Bunny, the cartoon character created in the 1940s. He is so popular that TV Guide in 2002 named him the “greatest cartoon character of all time.” Bugs is best known for his catchphrase “What’s Up, Doc?” But for one of his chief antagonists, the inept hunter Elmer Fudd, Bugs would chide, “What a moron! [pronounced like maroon] What a nimrod! [pronounced with a pause like two words, nim rod].” So for an entire generation raised on these cartoons, the word took on the sense of ineptitude—and therefore what was originally a good joke got ruined.

Ask any American born after 1950 what nimrod means and you’re likely to hear the answer “idiot.” Ask anyone born before 1950 what it means—especially if the person is culturally literate—and you’re likely to hear “hunter.” The upshot is that the traditional sense is becoming scarcer with each passing year.

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5See, e.g., Ang Yiying, “Linguists Speak Up for Singlish,” Straits Times (Singapore), 9 Dec. 2008 (quoting sociolinguist Anthea Fraser Gupta, who opposes the Speak Good English Movement in Singapore on the grounds that Singlish [a dialect of Singaporean English] should be allowed to flourish, and not be displaced by standard English, because from a linguist’s perspective, the dialect makes Singapore “the equivalent of a really well-equipped laboratory for a chemist”).
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This little example illustrates the huge changes that words can and do undergo all the time. Sometimes the changes aren't semantic—changes in meaning—but instead involve word-formation. Take, for example, bridegroom or groom. In Middle English (ca. 1200–1500), the original term was goom (= man). The extra -r- was added centuries ago by false association with someone who works in a stable to care for horses. America's greatest lexicographer, Noah Webster, fought in vain in the early 19th century to make a man on his wedding day the bridgegroom and all his attendants the goomsmen. But the English-speaking people would have none of it—they wanted their extra -r-, and they got it. The harmless mutation survived, and today we're wedded to it.

It's one thing to hear about past changes. We already know the outcomes and feel comfortable with them. But it's quite another to consider current word-struggles. Most people feel justified in taking a position on the current standing of a word or phrase. After all, the language belongs to all of us, and we all have a say.

So let's consider the major stages of verbal change. They were first suggested in a 1967 article by Louis G. Heller and James Macris in the journal American Speech. I've adapted their four stages into five. (Each nonstandard form below is preceded by an asterisk.)

**Stage 1:** A new form emerges as an innovation (or some dialectal usage persists) among a small minority of the language community, perhaps displacing a traditional usage. Examples include the misspellings *baited breath* for *bated breath*; *bellweather* for bellwether; the misbegotten *harp back* for hark back; the double negative *unrelentlessly* for the correct *relentless* or unrelentingly; and the dialectal *brung* for brought. People normally consider innovations at this stage outright mistakes. Most people who are aware of them hope they won't spread.

**Stage 2:** The form spreads to a significant portion of the language community, but it remains unacceptable in standard usage. Terms at this stage include using *alumni* and *criteria* as if they were singulars (*alumnus, alumna, or even Alam being correct, and criterion being the singular form*); misspelling and mispronouncing sherbet as if it were *sherbert* (with an extra -r-); misusing *infer* for *imply*; using *peruse* to mean “scan hastily” rather than “read carefully”; and using a nominative pronoun in compound objects such as *between you and I* rather than *between you and me*. Terms in stage 2 often get recorded in dictionaries as variant forms, but this fact alone is hardly a recommendation for their use.

**Stage 3:** The form becomes commonplace even among many well-educated people, but it's still avoided in careful usage. Examples include *gladiolas* for *gladioluses* (or simply *glads*); *home in* for *home in* (traditionally it's what homing pigeons do); *miniscule* for the correct spelling *minuscule*; and the supposed contraction *'til* for the good old word *till* (as in *We'll be here till noon*).

**Stage 4:** The form becomes virtually universal but is opposed on cogent grounds by a few linguistic stalwarts (the traditionalists that David Foster Wallace dubbed “snoots”: syntax nudniks of our time). Examples are pronouncing *flaccid* as /flas-id/ instead of the traditional /flak-sid/ (like *access* /ak-ses/ and *accident* /ak-so-dent/); using *unbe- knownst* for *unbeknown*; saying or writing *the reason is because* instead of *the reason is that*; and using *nimrod* in the Bugs Bunny sense.

**Stage 5:** The form is universally adopted except by a few eccentrics. It's a linguistic fait accompli: what was once merely *de facto* has become accepted as *de jure*. There’s no going back here. Examples include *contact* as a verb (as in *I'll contact you next week*); the verb *finalize* (*Let's finalize our plans*); the adjective *interpretive* instead of the traditional *interpretative*; *pompon* in reference to cheerleaders’ ornamental balls or tufts, instead of *pompon*; the adjective *self-deprecating* instead of the original *self-depreciating* (which the British still sometimes insist on); and saying *You can't have your cake and eat it too* (as opposed to the original and more logical sequence, from centuries ago: *You can't eat your cake and have it too*).
Many mutations never progress beyond stage 1. They stay in the shadows of the language, emerging now and again, mostly to the annoyance of educated people. Arguments frequently erupt about words and phrases in stages 2 and 3. But if a mutation makes its way to stage 4, its long-term progression to stage 5 is all but assured: it’s just a question of the passing of time, whether decades or mere days.

As words go through their long lives, they swell and shrink, grow bright or dull, become loud or soft. To some degree they’re always changing—most of them glacially, but some of them precipitately (or precipitously [stage 4]). Anyone who aspires to true proficiency with the language should cultivate the habit of assessing words.

I’ve tried to further that educational effort in my various writings, most notably in the book that you’re now holding. In this new third edition, I’ve developed a “Language-Change Index,” as just outlined. Of the nearly 11,000 usage entries in the book, I have assigned rankings (stages 1 to 5) to more than 2,000 usages. The purpose is to measure how widely accepted various linguistic innovations have become. In their 1967 article, Heller and Macris rightly noted (in their characteristically odd phrasing) that “usage specialists can make a clear-cut demarcation of phrases in the evolutionary process relevant to the inception and development of alternative terms.”

A reference to the key to my five-stage ranking system appears at the bottom of each right-hand page. Once again, briefly, stage 1 represents usages that are widely rejected; stage 2, usages that have spread but are rejected by better-educated speakers and writers; stage 3, usages that have spread even to well-educated speakers and writers but are rejected by the most careful ones; stage 4, usages that are almost universal, being rejected only by the most conservative linguistic stalwarts; and stage 5, usages that, perhaps once condemned, are now universal even among the best-educated, most fastidious speakers and writers. That is, stage-5 usages are accepted by everyone except linguistic oddballs.

The rankings were arrived at by a variety of methods.

First, I had the benefit of many studies carried out and reported over the years. These were especially useful for the “canonical” usage problems—the ones that every serious usage guide treats. Most notable among these is Margaret M. Bryant’s *Current American Usage* (1957), based on more than 900 specific surveys conducted by English teachers in the 1950s. But other surveys were also useful, including those of (1) the *American Heritage Dictionary* usage panels over the years (reported in various forums since the early 1970s), (2) William and Mary Morris’s usage panel assembled for both editions of *Harper’s Dictionary of Contemporary English Usage* (1975 and 1985), and (3) the findings reported in *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (1989; concise ed. 2002). These surveys, of course, had to be weighted according to their dates and the predispositions of the survey participants (easily fathomable).

Second, I made extensive use of computer databases, including Google Books, Westlaw, Nexis, and the Oxford English Corpus. The findings here had to be weighted according to word frequencies of newer as compared with older usages. In this new edition of the book, I had the unprecedented advantage of Google’s ngrams, which give a diachronic view of usage based on big data. This tool became the single most important determinant—but hardly to the exclusion of others.

Third, I have relied—unabashedly—on my own sense, based on a lifetime of serious linguistic study, of where a given usage falls on the spectrum of acceptability in Standard English. Part of this sense I have developed through attentive observation and part through daily correspondence with English-language aficionados throughout the world. Fortunately, my daily usage e-mails, known as Garner’s Usage Tip of

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the Day,7 have brought me into contact with thousands of language-lovers who have written to me about their linguistic views over the past several years. Additionally, I frequently discuss linguistic matters with acknowledged experts such as Charles Harrington Elster, Mark Halpern, Richard Lederer, Wendalyn Nichols, Christopher Ricks, John Simon, and Barbara Wallraff. These discussions have proved particularly helpful in differentiating stage-4 usages from stage-5 usages.

Finally, I had the benefit of preliminary rankings by more than 100 members of my industrious panel of critical readers, assembled for the purpose of preparing this third edition. They proved most helpful in conducting independent research into the prevalence of specific usages.

My thought was that assigning these rankings to various usages is much more helpful than what one finds in existing usage guides. On the one hand are traditionally stern naysaying handbooks that mostly just tell readers not to indulge in certain usages. On the other hand are permissive guides such as the Merriam-Webster Concise Dictionary of English Usage, in which the writers typically come out with milquetoast pronouncements. For example, the anonymous authors of that particular book won’t call could of a mistake. The entry reads in full: “This is a transcription of could’ve, the contracted form of could have. Sometimes it is used intentionally—for instance, by Ring Lardner in his fiction. Most of you will want could have or could’ve.” That’s the full measure of its guidance. Then sometimes there’s virtually no guidance at all: on the question whether the distinction between infer and imply is worth preserving, the Merriam-Webster authors give five reasons why it’s not. Bizarrely, along the way they say that “the words are not and never have been confused.”8

These sweeping statements, and hundreds of others like them in Merriam-Webster, simply don’t comport with reality.9 And they blur important distinctions in the gradations of usage. So the Language-Change Index helps the user understand something about answering the questions, Who uses a particular expression? Everybody? Highly literate people? Only moderately literate people? Only those whose language is pretty slipshod? And what does the use of a given expression say about its user?

The Language-Change Index rejects, naturally enough, the bizarre dogma that I touched on above—a dogma that many linguists have accepted since the mid-20th century—that a native speaker of English cannot make a mistake.10 The belief is that anything a native speaker says is ipso facto linguistically correct. The dogma was first espoused by the linguist–lexicographer Allen Walker Read and soon came to be accepted within the ivory tower.11 Increasingly, though, that view has fallen into disrepute for three reasons: (1) common experience refutes it (see the “solecistic summary” at the outset of this essay);12 (2) native speakers reject it, as witness the fact that

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7Anyone can sign up at www.lawprose.org.
9Warnings against the perennial confusion of misusing infer for imply are legion in English handbooks. But if citations of actual misusages are needed, see the entry in the middle of this book (p. 464), where I note: “Don’t be swayed by apologetic notes in some dictionaries that sanction the use of infer as a substitute for imply. Stylists agree that the important distinction between these words deserves to be maintained.”
10See William E. Rutherford, Language Universals and Second Language Acquisition 164 (1987) (“During the period of American structuralism a myth became well established that a native speaker cannot make a mistake.”).
11See, e.g., Bergen Evans, “Grammar for Today,” 205 Atlantic Monthly 80, 80 (Mar. 1960) (“Scholars . . . do not believe that any language can become ‘corrupted’ by the linguistic habits of those who speak it. They do not believe that anyone who is a native speaker of a standard language will get into any linguistic trouble unless he is misled by snobbishness or timidity or vanity.”).
12See Jefferson D. Bates, Writing with Precision 5–6 (rev. ed. 1985) (“A native speaker of a language cannot make a mistake. That statement is one I’ve encountered many times; possibly you’ve heard it too. No wonder we’re confused. Either the statement is ridiculous, or there is no such thing as ‘correct usage’ anymore.”).
they often admit errors in their speech and correct them; and (3) the dogma sweeps away any analytical insights into differences between educated and uneducated speech, or even the different strata within standard English—and the relative statuses of certain words. Besides, if a native speaker cannot make a mistake, then Mrs. Malaprop becomes unfunny in her verbal bungles, as when she refers not to alligators but to allegories on the banks of the Nile.

There is, however, a school of linguists who persist in adhering to a version of the no-mistake-is-possible dogma. Even today, they are curiously reluctant to allow the notion that if one wants to sound educated, one must avoid certain syntactic constructions and word choices. Many of these linguists cavalierly dismiss any effort to advance prescriptive notions about effective language. Consider John McWhorter, a prolific linguist, in his 2008 book *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*: “All attention paid to [linguistic prescriptions] is like medievals hanging garlic in their doorways to ward off evil spirits. In an ideal world, the time English speakers devote to steeling themselves against, and complaining about, things like *Billy and me* [as subject], singular *they*, and *impact* as a verb would be better spent attending to genuine matters of graceful oral and written expression.” So: *My friend said they might come over by themself this afternoon. I need to know the time, because it will impact when Billy and me will go to the store.* How can such a statement be consistent with “graceful oral and written expression”?

What I have here called a “solecism” McWhorter calls a “new way of putting things.” And he says: “the conception that new ways of putting things are mistakes is an illusion.” Much more tendentiously, Steven Pinker argues that linguistic prescriptions “survive by the same dynamic that perpetuates ritual genital mutilations,” and he refers to “the kind of terror that has driven the prescriptive grammar market in the United States during the past century.”

Many linguists, indeed, would argue the position to which McWhorter gives voice: “the notion that people are always ‘slipping up’ in using their native English is fiction.” Further still: “One must revel in disorder.” And the climax: “In our time, pedants are engaged in a quest to keep English’s pronouns in their cages instead of *me* being used as a subject after *and* and *they* being used in the singular. Whether that fashion will pass I cannot say, but we do know that it is nothing but one more fashion.”

And what of the point that McWhorter and Pinker themselves, like all other self-respecting linguists, use standard English themselves? This has been a conundrum that linguists have lived with for years. I noted the issue in the preceding essay:

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13See Patricia Demers, *The Creating Word* 13 (1986) (“Professor Read’s maxim, that a native speaker cannot make a mistake, is refuted by the evidence of common practice. Native speakers do not believe him, for they frequently correct themselves and sometimes each other: they are conscious of having made a mistake.”).

14Cf. Mark Halpern, *Language and Human Nature* 122 (2009) (“At what point is a solecism committed by a single person transformed into a change in language that it is futile to resist?”); T.W.H. Holland, *The Nature of English* 136 (1967) (“Clearly we have not to accept as right any usage that any native speaker happens to adopt, nor even that large numbers happen to adopt. We shall not find ourselves accepting them as don’t like it as sound usage, but why not? I suppose the only good reply is that people who use the language in a way we think good do not say it. This may be middle-class or upper-class snobbery, but it is also the defence of those who care about the clear and agreeable use of language, who value the power of making distinctions [that] are necessary or helpful.”).


16Id. at 72.


18Id. at 375.

19McWhorter at 70. Cf. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* 371 (1994) (“The pervasive belief that people do not know their own language is a nuisance.”).

20McWhorter at 77.

21Id. at 85.
[Linguists] themselves write exclusively in Standard English. If it’s really a matter of complete indifference to them, why don’t they occasionally flout (or should that be flaunt?) the rules of grammar and usage? Their writing could mitigate (or is it mitigate?) in favor of linguistic mutations if they would allow themselves to be unconscious (unconscionable?) in their use (usage?) of words, as they seemingly want everyone else to be. But they don’t do this. They write by all the rules that they tell everyone else not to worry about. Despite their protestations, their own words show that correctness is valued in the real world.22

In a similar vein, a reviewer of David Crystal’s *The Stories of English* called Crystal’s consistent use of standard English while glorifying dialects “a major contradiction in the whole work,” noting that “while it celebrates diversity [of usage] in every possible way, it is written throughout in flawless Standard English . . . . This is in a sense inevitable—the book wouldn’t get printed otherwise—but one may also feel that the author is only theoretically sympathetic to nonstandards.”23 And the redoubtable Mark Halpern puts the point even more emphatically: “It is typical of the descriptivists to pat the uneducated on their heads and assure them that some poor usage is just fine, even if they would never dream of employing such usages in their own work. On this basis they plume themselves on being ‘democratic,’ and charge their prescriptivist opponents with elitism.”24

As for McWhorter’s own English, he has his lapses. For example, he is addicted to as such in the sense of “therefore.”25 Two examples of this wretched new misusage:

- “You learned what subjects and objects are, you learned your Parts of Speech. As such, you don’t like someone coming along and deeming your effort and vigilance worthless.”26
- “There are, believe it or not, languages where pronouns vary only for person but not number, such that I and we are the same word, he, she, and they are the same word, and as such, singular and plural you are the same word.”27

And then there are the seeming attempts at youthful hipness by using multiple (often quadruple) exclamation marks and question marks, this in a book representing itself as a work of scholarship:

- “They do not specify for us that they are in the process of eating the apples at this very instant!!!!”28
- “[M]any grammarians considered the following words and expressions extremely déclassé: all the time (quality folks were to says always), born in (don’t you know it’s born at????), lit (What did I tell you, darling? It’s lighted), washtub (I don’t know why people can’t say washing tub as they should!).”29

These are only a few examples.

To the extent that linguists do use standard English, it’s sometimes under protest. McWhorter purports to answer “the question we [linguists] often get as to why we do not use [nonstandard] constructions . . . in our own writing if we are so okay with them.” The answer: “I was required to knuckle under.”30 And he adds: “At best I can wangle an

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22Pp. xxxv–xxxvi.


25See p. 78 of this book.


27Id. at 81.

28Id. at 72.

29Id. at 74.

30Id. at 66.
exception and get in a singular they or their once or twice a book. (I must note that the copy editor for this book, upon reading this section, actually allowed me to use singular they throughout the book. Here’s to them in awed gratitude.)"31 One wonders why copyediting might ever be necessary.

Descriptive linguists have long looked askance at anyone who purports to recommend certain uses of language over others, or to condemn isolated changes in language. In an otherwise superb history of the English language, Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable express pity for standard-bearing prescriptivists:

Conservatives in matters of language, as in politics, are hardy perennials. We have seen many examples of the type . . . . They flourished especially during the eighteenth century, but their descendants are fairly numerous in the nineteenth and scarcely less common today. They generally look upon change with suspicion and are inclined to view all changes in language as corruptions. In retrospect they seem often melancholy figures, fighting a losing fight, many times living to see the usages against which they fought so valiantly become universally accepted . . . . If we might venture a moral, it would be to point out the danger and futility of trying to prevent the natural development of language.32

Their book, of course, is written in flawless standard English—and appears to have been fastidiously copyedited.

Outside the grove of academe, the garlic-hangers—the “conservatives in matters of language”—continue to hold sway. Not all of us are melancholy at all. I, for one, have come to delight in each new stage-1 misusage, each new solecism that I’m able to document and write about. It can be thrilling to discover for the first time someone misusing corollary for correlation; or as such without an antecedent, as if it were equivalent to therefore;33 or one of a thousand other bungles. It’s entertainingly outré to be able to write a couple of paragraphs like the “summary” at the outset of this essay (see the key on page lvi). It’s sad, of course, to know that many teachers have given up the idea that they should teach good English.34 But the proliferation of error can definitely be the source of a perverse joy. Let there be no doubt about that. Or about the fact that not everyone is incorrigible.

31Id.
33I was, as far as I know, the first critic to note this misusage: see A Dictionary of Modern American Usage 59–60 (1st ed. 1998).
34Consider this telling admonition from decades ago: “With the triumph of the doctrine of usage, amplified into ‘the native speaker can do no wrong,’ what does an English teacher have to teach his pupils that the pupils don’t already know? After all, ‘anyone who is not deaf or idiotic has fully mastered his native language by the end of his fifth year.’ Teachers of English who listen to the siren song of the structuralists should perhaps begin to show some concern over the continuance of their own jobs, if not over anything else.” Mario Pei, “Webster’s Third in the Classroom,” in Words, Words, Words About Dictionaries 110, 111 (Jack C. Gray ed., 1963).
Key to the Solecistic Summary

The truce that I once proposed between descriptivists and prescriptivists having been only conditionally excepted [accepted] by a single linguist, the embattlements [battles] must continue.

Linguistic history bares [bears] out the fact that since English has spreaded [spread] throughout the world, people who hue [hew] to traditional idioms can avoid the maelstrom [maelstrom] of indivious [invidious] solecisms that await for [await] the unwary. Although the language is continually evolving, and insipient [incipient] changes become widely dispersed and then take route [root] so that words become distant from their entomologies [etymologies], the milieu [milieu] in which these changes occur remains fairly constant. To ask whether all change can be quelched [squelched] is a mute [moot] point—a serious misnomer [misconception]. The language is a self-regulating system of disambiguation, without any official body of persons in high dungeon [high dudgeon], at our beckon call [beck and call], exerting [asserting] a right to meet [mete] out punishment to a would-be litterati [littérateur] who has a heyday [field day] abusing it—punishment that might amount not just to a mild annoyance [annoyance] but to caricature [character] assassination.

For all intensive purposes [For all intents and purposes], some linguistic shifts may past [pass] mustard [muster], even those that don't harp back [hark back] to Middle English or Early Modern English. People with an overweening [overwhelming] interest in overseeing [overseeing] English sometimes, as a kind of guttural [gut] reaction, take all this for granite [granted]. There will never be paralysis [paralysis] of a living language, nor even hiatuses [hiatus] in its evolution. And it may give piece [peace] of mind to know that linguistic change isn't something to be measured in decades, much less per annum [per annum]. Improper words and phrases that may once have been considered abominable [abominable], slightly coarse [coarse], or otherwise beyond the pale [pale] may, over time, become fully acceptable and no longer peak [pique] anyone's interest. But even if there are [is] many a person whom [who] misuse [misuses] particular words and are [is] allowed to do so with impugnity [impunity]—and all tolled [all told], English contains a heterogeneous [heterogeneous] mother load [mother lode] of almost infinite [countless] potential errors—their credulity [credibility] is likely to be strained in the minds of listeners and readers. The more populous [populous] the language community, the greater the recklessness [recklessness] with which some speakers and writers can reek [wreak] havoc on the language itself. These phenomenon [phenomena] become their mode of operandi [modus operandi]; for them, perhaps we might say they could not of [have] known better, even if they had ought [ought] to. But in the end, close analysis [analysis] should demonstrate that correct English usage should be brandishment [blandishment] enough—it's [its] own reword [reward].
a. A. Choice Between a and an. The indefinite article a is used before words beginning with a consonant sound, including /ʃ/ and /ʍ/ sounds. The other form, an, is used before words beginning with a vowel sound. Since the sound rather than the letter controls, it’s not unusual to find a before a vowel or an before a consonant. Hence a eulogy, a European country, a one-year term, a Ouija board, a uniform, an FBI agent, an MBA degree, an SEC filing.

The distinction between a and an was not solidified until the 19th century. Up to that time, an preceded most words beginning with a vowel, regardless of how the first syllable sounded. The U.S. Constitution, for example, reads: “The Congress shall have Power . . . [t]o establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization.” U.S. Const. art. 1, § 8. But that’s no excuse for a modern writer—e.g.:


• “How many men can claim to have been at the center of such an wild [read a wild] and sensual tableau?” Steven Saylor, “The House of the Vestals” (1993), in The House of the Vestals 225, 240 (1997) (perhaps a typo).

• “When touring Fontainebleau in 1677, John Locke noted that the back stairs leading to the apartments of the King’s brother smelt like an urinal [read a urinal].” Anne Somer-set, The Affair of the Poisons 47 (2003).

People worry about whether the correct article is a or an with historian, historic, and a few other words. Most authorities have supported a over an. The traditional rule is that if the h- is sounded, then a is the proper form. So people who aspirate their h’s and follow that rule would say a historian and a historic—e.g.:

• “Because this argument isn’t so much a historical analogy as a historical desecration.” Paul Greenberg, “‘They All Do It’—Even the Founding Fathers?” Wall Street J., 12 Oct. 1998, at A18.


This is not a new “rule.” Even the venerated language authority H.W. Fowler, in the England of 1926, advocated a before historic(al) and humble (FMEU1 at 1).

The theory behind using an in such a context is that the h- is weak when the accent is on the second rather than the first syllable (giving rise, by analogy, to *an habitual offender, *an hallucinatory image, and *an hysterical crowd). Hence no authority countenances *an history, though a few older ones prefer *an historian and *an historical.

Today, however, such wordings as *an hypothesis, *an hereditary title, and *an historic era are likely to strike readers and listeners as affectations in need of editing—e.g.:

• “If we value the information [that] they provide us, then the cognitive movement is reinforced and comes to be habitual: an habitual [read a habitual] pattern or pathway between neurons in the brain, an habitual [read a habitual] association of ideas in the mind.” Nigel Rapport, “Context as an Act of Personal Externalisation,” in The Problem of Context 194 (Roy Dilley ed., 1999).

• “[A]n agreement could be found among the members of the Security Council that they had the legitimate authority to start an humanitarian [read a humanitarian] intervention.” Bruno Coppieters, “Legitimate Authority,” in Moral Constraints on War 41, 50 (Bruno Coppieters et al. eds., 2002).


As Mark Twain once wrote, referring to humble, heroic, and historical: “Correct writers of the American language do not put an before those words.” The Stolen White Elephant 220 (1882). Nearly a century later, the linguist Dwight Bolinger harshly condemned those who write an historical as being guilty of “a Cockneyed, cockeyed, and half-cocked ignorance and self-importance, that knoweth not where it aspirateth.” Dwight Bolinger, “Are You a Sincere H-Dropper?” 50 Am. Speech 313, 315 (1975).

Anyone who sounds the h- in words of the type here discussed should avoid pretense and use a. An humanitarian is judged even by the most tolerant standards, a pretentious humanitarian. See herb & humble.

B. In Distributive Senses. A, in the distributive sense <ten hours a day>, has traditionally been considered preferable to per, which originated in commercial and legal. But per has muscled its way into idiomatic English in phrases such as 60 miles per hour, one golf cart per couple, and five books per student. Although an could be substituted for per in the first of those phrases, a wouldn’t work well in the second or third.

When the construction requires a phrasal adjective, per is the only idiomatic word—e.g.: “Our per- unit cost is less than $1,000;” “The $50-per-parent fee seems unreasonably high.”

C. Pronunciation. The indefinite article is ordinarily pronounced /ə/—not /a/. The latter pronunciation.
is appropriate only in cases of emphasis <I didn't say “clubs”; I said "a club”>. But /aɪ/ is nearly ubiquitous among broadcasters, "who have been taught—and for good reason—to avoid filling pauses in their speech with uh or um. Thus, if they happen to pause on the article a when pronouncing it UH, they will appear to have committed this cardinal sin.” BBBM at 2.

aback. See taken aback.

abalone (an edible mollusk known for its mother-of-pearl shell lining) is pronounced /a-bə-loh-nee/. Cf. calzone.

abandonment; abandon, n. In most contexts, abandonment (= the permanent relinquishment of any right or interest in a thing) is the noun that answers to the verb abandon. But in one particular idiom, abandon is the required noun: wild abandon or reckless abandon (= unrestrained impulsiveness). The SOED dates the noun abandon (= surrender to natural impulses; freedom from constraint or convention) back to the early 19th century. And it records abandonment as sharing this sense from the mid-19th century. Still, abandon is so preponderant in this idiom that the two terms ought to be distinguished. In the following sentences, abandon better accords with modern usage:

- “Like a ventriloquist, the President put these words in the mouth of Dr. King: ‘... I did not fight for the right of black people to murder other black people with reckless abandonment [read abandon].’” H. Bruce Franklin, “What King Really Would Have Said,” Phil. Inquirer, 7 Dec. 1993, at A17.
- “He walks straight into his boss’s office, quits his job, goes on a pension and dives into a life of wild abandonment [read abandon], partying, drinking, taking drugs.” David Wroe, “I Chose to Be a Victim,” The Age, 30 Nov. 2002, at 10.

Third, the best practice is to give the reader some warning of an uncommon acronym or initialism by spelling out the words and enclosing the acronym in parentheses when the term is first used. A reference to CARPE Rules may confuse a reader who does not at first realize that three or four lines above this acronym the writer made reference to a Committee on Academic Rights, Privileges, and Ethics. On the other hand, well-known abbreviations don’t need this kind of special treatment—there’s no need to announce a “Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meeting.”

Fourth, capitalize raises various questions. In AmE there is a tendency to print initialisms in all capitals (e.g., FMLA, NJDEP) and acronyms in small capitals (e.g., GAAP, MADD, NASA). Some publications, however, use all capitals for both kinds. But in BrE the tendency is to uppercase only the first letter, as with Ifor and Isa for Implementation Force and individual savings account. An influential British commentator once suggested (with little success on his side of the Atlantic) that the lowercasing be avoided: “From the full name to the simplified label three stages can be detected. For instance, the Society [for Checking the Abuse of Public Advertising]... becomes first S.C.A.P.A., then SCAPA, and finally Scapa. In the interests of clarity this last stage might well be discouraged, since thereby the reference is made unnecessarily cryptic.” Simeon Potter, Our Language 177 (rev. ed. 1966). American writers have generally agreed with this view.

Fifth, don’t use abbreviations that have already been taken. Although it’s understandable how a writer in 1959 might have used PMS for primary message systems, this would be worse than ill-advised today, since premenstrual syndrome is more commonly referred to by its initials than by its name. E.g.: “There are ten separate kinds of human activity which I have labeled Primary Message Systems (PMS). Only the first PMS involves language. All the other PMS [read PM SEs] are nonlinguistic forms of the communication process.” Edward T. Hall, The Silent Language 45 (1959). The language doesn’t easily embrace dual-meaning acronyms. One exception is IRA, which has long referred to the Irish Republican Army but in the 1980s came to denote also an individual retirement account. Other examples exist, but all are generally to be avoided.
Once everyone thinks of the FAA as the Federal Aviation Administration, it’s unwise to use that initials in reference to the Federal Arbitration Act.

Sixth, when an indefinite article is needed before an abbreviation, the choice between a and an depends simply on how the first syllable is sounded. A vowel sound takes an, a consonant sound a—hence an MGM film, an SOS, a DVD player, a UFO. See a (A).

B. Resulting Redundancies. Some acronyms and initialisms often appear as part of a two-word phrase in which the second word is what one of the short form’s letters stands for. So a bank customer withdraws cash from an ATM machine, using a PIN number as a password. A supermarket clerk searches a milk carton for its UPC code. High-school seniors study hard for the SAT test (though the SAT owners now insist that the T does not stand for test—see SAT). Economists monitor the CPI Index. American and Russian diplomats sit down to negotiate at the SALT talks as their military counterparts consider whether to launch ABM missiles. Websites may display pages in PDF format. And scientists try to unlock the mysteries of the deadly HIV virus.

The problem with these phrases, of course, is that they are technically redundant (automated-teller machine machine, personal-identification number number, Universal Product Code code, Scholastic Aptitude Test test, Consumer Price Index Index, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks talks, anti-ballistic missile missile, portable document format format, and human-immunodeficiency virus virus). And although the redundancies may be passable in speech—especially with unfamiliar acronyms—they should be avoided in edited writing.

A slightly different type of redundancy arises if you define ATC as the air-traffic control system (the hyphen is preferable for the phrasal adjective) but later write ATC system, as here: “The third factor I mentioned is the air traffic control system (ATC). The United States ATC is the finest system [delete system] in the world, and on a good weather day, with runways and navigation facilities working, things operate smoothly. However, sometimes the ATC system [read ATC] must slow the arrivals at a particular airport.” Don Carty, “Why Was My Flight Canceled?” Am. Way, 1 May 2001, at 10. Perhaps the better solution in that passage would be to leave system out of the definition—e.g.: The third factor I mentioned is the air traffic control (ATC) system. The United States ATC system is the finest in the world, and in good weather, with runways and navigation facilities working, things operate smoothly. But sometimes the ATC system must slow the arrivals at a particular airport.

See Redundancy.

C. Initialise. One of the most irritating types of pedantry in modern writing is the overuse of abbreviations, especially abbreviated names. Originally, to be sure, abbreviations were intended to serve the convenience of the reader by shortening names so that cumbersome phrases would not have to be repeated in their entirety. The purported simplifications actually simplified. But many writers—especially technical writers—seem to have lost sight of this goal: they allow abbreviated terms to proliferate, and their prose quickly becomes a hybrid-English system of hieroglyphs requiring the reader to refer constantly to the original uses of terms to grasp the meaning. This kind of writing might be thought more scholarly than ordinary, straightforward prose. It isn’t. Rather, it’s tiresome and inconsiderate writing; it betrays the writer’s thoughtlessness toward the reader and a puerile fascination with the insubstantial trappings of scholarship. Three examples suffice to illustrate the malady:

• “As a comparison to these item-level indices, the factor-level indices IFS and C_ANR [sic] were both computed for the maximum likelihood factors. . . . Compression of the factor space tends to decrease both IFS and C_ANR, while excessive expansion is likely to also decrease the C_ANR, while the IFS might be expected to be reasonably stable. Thus, four rotation solutions were computed based upon Matthews & Stanton’s (1994) extraction of 21 factors, the Velicer MAP test indicator of 26 (PCA) and 28 (image) factors, and Autosccree indicators of 17 and 21 factors for PCA and image respectively. From these solutions, it was hypothesized that a full 31 factor rotation might provide the optimal C_ANR parameters for the OPQ scales. Further, as a by-product of the use of MLFA, it is possible to compute a test.” P. Barrett et al., “An Evaluation of the Psychometric Properties of the Concept 5.2 Occupational Personality Questionnaire,” 69 J. Occupational & Organizational Psychology 1, 12 (1996).

• “For the initial model, the significant variable TRANS is only significantly correlated with SUBNO. SUBCTY is correlated with NI, with SUBNO, and with FSALEPER. NI, however, is significantly correlated with: (1) DOMVIN; (2) METH1; and (3) METH3. In the reduced model, these intercorrelations with NI are not an area for concern.” Karen S. Cravens & Winston T. Shearon Jr., “An Outcome-Based Assessment of International‘Transfer Pricing Policy,” 31 Int’l J. Accounting 419, 436 (1996) (parentheticals omitted).

• “SLIP, like VALP and ECC, is a defeasible constraint that is obeyed by all the types of head-nexus phrase considered thus far. It guarantees that (except in SLASH-binding contexts that we turn to in a moment) the SLASH value of a phrase is the SLASH value of its head-daughter.” Ivan A. Sag, “English Relative Clause Constructions,” 33 J. Linguistics 431, 446 (1997).

And so it goes throughout each article. See obscurity.

When naming something new, one sometimes finds the task hopeless: consider the ALI–ABA CLE Review, as opposed to calling it the American Law Institute–American Bar Association Continuing Legal Education Review. You can’t choose either one enthusiastically. Both sponsors must have their due (in part so that they can have their dues), and the initialisms might gradually become familiar to readers. But they aren’t ideal because they give bad first impressions.
Remember that effective communication takes two—the writer and the reader. Arthur Quiller-Couch reminded writers never to forget the audience:

[T]he obligation of courtesy rests first with the author, who invites the seance, and commonly charges for it. What follows, but that in speaking or writing we have an obligation to put ourselves into the hearer's or reader's place? Is it his comfort, his convenience, we have to consult. To express ourselves is a very small part of the business: very small and unimportant as compared with impressing ourselves: the aim of the whole process being to persuade.

Quiller-Couch, On the Art of Writing 291–92 (2d ed. 1943).

Abbreviations are often conveniences for writers but inconveniences for readers. Whenever that is so, the abbreviations should vanish.

Robert Burchfield warned that the proliferation of initialisms could profoundly affect the language as a whole: “As formations they are often ingenious—for example KWIC (Key Word in Context) and CARE (Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere, a federation of U.S. charities)—but they are barren, in that they cannot generate anything except themselves, and etymologically rootless. Each one that is formed takes the language fractionally away from its Germanic, and ultimately its Indo-European, origins.” Robert W. Burchfield, Unlocking the English Language 65 (1989).

D. Plurals. See plurals (1).

abdomen is most commonly pronounced /ab-də-men/, though some people continue to use the old-fashioned /ab-doh-man/.

abdominal (= pertaining to the abdomen or belly) is so spelled. Perhaps under the influence of abominable, it is sometimes wrongly made *abdominable—e.g.:

- “Colchicine, 0.5 or 0.6 mg every hour until relief or intolerable side effects (abdominal [read abdominal] cramping or diarrhea) occur . . . .” “Treatment of Gout,” Am. Fam. Physician, 15 Mar. 1999, at 1624.

- “The uncertainty of Cox’s status—he has not been able to practice for weeks because of an abdominal [read abdominal] strain, and he says he no longer wants to take painkillers—is only a small reflection of the uncertainty over the team’s future.” Gerald Eskenazi, “Add Cox to List of Jets’ Troubles,” N.Y. Times, 10 Dec. 1999, at D5.

- “Alfonso Soriano, diagnosed with tendinitis in his right shoulder, sat out Yankees’ exhibition game vs. Twins yesterday in Fort Myers, as did Jason Giambi, who’s battling strained abdominal [read abdominal] muscle.” N.Y. Post (graphic), 8 Mar. 2003, Metro §, at 56.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*aberrance; *aberrancy. See aberration.

aberrant, adj.; aberrational; aberrative. These terms appear in order of descending frequency. Aberrant /ab-ar-ant or /a-bər-int/ = deviating from behavioral or social norms. Aberrational /a-bə-ray-sha-nal/ = of, relating to, or involving an aberration. Aberrative /a-bər-a-tiv/ = tending toward aberration. For aberrant as a noun, see aberration.

aberration; aberrant, n.; *aberrance; *aberrancy. Aberration = (1) a deviation or departure from what is normal or correct; or (2) a mental derangement. Aberrant, which is almost always used in reference to people, means “a deviant; one deviating from an established norm.” *Aberrance and *aberrancy are need-less variants of aberration—enough so to be labeled linguistic aberrations themselves. See SPELLING (A).

aberrational; aberrative. See aberrant, adj.

abettor; *abetter. In both AmE and BrE, abettor is the more usual spelling. It was otherwise from about 1640 to 1750, but since then abettor has predominated. See -ER (A). Cf. bettor.

Current ratio: 2:1

abhor (= to detest, esp. on grounds of morality or ethics) is pronounced /ab-hor/ or /ab-hor/—not /a-bor/. For an example of adjure misused for abhor, see abjure (c).

abide = (1) to stay, dwell <the right of entering and abiding in any state in the Union>; (2) to tolerate, withstand <we won’t abide that type of misconduct>; (3) to obey (construed with by) <we abide by the rules>; (4) to await <our decision must abide the outcome of this struggle>; or (5) to perform or execute (in reference to court orders or judgments) <the lower courts must abide the judgments of the Supreme Court>. In sense 1, abode is the preferred past tense, and either abode or abided is the past participle. In all other senses, abided is the preferred past tense and past participle.

ability; capacity. The traditional distinction is that while ability is qualitative, capacity is quantitative. Hence, ability refers to a person’s power of body or mind <a writer of great ability>; capacity, meaning literally “roomy, spacious,” refers figuratively to a person’s physical or mental power to receive <her memory has an extraordinary capacity for details>.

For the distinction between capacity and capability, see capacity.

abjection; abjectness. Both words refer to a state of being cast aside, abased, and humiliated. The subtle difference between the two is that abjection refers to the physical condition—e.g.: “Abjection was a way of surviving Stalin: you gave him something of your blood, without wavering.” “Other Comments,” Forbes, 3 Feb. 2003, at 26. Abjectness refers to the state of mind—e.g.: “But were he to continue in office, at least judging by the abjectness of his apology, MADD
might just have found a national poster boy.” Jim Coyle, “We’ve Come a Long Way in Public Attitudes,” Toronto Star, 14 Jan. 2003, at B2. Abjuration is used more frequently today by a 12-to-1 ratio.

abjure; adjure. A. Senses Distinguished. Abjure, the more frequently used of these words, may mean either (1) “to renounce” <Germany abjured the use of force>, or (2) “to avoid” <her evaluation abjured excessive praise>. In bygone days, people were sometimes required to “abjure the realm,” i.e., go abroad. Adjure means “to charge or entreat solemnly; to urge earnestly” <Reagan adjured the Soviets to join him in this noble goal>.

B. Cognate Forms. The noun forms are abjuration (or *abjurement—now defunct) and adjuration. The adjectival forms end in -tory. The agent nouns are abjuror and adjurer.

C. Adjure Misused. Adjure is sometimes misused for two other words, abhor and require. The first of these is hard to explain but easy to illustrate—e.g.: “Most of us don’t dislike lawyers individually; we adjure [read abhor?] them as a group.” “Our Legal System’s Put Us in a Box,” Chicago Trib., 23 Aug. 1988, at C19.

The other error, adjure for require or command, occurs often in legal writing but elsewhere as well—e.g.:

• “Arizona law adjures [read requires] that statutes should be construed to effect their objects.” Knapp v. Cardwell, 667 F.2d 1253, 1261 (9th Cir. 1982).

• “Assaying the quality of defendant’s acts and omissions . . . adjures [read requires] just such a judgment call.” Swift v. U.S., 866 F.2d 507, 511 (1st Cir. 1989).

• “‘Use Absolut,’ he adjures [read commands] a waiter at the restaurant where he, Iris, Kate and Daniel have an uncomfortable dinner. ‘I’ll know if the bartender uses a house brand.” Amanda Vaill, “A Story of Reckless Passion and Race,” Chicago Trib., 25 May 2003, Books §, at 3.

Fortunately, most writers use adjure correctly—e.g.: “Some talked of open schism last week, when she adjured him to ‘rule’ if he wanted to save home rule, and he replied that she had failed him in his moment of need.” Michael Powell & Hamil R. Harris, “Norton’s Exercise in Flexibility,” Wash. Post, 7 Aug. 1997, at J1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. adjure misused for abhor: Stage 1
2. adjure misused for require: Stage 1

abjuror; *abjuror. The -er spelling, which has always predominated, is preferred. See -er (A).

Current ratio: 5:1

-ABLE. A. Choice of -able or -ible. Many adjectives have competing forms ending in -able and -ible. Some of these have undergone differentiation in meaning; the less commonly used forms in some pairs are merely needless variants of the predominant forms. The lists that follow contain the most troublesome words of this class.

Unlike -ible, -able is a living suffix that may be added to virtually any verb without an established suffix in either -able or -ible. Following are only some of the hundreds of adjectives preferably spelled -able:

actionable  contestable  lapsable
addable  contractable  lovable
admittable  conversable  mixable
advisable  convictable  movable
affectable  correctable  noticeable
allegable  definable  offenable
analyzable  detectable  patentable
annexable  diagnosable  persuadable
arrestable  discussable  preventable
ascendable  endorsable  processable
assertable  enforceable  protectable
assessable  evadable  ratable
averageable  excisable  redressable
avertable  excludable  referable
bailable  expandable  retractable
blamable  extendable  revisable
changeable  extractable  rinsable
chargeable  ignitable  salable
circumscribable  immovable  suspendable
commensurable  improvable  tractable
committable  inferable  transferable
condensurable  indicative  transmissible
connectable  investable  willable

Although -ible is now dead as a combining form in English, the words in the following list remain that suffix:

accessible  divisible  perceptible
adducible  edible  perfectible
admissible  educible  permissible
audible  eligible  plausible
collapsible  erodible  possible
collectible  exhaustible  producible
compressible  expressible  reducible
compatible  extensible  remissible
comprehensible  fallible  reprehensible
compressible  feasible  repressible
conceivable  flexible  *rescissible
conceivable  forcible  resistible
conductible  fusible  responsible
contemptible  gullible  reversible
controversible  horrible  reversible
convertible  impressible  retrogradable
corrodible  ineradicable  reworkable
collaborable  ineliminable  restorable
credible  intelligible  revocable
deductible  interconvertible  restorable
educible  irremissible  reviewable
defendable  invincible  reusable
defectible  irremissible  reversible
defensible  irreplicable  restorable
desendible  irrepairable  restorable
desirable  irrendible  restorable
destructible  invariable  restorable
diffusible  irremediable  restorable
digestible  irreparable  restorable
discernible  irrevocable  restorable
disperisible  irrevocable  restorable
dismissible  irrevocable  restorable

-ABLE. B. Choice of -ible vs. *-ible. The suffix *-ible is more used with nouns than adjectives. The suffix -ible is more clearly preferrable and often, as in admissible, -ible is used as an adjective, as in admissible.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
Some adjectives with the variant suffixes have different meanings. Thus impassable means “closed, incapable of being traversed”; its twin, impassible, means “unable to feel pain” or, less distinctively, “impassive, emotionless.” Passable and passible have correspondingly positive meanings. (These pairs are formed from different Latin roots, L. passus “having suffered” and L. passare “to step.”) Similarly, impartible means “not subject to partition” and impartable “capable of being imparted.” Conversable means “oral,” while conversible is a needless variant of convertible. Forcible means either “done by means of force” <forcible entry> or “characterized by force” <forcible behavior>; forcible, much less frequently encountered, means “capable of being overcome by force”; it would be the better term to describe a door that is “capable of being forced open.” (See forcible.) For the similar difference between educable and educable, see educable (A).

Other variant adjectives, though, are merely duplicative. Typical examples are extendable, extendible, and extensible. The first of these is now prevalent in AmE (though labeled obsolete in the OED). Extensible was, through the mid-20th century, the most common form, but today it trails extendable by a substantial margin, while *extendible continues to appear infrequently. Writers and editors ought to settle on the most firmly established form—extendable, which is as well formed as the variants—and trouble their minds with weightier matters. See differentiation & mute e.

B. Attaching -able to Nouns. This passive suffix is usually attached to verbs, as in avoidable, forgettable, and reproachable. But sometimes it’s attached to nouns, as in marriageable, objectionable, and salable. These do not mean “able to be married,” “able to be objected,” and so on. Although *marryable and *objectable would have been the more logical forms, time, idiom, and usage have made these and several other forms both ineradicable and unobjectionable.

C. Attaching -able to Intransitive Verbs. A few words formerly upset purists: dependable (depend-onable), indispensable (in-dispense-withable), laughable (laugh-at-able), listenable (listen-to-able), reliable (rely-on-able), and unaccountable (un-account-for-able). They’re indispensable to the modern writer—not at all laughable. See reliable.

D. Converting -ate Verbs into -able Adjectives. When -able is added to a transitive polysyllabic verb ending in the suffix -ate, that suffix is dropped. Hence accumulable, calculable, regulable, etc. (See -ATABLE.) Exceptions, however, occur with two-syllable words, such as rebatable and debatable.

E. Dropping or Retaining the Medial -e-. This question arises in words such as irrecconcilable, micro-wavable, movable, resumable, and salable. Although writers formerly put an -e- before -able, both AmE and BrE generally drop such a medial -e-, except in words with a soft -e- (traceable) or a soft -g- (chargeable). See mute e.

F. Compounds. English has a remarkable ability to accept unlikely forms such as come-at-able (1687) <the come-at-able facts of the case>, get-at-able (1799) <the source of the leak may not be get-at-able>, and unputdownable (1947) <an unputdownable book>. These have been fashioned by adding -able to phrasal verbs. In both AmE and BrE, the first two tend to be hyphenated (come-at-able, etc.). Yet unputdownable is universally solid, perhaps because none of the internal syllable breaks except -able begins with a vowel.

able to be [+ past participle]. This construction is rare—and rightly so. A sentence such as That speech is able to be delivered by anyone can always be advantageously revised: Anyone can [or could] deliver that speech. See passive voice.

ablation (= washing), which appears most commonly in the plural form, should generally be reserved for washing or rinsing as part of a religious rite. E.g.: “Before every prayer, Muslims perform ablation—washing their hands and face, rinsing their mouth and nose, and even washing their feet.” Dr. Shagufa Hasan, “Age-Old Rituals Source of Health for Body, Mind,” Oregonian (Portland), 18 July 2002, at 13. And the word may belong in exotic contexts—e.g.: “Early batters were already making their morning ablations [in the Ganges River].” Glenn Leichman, “Season’s Greetings—on the Ganges,” Seattle Times, 22 Dec. 1996, at K1. But the word is pretentious, or else facetious, when the reference is to the ordinary act of washing one’s face and hands—e.g.: “By morning the water was usually frozen, calling for a trip to the kitchen to thaw it out before morning ablutions.” Oliver Andresen, “Old-Time Winters Have a Biting Story to Tell,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 24 Jan. 2003, at 3.

aboard. Usually restricted to ships or planes in BrE, this word is applied broadly in AmE to any public conveyance—e.g.: “The bus had about 35 pupils aboard from Varina and Mehfoud Elementary schools.” Mark Bowes, “It Was Close to a ‘Catastrophe,’” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 18 Jan. 1997, at B1. More recently, it has come to be applied to organizations as well—e.g.: “Longtime in-house attorney Thomas ‘Tad’ Decker was brought aboard in 2000 to become managing partner.” Jeff Blumenthal, “New Year Brings Firm Leadership,” Legal Intelligence, 2 Jan. 2002, at 1.

abode. For the past tense of abide, see abide.

abode, place of. This phrase is a pretentious way of referring to someone’s home or house. It’s also redundant, since an abode is a place. See redundancy.

abolition; *abolishment. The latter is a needless variant. Cf. admonition (B).

abominable (= [1] detestable, odious; or [2] extremely disagreeable) derives from the Latin adjective abominabilis “ill-omened” (seriously unlucky). During the Middle Ages, however, English writers mistook the etymology and believed—through a kind of “learned” folk etymology—that the word was *abhornable, from ab homine (meaning “away from man; repulsive to mankind”). This usage persisted
through the 17th century, and Shakespeare himself had a character in *The Tempest* (1611) refer to Caliban as “an abominable Monster” (2.2.158). Indeed, Shakespeare’s first folio includes 18 instances of the misspelled version. In what is probably Shakespeare’s first play (*Love’s Labour’s Lost* [1598]), the laughable pedant Holofernes derides the “rackers of ortography” (5.1.24–25) who were starting to use the etymologically correct spelling of *abominable*. In fact, the rackers of orthography had done their work 300 years before the name Holofernes was ever dreamt up, when they started inserting the -h- into the Latin word: “The connection with homo, ‘man,’ is a very old error and antedates the adoption of the word into English.” James Bradstreet Greenough & George Lyman Kittredge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech* 342 (1901). Today usage has settled on the spelling *abominable* (things were set aight in the 18th century). The modern meaning of the word, however, derives from the erroneous etymology of medieval times.

*aborigine*, as a singular noun, is a back-formation from the plural *aborigines* (L. *ab origine* “from the beginning”). Traditionally, the word *aboriginal* was considered the proper singular, but today *aborigine* is standard English as a singular noun. It predominates in print sources by a 2-to-1 ratio. (*Aboriginal* is still current in adjectival uses.)

The spelling *Aborigine*, with the initial capital, is traditional when referring to the indigenous peoples of Australia.

**Language-Change Index**

*aborigine* as a singular: Stage 5

*abort* = (1) (of a pregnancy, project, or mission) to end prematurely; (2) (of a fetus) to cause to be expelled before full development; or (3) (of a pregnant female) to cause to have an abortion. Senses 1 and 2 are more usual than sense 3, which, as an example of hy- pallage, strikes many readers as odd. E.g.: “In the 50 years after the 1916 anti-British rebellion, nationalists incorporated the tragedy into their vision of ‘a heroic struggle against seven centuries of British oppression.’” “Famine, Politics Intertwined,” *USA Today*, 15 Jan. 1997, at D2. *Abortive* is archaic in reference to abortions of fetuses, except in the sense “causing an abortion.”

**about. A. And approximately.** When possible, use about instead of approximately, a formal word often intended to lend a scientific air to prose. But it sounds pseudoscientific and pretentious when it appears in ordinary contexts.

B. **And around.** When there is a choice between about and around—as in beat around (or about) the bush, strewn around (or about) the garden, or all around (or about) the city—the word around greatly predominates in AmE. In those phrases, about sounds schoolmarmish.

C. **About the head.** Theodore M. Bernstein called this phrase “police-blotter lingo” (*The Careful Writer* at 5) when used in the sense “<on> the victim was wounded several times about the head>. The phrase might still be common in police blotters, but in published print sources it appears only occasionally—e.g.: “A Malaysian companion, 15, suffered a punctured eardrum from the interrogator’s blows about the head.” William Safire, *Singapore Adds Insult to Injury,* *Star Trib.* (Minneapolis), 24 May 1994, at A15.

D. **At about.** This phrase is sometimes criticized as a redundancy, the argument being that about can often do the work by itself. It often can, but in many contexts, especially those involving expressions of time, the phrase at about is common, idiomatic, and unimpeachable. (We’ll arrive at about 9:00 tonight).

**above. A. Meaning “more than” or “longer than.”** Although over has come to be accepted in these senses, above should be restricted to informal contexts. It’s a casualism when used before a plural noun—e.g.:

- “Now, the RBI has allowed only the incentive of one percent for one-year deposits, 1.5 percent for two-year deposits and two percent for deposits above two years [read of two years or more or of longer than two years].” "NBFCs Allowed to Reimburse Part of Broker’s Expenses," *Econ. Times*, 3 Oct. 1996, at 8. Cf. over (A).
- “A recent survey of New York City restaurants showed that only 12 percent had seating capacity above [read for more than] 200 people.” Terry Fiedler, "Restaurants," *Star Trib.* (Minneapolis), 22 Apr. 1998, at D1.
- “The data shows the vast majority of users in Wales were men with above nine out of ten users being men in nearly every town.” Almost 3,000 Joined Adultery Website,” *S. Wales Evening Post*, 24 Aug. 2015, at 2. (A possible revision: The data show that over 90% of Welsh users were men.)

**Language-Change Index**

above meaning “more than”: Stage 4

B. **For above-mentioned.** Above is an acceptable ellipsis for above-mentioned, and it is much less inelegant <the above statements are his last recorded ones>. It was long thought that above could not properly act as an adjective. But the word was used in this way throughout the 20th century, even by the best writers. The *OED* records this use from 1873 and says that above “stands attributively,” through ellipsis, for above-said, above-written, above-mentioned, or some other phrase.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

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Some critics have suggested that *above* in this sense should refer only to something mentioned previously on the same page, but this restriction seems unduly narrow. Still, it’s often better to make the reference exact by giving a page or paragraph number, rather than the vague reference made possible by *above*. Idiom will not, however, allow *above* to modify all nouns: *above vehicle* is unidiomatic for *vehicle mentioned above*. (If you must say *mentioned*, put *above* after that word.) Better yet, simply write *the vehicle* if readers will know from the context which one you’re talking about.

Less common than the adjectival *above* is the noun use <the above is entirely accurate>. Pooley’s assessment still stands: “Any writer may feel free at any time to use ‘the above statement,’ and with only slightly less assurance, ‘the above will prove.’ In either case, he has the authority of scholars and standard literature.” Robert C. Pooley, *Teaching English Usage* 130 (1946).

**Language-Change Index**

1. *above* as an adjective (in the *above* data): Stage 5
2. *above* as a noun (as in all of the *above*): Stage 5

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*abridgable*. So spelled—not *abridgeable*. See *mute e*. Current ratio: 3:1

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*abridgment; abridgement*. The first spelling is AmE; the second is BrE. Cf. *acknowledgment & judgment* (A). See *mute e*.

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*abrogable*. So formed—not *abrogatable*. See *-able* (d) & *atable*.

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*abrogate; arrogate*. These words are sometimes con-founded. *Abrogate*, the more common term, means “to abolish (a law or custom) by authoritative or formal action; annul; repeal.” E.g.:

- “In 1964, heavy fighting began on Cyprus after Cypriot Archbishop Makarios abrogated a 1960 treaty signed by Cyprus, Greece and Turkey.” *Almanac,* *Chicago Trib.*, 4 April 1997, Metro §, at 10.

- “Last month, the NYSE raised its fees to as much as $350 a branch to $250, but the SEC can abrogate the increase within 60 days, a period that ends in mid-March.” Cheryl Winokur Munk, *SEC is Reviewing Higher NYSE Fees on Branch Offices,* *Wall Street J.*, 10 Feb. 2003, at C9.

*Arrogate*, meanwhile, means “to usurp”—e.g.:

- “And if [the justices of the U.S. Supreme Court] rule in favor of the McDougall panel, they have even more dramatically arrogated to themselves the role of super legislators.” “Resolving Judicial Malpractice,” *Detroit News*, 9 Apr. 1997, at A6.

- “Two dangerous impulses of government are at work: First is the desire to arrogate more power to the executive branch by refusing to acknowledge Congress’ oversight role.” Editorial, “Government’s Path of Secrecy,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 16 Jan. 2003, at A12.

The most common mistake between these words is to misuse *abrogate* for *arrogate*—e.g.:

- “Some of them have abrogated [read arrogated] to themselves the functions of faith, making claims that history will probably refuse them.” Anthony Winterbourne, *Speaking to Our Condition: Moral Frameworks in Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung* 31 (2000).

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*abrogate* misused for *arrogate*: Stage 1

Current ratio (arrogate to itself vs. *abrogate to itself*): 84:1

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*abscess* (= a small mass of pus collected in a hollow where tissue has decayed) is sometimes misspelled *abcess* or *abcess*—e.g.: “Though the jokes start out low (tooth abscesses [read abscesses], fake body casts), the sassin’ siblings eventually show their true, warm, brotherly colors.” “Fall Previews,” *Newsday* (N.Y.), 8 Sept. 1996, at 4.

**Language-Change Index**

*abscess* misspelled *abcess* or *abcess*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 3,257:16:1

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*abscond*, vb., is both transitive (“to conceal [something!”) and intransitive (“to depart secretly or suddenly; to hide oneself”). The intransitive uses are more common—e.g.:


While *abscond* is often followed by *with* to indicate a taking, and especially a theft, the word itself has no such meaning. Yet it is sometimes misused alone as a transitive with that sense—e.g.:


- “The biggest problem is the Chinese government is going to abscond [read take] about 97 percent of his paycheck, meaning the Houston Rockets are going to buy Beijing a couple of ICBMs in the next three years.” David Whitley, “Projecting Boys into Men Won’t Be Easy Tonight,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 26 June 2002, at D1.

**Language-Change Index**

*abscond* misused for *steal*: Stage 1

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 2:1.5:1

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See *arrogate*.

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*abscosion*. The second and third are needless variants rarely found. *Abscendence* is the preferred and most common noun corresponding to the verb *abscond*. E.g.: “Apart from these *abscondences*, the only clue to emotional turmoil was a struggle with his weight.” Andrew Billen, “Playing the Shrink,” *Observer*, 15 Sept. 1996, at 12.

*Abscondence* is an infrequent misspelling.
absent, used as a preposition meaning “in the absence of” or “without,” is commonly used in legal jargon. The better choices are without and in the absence of—e.g.:
- “Absent [read Unless our city has] these [qualities], the good citizens will choose to live outside this environment [read elsewhere]?”—Robert J. Fauls Jr., “Let’s Have Some Police Guidance,” Atlanta J.-Const., 21 Mar. 1996, at A17. (As it stood in the original sentence, absent was a kind of dangler, appearing to modify citizens instead of the city mentioned in the preceding sentence [not supplied here].)
- “Absent a military solution, then, and absent a political one, the refugee crisis is unlikely to subside”—Cameron Responds to the Refugee Crisis with Spin,” Independent, 8 Sept. 2015, at 2. (A possible revision: Without a military or political solution, the refugee crisis is unlikely to subside.)

Although Merriam-Webster has dated this usage from 1945, in fact it appeared in a law case 26 years earlier: “The Dean decision is a reminder . . . that fraud in the transferor is enough under 67e, absent good faith in and a fair consideration on the part of the transferee.” Richardson v. Germania Bank of New York, 263 F. 320, 324 (2d Cir. 1919). For an interesting discussion of how this American legalism has spread into nonlegal contexts, see two pieces by Alan R. Slotkin, “Absent ‘Without’: Adjective, Participle, or Preposition,” 60 Am. Speech 222 (1985); “Prepositional Absent: An Afterword,” 64 Am. Speech 167 (1989).

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**absent** for without: Stage 3

**absentee**, used as an adverb, is a useful linguistic development. E.g.: “Almost 9 percent of the voters voted absentee.” Barbara Schlichtman, “Phillips, Chaney Apparently,” Sunday Advocate (Baton Rouge), 6 Apr. 1997, at B4. It would be cumbersome in some context to have to write voted as absentees. Although some dictionaries record absentee only as a noun, the adverbial usage is increasingly widespread. The word may also function as an adjective <absentee ballot> <absentee landlord>.

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**absentee** as an adverb: Stage 4

**absenta**, in. See in absentia.

**absinthe; *absinth**. The word derives from *artemisa absinthium*, the botanical name for common wormwood, a bitter herb used in folk medicines and drink flavors. In reference to the herb, *absinth* was the predominant spelling in the 18th century. In the mid-19th century, a Swiss physician created a green medicinal alcoholic spirit with wormwood, green anise, and sweet fennel; he called it *absinthe*, and that has been the predominant spelling ever since, for both the herb and the drink. Both spellings occasionally appear in studies of the effects of wormwood mixed with alcohol, none of which have concluded that absinthe makes the heart grow fonder.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 23:1

**absolute. See adjectives (b).**

**Absolute Constructions.** Increasingly rare in modern prose, absolute constructions have traditionally allowed writers to vary their syntax while concisely subordinating incidental matter. The absolute phrase doesn’t bear an ordinary grammatical relation to the rest of the sentence, since the noun or noun phrase does not perform any function (subject, object, apposition, etc.) that ordinarily attaches a noun grammatically to other words in the sentence. Yet the whole absolute phrase adverbially modifies some verb. For example: *The court adjourning, we left the courtroom*. This is equivalent to *When the court adjourned, we left the courtroom*.

This construction often has an antique literary flavor, and it gets creakier year by year. Few modern writers would use the nominative absolute in the way Herman Melville did: “A drumhead court was summarily convened, he electing the individuals composing it . . .” Billy Budd 63 (1891; repr. [Signet ed.] 1979).

In that sentence, the pronoun he is modified by the participle electing: the individuals composing it is the object of electing. The whole italicized phrase is a nominative absolute, since it has no grammatical function in the statement *A drumhead court was summarily convened*.

One does encounter more modern examples—e.g.:
- “Mike would not soon forget the frantic drive back to civilization, the four-wheel-drive Land Rover slipping and sliding up the muddy track into the hills.” Michael Crichton, Jurassic Park 16 (1990).
- “He speaks in a voice that seems to emerge from a shadow. Perhaps it does, he having been conceived in the dark days of Europe following the last world war, and he having been nurtured under the repression of the ensuing Iron Curtain.” James Keenan, “Andrei Codrescu: Man of Letters . . . and Radio,” Pantagraph (Bloomington, Ill.), 28 Jan. 2000, at D1.

Yet as nominative absolutes become rarer, fewer and fewer writers understand how to handle them. Three problems arise.

First, many writers insert with at the beginning of the phrase (making it something like an “objective absolute”) <With Jacobson being absent, the party was a bore>. E.g.:
- “In other local elections in France, the results were mixed, with [delete with] the right doing a bit better

• “With her [read She] having mastered all these skills, it was time . . . to get her to face up to the biggest challenge yet.” Amy Edelstein, “It’s Jessie the Messy,” Newsday (N.Y.), 5 Mar. 2002, at B17. (A better revision: Once she mastered all these skills, it was time . . .)

Second, some writers mistakenly make an absolute construction—what should be a “nominative” absolute—possessive. E.g.: “His [read He] having won an astonishing thirteen major golf events, including the 1930 Grand Slam (the British Open, the British Amateur, the U.S. Amateur, and the U.S. Open Championship), it’s hard to fathom that Bobby Jones was little more than a part-time player.” William Kissel, “Great Golf Shops,” Celebrated Living, Mar. 2002, at 39–40.

Third, writers sometimes incorrectly separate the noun and the participle with a comma—e.g.: “President Clinton, having forcefully called attention to the atrocities in Bosnia, the U.N. decided to act.” (Read: President Clinton having forcefully called attention to the atrocities in Bosnia, the U.N. decided to act.) See PUNCTUATION (d).

All in all, it’s hard to quibble with the Fowler brothers’ judgment that the absolute construction is “not much to be recommended.” H.W. Fowler & F.G. Fowler, The King’s English 124 (3d ed. 1931). Or with Lester King’s later assessment: “The absolute construction is not wrong, merely stilted and clumsy. In my own editing, I always delete it and make some appropriate substitution.” Lester S. King, Why Not Say It Clearly 33 (1978).

For a modern remnant of an absolute construction, see provided.

absolutely, in the sense “really” or “very much,” is often a meaningless intensifier. You should be absolutely ashamed of yourself is the sort of thing a parent might say when scolding a child, but in polished writing the word absolutely adds nothing of value to that sentence.

absolve. Depending on the context, absolve takes either of or from. One is absolved of financial liability and absolved from wrongdoing—assuming that the authorities treat one kindly. Absolve from is the more frequent phrasing.

absorb; adsorb; *sorb. Absorb is the common term meaning “to soak up”; adsorb is a scientific term that refers to the collecting of condensed gas (or similar substance) on a surface. (Just try writing that without so much sibilance: it will stump even the most seductive scribe.) *Sorb is a relatively obscure term that embraces both of its prefixed siblings.

abstracter. See abstracter.

ABSTRACTITIS. “How vile a thing . . . is the abstract noun! It wraps a man’s thoughts round like cotton wool.” Arthur Quiller-Couch, On the Art of Writing 109 (2d ed. 1943). Abstractitis is Ernest Gowers’s term for writing that is so abstract and obtuse (hence abstruse) that the writer does not even know what he or she is trying to say (FMEU2 at 5). Far be it from the reader, then, to find coherent meaning in such writing.

One sympathizes with a keen judge who wrestled with the Internal Revenue Code: “The words . . . dance before my eyes in a meaningless procession: cross-reference to cross-reference, exception upon exception—couched in abstract terms that offer no handle to seize hold of—leave in my mind only a confused sense of some vitally important, but successfully concealed, purport, which it is my duty to extract, but which is within my power, if at all, only after the most inordinate expenditure of time.” Learned Hand, “Thomas Walter Swan,” 57 Yale L.F. 167, 169 (1947).

Perhaps the best antidote to this malady—which in some degree afflicts most sophisticated writers—is an active empathy for one’s readers. Rigorous thought about concrete meaning, together with careful revision, can eliminate abstractitis.

An example from political science illustrates the affliction:

Rosenau defines linkage as “any recurrent sequence of behavior that originates in one system and is reacted to in another.” While there remains little doubt that such linkages exist, it has nevertheless been convenient for scholars of comparative and international politics to disregard or, to use the more contemporary term, to hold constant, factors in the other sphere. Thus, for the student of international politics, the nation functions in the international environment on the basis of the givens of that system, unrestrained by any domestic considerations. Differences existing between national systems are not considered crucial to an understanding of a nation’s international behavior. This approach to international politics has been referred to as the “realist” school, and among its leading proponents is Hans J. Morgenthau. From the other perspective, the student of comparative politics feels that the international system is virtually irrelevant for purposes of explaining domestic political events. In both cases, this has led to a rather stultified approach. Situations arose in which the actions of a nation appeared to be “irrational,” in that they could not be explained adequately on the basis of the conceptual tools of either of the two approaches.

It is to these types of problems that the emerging linkage politics approach addresses itself. The purpose of studying linkage politics is to gain a more complete understanding of events by taking account of a large number of variables that have a bearing on the ultimate behavior of a nation, whether this behavior be manifested in the domestic or international spheres. The adoption of such an approach does not imply that all previously unexplained phenomena now come within our grasp. It merely adds a new dimension to those phenomena already accounted for.


This passage doesn’t give any examples of the principles it discusses. It combines PAS SIVE VOICE with JARGON. And it has many of the archetypal abstract words known as ZOMBIE NOUNS—that is, words ending with these suffixes: -tion, -sion, -ment, -ity, -ence, -ance. Writers are well advised to take these longish nouns and turn them back into verbs or participles.
if possible—that is, write adopting, not the adoption of, and so on.

The Fowler brothers quote the following sentence—laden with zombie nouns—in *The King's English* (1906): “One of the most important reforms mentioned in the rescript is the unification of the organization of judicial institutions and the guarantee for all the tribunals of the independence necessary for securing to all classes of the community equality before the law” [42 words]. Arthur Quiller-Couch's revision eliminates the zombie nouns: “One of the most important reforms is that of the courts, which need to be independent within a uniform structure. In this way only can people be assured that all are equal before the law” [35 words]. *On the Art of Writing* 109–10 (2d ed. 1943). But the following revision is even better: ‘Among the most important reforms is to unify the courts so as to guarantee their independence and the equality of all people before the law’ [25 words].

By some accounts, abstractitis leads to far worse things. "If concepts are not clear," wrote Confucius, "words do not fit." And consequences follow: "If words do not fit, the day's work cannot be accomplished, morals and art do not flourish. If morals and art do not flourish, punishments are not just. If punishments are not just, the people do not know where to put hand or foot.” Confucius, *Analects* 13.3. When we descend into abstractitis, more than just our language is afflicted.

Fred Rodell, a Yale law professor, realist, and semanticist who frequently criticized lawyers' language, issued his own inimitable warning against abstractitis: "Dealing in words is a dangerous business, and it cannot be too often stressed that what The Law deals in is words. Dealing in long, vague, fuzzy-meaning words is even more dangerous business, and most of the words The Law deals in are long and vague and fuzzy. Making a habit of applying long, vague, fuzzy, general words to specific things and facts is perhaps the most dangerous of all, and The Law does that, too.” Fred Rodell, *Woe Unto You, Lawyers!* 39 (1939; repr. 1980). See obscurity.

**Abstract Nouns, Plurals of.** See plurals (f).

abstractor; *abstracter*. The *OED* notes that - or - is "analogically the more regular form." Since the early 1960s, it has been the more usual as well. See -er (a).

Current ratio: 2:1

abstruse; obtuse. *Abstruse* = (of a subject matter, piece of writing, etc.) difficult to understand; recondite. *Obtuse* = (1) not pointed or sharp; or (2) dull in intellect, not perceptive.

abysm(al); abyss(al). Both nouns signify "a bottomless gulf." *Abyss* is in more widespread use and is therefore to be preferred. Though *abyss* is obsolete, *abysmal* thrives (indeed, in some phrases it has become trite) as a figurative term for “immeasurably bad” <abysmal ignorance> <abysmal weather>. *Abyss* is a technical oceanographic term <the geology of the abyssal deep>.

**academically.** So spelled—not *academically*. E.g.: “The goal of the strategic plan is to keep the university competitive economically and *academically* [read academically] through the year 2005, the release states.” Frank Mastin Jr., “84 Employees Lose Their Jobs at Tuskegee University,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 2 Oct. 1997, at C2. See -ic.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*academically* misspelled *academically*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 18:1

academy; academia; academe. An *academy* (/ak-a-dee-mee/) is (1) a school, especially one to prepare for further education, usu. at the postsecondary level <college-prep academy>; (2) a school that provides specialized career training <police academy>; or (3) an organization of distinguished scholars, artists, scientists, or the like who aim to develop, promote, and maintain standards in a field <the National Academy of Sciences>. The term derives from *academia* (/ak-a-dee-mee-a/), which commonly refers to the academic community at large, or the society of university scholars <authorities from the worlds of business and academia>. Capitalized, it refers to Plato’s school of philosophy in ancient Greece, which morphed into *Academe*. *Academe* (/ak-a-deem/) is the oldest English-language term for a school or an academic community; today it’s used almost exclusively to refer to an institution of higher education <halls of academe>, often in the set phrase groves of academe.

a *cappella* (= [of singing] not accompanied by instrumental music) is sometimes misspelled *a capella—* e.g.: “Sarah Waltman and Lenore Lopez, both of Blue Island, were in the audience at Cafe Luna on the night when Yaseen made her *a capella* [read a cappella] debut.” Annemarie Mannion, "Instant Stardom, “*Chicago Trib.*”, 17 Aug. 1997, Tempo Southwest §, at 1. Occasionally, it is misspelled with an apostrophe—e.g.: “A performance by the acclaimed Rust College A’Cappella [read A Cappella] Choir. “SLU,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 1 Feb. 2001, Mandeville §, at 7. It’s also wrong to spell the term as one word. Though borrowed from the Italian for “chapel,” the phrase has been thoroughly anglicized and should not be set in italic.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*a cappella* misspelled *a capella*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 4:1

accede; exceed. *Accede*, v.i., = (1) “to agree or consent”; (2) “to come into office or a position of stature”; or (3) “to enter a treaty or accord.” It takes the preposition to. *Exceed*, v.t., means (1) “to surpass,” or (2) “to go beyond the proper limits.” The first syllable
of accede should be pronounced with a short a- to differentiate its sound from exceed.

Occasionally exceed is misused for accede (sense 1)—e.g.: “Eighty potential jurors filed into the Santa Clara County superior court chambers of Judge Charles Hastings after he, exceeding [read acceding] to the wishes of Davis' attorneys, instructed Joel and B.J. Klaas, the slain girl's grandparents, to remove the memorial buttons from their lapels.” Michael Dougan, “Judge Orders Removal of Polly Klaas Buttons,” S.F. Examiner, 14 Feb. 1996, at A2.

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accelerate (= to speed up), in standard english, is pronounced /ak-ә,ә-rәyt/—not /ә-ә-rәyt/.

accent, v.t.: accentuate. These synonyms have a good latent distinction. H.W. Fowler noted that accent is more common in literal senses, accentuates in figurative senses (FMEU1 at 7). Hence one properly accents the second syllable of the word insurance, but accentuates the advantages of buying life insurance from a reputable company.

ACeent Marks. See diacritical marks.

acceptance; *acceptancy; acceptation; *acception. Acceptance expresses the active sense of the verb (to accept), and acceptation expresses the passive sense (to be accepted). The other two are needless variants. Acceptance, the broadest term, means (1) “the act of accepting” <William's acceptance of the award was delayed>, or (2) “the state of being accepted” <widespread acceptance of the theory>. Although acceptation can bear sense 2 of acceptance (in which it's really a needless variant), today its primary meaning is “a generally accepted meaning (of a word, phrase, or document)” —e.g.: “The Constitution's commercial clause, . . . in its original acceptation, had merely granted Congress limited authority over the regulation of interstate commerce.” Wilfred M. McClay, “A More Perfect Union? Toward a New Federalism,” Commentary, Sept. 1995, at 28.

access, n. A. Confused with excess. Access, n., most commonly means (1) “the right or ability to enter or get near,” (2) “a means of approaching,” or (3) “retrievability of electronic information by computer.” Excess = (1) an overabundance, superfluity; or (2) the amount by which one thing exceeds another. Sometimes access is misused for excess —e.g.:  

- “It has been noted that samples of this kind may be difficult to amplify with primers that give a product in access [read excess] of 400–500 bp.” Finbarr E. Cotter, Molecular Diagnosis of Cancer 117 (1996).

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access misused for excess: Stage 1

B. Meaning “outburst.” This sense, though somewhat archaic, is unimpeachable. Still, the usage is likely to give most readers pause —e.g.:  

- “Chris Denning . . . was fired, Peel recalls, for remarking on air that he awoke that morning in such an access of [better: delete an access of] high spirits that he felt like a 15-year-old boy, but that sadly there were no 15-year-old boys available at four o'clock in the morning.” D.J. Taylor, “The God of Adolescence,” Sunday Independent, 29 Aug. 2004, at 6.

access, vb. A. Generally. As a verb, access has its origins in computerease. Like a number of other nouns turned into verbs (e.g., contact), it now seems increasingly well enconced in the language. As Ernest Gowers said about contact, it is an ancient and valuable right of English-speaking peoples to turn their nouns into verbs when they are so minded (FMEU2 at 108). Gain access to or some other such equivalent is admitted unguainly alongside access.

But outside computing and electronic contexts, using access as a verb still jars sensitive ears. Avoid the verb if there's a ready substitute —e.g.:  


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access as a verb outside computing contexts <accessing the books>: Stage 4


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

access misused for assess: Stage 1

*accessary. See accessory (A).

accessible. So spelled —not *accessible. The word is pronounced /ak-ses-i-bal/. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 2,404:1
accession = (1) a coming into possession of an office or right; (2) acquisition of (something connected to one’s property) by growth, labor, or the like; or (3) a secondary or subordinate thing that is connected with another thing. The word is pronounced /ak-se-shən/, not /ə-se-shən/.

accessory, n. A. And *accessory, n. Accessory now predominates in AmE and BrE in meaning both “abettor” and “a thing of lesser importance.” Although H.W. Fowler championed a distinction between accessory and *accessory (the first applying primarily to things, the second to people [FMEU1 at 8]), *accessory is now merely a needless variant and should be avoided.

Current ratio (accessories vs. *accessories): 275:1

B. Pronunciation. Accessory should be pronounced with the first -c- as a hard -k-: /ak-see-ar-ee/. A common mispronunciation is /ə-ses-ə-reel/. Cf. accession, flaccid & succinct.


Language-Change Index

-accidentally misspelled *accidentally: Stage 1
Current ratio: 59:1

accident working. See working.

acclimate; acclimatize. Although the -ize form is preferred by H.W. Fowler and other BrE authorities, the shorter form—which actually predates the longer—is now standard AmE. Some American dictionaries put the primary definition under acclimatize /ə-kli-mət-iz/, but few Americans use this term; the main term is acclimate /ak-lə-mayt/. The corresponding nouns are acclimation /ə-kli-mə-shən/ in AmE and acclimatization /ə-kli-mət-zən/ in BrE. See -ize.

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acclimate, vb., and acclimation, n.: Stage 5
Current ratio (acclimate vs. acclimatize): 3:1

accommodable. So formed—not *accommodatable, as it is sometimes erroneously written. E.g.: “Ford [cites as the company’s values] persistence, understanding business etiquette, and a demand in the industry to know the client’s needs and deliver them in a concise, accommodable [read accommodable] manner.” Andrea Akins, “New Agency’s Successes on the Fast Track So Far,” Nashville Bus. J., 21 June 1993, at 35. But accommodating is far more common and familiar to readers. See -able (d) & -atable.

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*accommodatable for accommodate: Stage 1
Current ratio (accommodable vs. *accommodatable): 2:1

accommodate is one of the most frequently misspelled words in the language. See spelling (a).

accompanied. Since the 19th century, idiom has required accompanied by, not *accompanied with—e.g.: • “The book, inspired by his No. 1 song ‘Butterfly Kisses,’ features pictures of various fathers and daughters accompanied with [read accompanying] pharmaceutical drug treatments.” “The Acupuncture Clinic,” Times Record News (Wichita Falls, Tex.), 1 Sept. 2015, at A6.

Accompanied by, like together with and along with, does not make a singular subject into a plural one because it merely introduces a prepositional phrase. See subject–verb agreement (e).

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*accompanied with for accompanied by: Stage 2
Current ratio (accompanied by vs. *accompanied with): 18:1


Language-Change Index

accompaniment misspelled *accompaniment: Stage 1
Current ratio: 2,623:1

accompanist /ə-kə-mən-tist/ is the standard form, not *accompanyist—e.g.: “Paxton was in wonder-ful form, and accompanyist [read compressor] Eric Weissberg added just enough instrumental firepower on guitar and dobro to lend the songs some spark.” Greg Haymes, “Tom Paxton Shows He’s Still at Top of His Songwriting Game,” Times Union (Albany), 28 Mar. 1994, at C4.

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accompanyist misspelled *accompanyist: Stage 1
Current ratio: 174:1

accord, n.; accordance. To be in accord is to be in agreement. E.g.: “The church agrees that Mary’s message at those places is in accord with Catholic teaching and devotion.” Steve Gushue, “For Many, Seeing Is Believing,” Palm Beach Post, 17 Jan. 1997, at F1.
To be in accordance is to be in conformity or compliance. Though sometimes cumbersome, the phrase is indisputably useful—e.g.: "Supporters of comprehensive sex ed are preparing to bring the battle to the states, compiling information detailing the least harmful way to design programs in accordance with the newly laid out federal standards." Clare Saliba, "Just Say No," Village Voice, 21 Jan. 1997, at 2. Certainly that wording is preferable to the legalistic phrase pursuant to. (See pursuant to.) But much depends on the precise phrase. For example, in accordance with your request is always stilted. Instead, write as you requested or some similar phrase.

Accord is sometimes wrongly used for accordance—e.g.: "Justice Marcos Aburto of the Supreme Court felt compelled to say that a decision would be made in accord [read in accordance] with the law and would not be influenced by outside pressure." Calvin Sims, "Case of '76 U.S. Assassination Reaching Final Stage in Chile," N.Y. Times, 15 May 1995, at A9.

A text sprinkled with the phrase is a weak form of attribution according to (a person); or (2) in accordance with. In sense 2, (1) depending on; (2) as explained or reported by (a person); or (3) in accordance with. In sense 2, the phrase is a weak form of attribution according to Barbara Tuchman, . . .; a text sprinkled with according to's gives the appearance of having little originality. Use the phrase sparingly.

According to Barbara Tuchman, . . .

Accordingly = (1) consequently, therefore <they were caught red-handed; accordingly, they were summarily fired>; or (2) in a corresponding or appropriate manner <they'll be dealt with accordingly>. See sentence adverbs. The word is a heavy connector often replaceable to good advantage by so. Cf. consequently.

Accost (= to approach and usu. to speak to in an abrupt or challenging manner) has historically had no connotations of physical contact. Hence it would traditionally be considered inappropriate in cases of physical violence—e.g.: "The victim, who was accosted [read assaulted] as he left the bar with three women, suffered scrapes and bruises." "Police Beat," Capital (Annapolis), 24 Aug. 1996, at A11. Accost simply isn't a strong enough word for that context. Cf. altercation & assault.

Also, accost isn't the right verb for what a threatening animal does, no matter how noisy it becomes—e.g.: "Two months later, a trio of yelping pit bull puppies accosted [read attacked] Waters in the basement of an apartment building." William Gaines & Laurie Cohen, "Workers' Comp Puts City on Injured List," Chicago Trib., 12 Jan. 1997, at C1.

Accounting. See bookkeeping & generally accepted accounting principles.

Accoutrement (= a supplementary item of dress or equipment; accessory) is predominantly so spelled in AmE and BrE alike, and always has been. Though given preference in several American dictionaries, *accouterment* has never prevailed in print. Likewise, the prevailing verb is accoutre in both AmE (by a 4-to-1 ratio) and BrE (by an 8-to-1 ratio).

Having been fully naturalized in the 16th century, the word is pronounced /ã-koʊ-tər-mənt/. It shouldn't be given a Frenchified pronunciation, as it sometimes is.

Current ratio (World English): 7:1 (AmE): 6:1

Accredit (= [1] to establish as credible, or [2] to issue credentials to) is the verb corresponding to the noun accreditation. But *accreditation, a back-formation from accreditation,* has arisen as a needless variant—e.g.: "The laboratory, on the second floor of the sheriff's Wheaton office, is one of 77 accredited [read accredited] facilities in the country." Art Barnum, "Du Page Crime Lab Wins National
Accreditation,” Chicago Trib., 13 Mar. 1991, at D9. Although the longer form finds citations in the OED from the mid-17th century, these provide no basis for using it in contemporary prose. Besides, the OED labels the word obsolete.

Occasionally accredit is loosely used in place of credit or attribute—e.g.:

- “It would be reasonable to assume that at least some of Rusedski’s astonishing recent improvement could be accredited [read credited] to his coach, Tony Pickard.” Rosie DiManno, “More than Meets the Eye in Rusedski Affair,” Toronto Star, 29 June 1998, at D6.
- “He was also an inventor and had several patents accredited [read credited] to his name.” “John Steven” (obit.), S. Bend Trib., 2 July 1999, at D5.
- “She accredits [read attributes] to her father, the retired Rev Hugh Dermot McMorran, one of the tenets of her policing ‘beliefs.’” Alan Murray, “Force for the Future,” Belfast Telegraph, 17 Dec. 2011, at 22.

The OED cites two examples, from 1876 and 1900, and labels this use an Americanism. But it doesn’t represent the best in American usage.

**ACCUESEE**

1. *accredit* for *accredit*: Stage 1
   Current ratio: 356:1

2. *accredit* in the sense “credit” or “attribute”: Stage 2
   Current ratio: 10:1

**ACCUMULABLE**

So formed—not *accumulable*. See -ABLE (D) & -ATABLE.

Current ratio: 528:1

**ACCUMULATE; ACCUMULATIVE; *CUMULATE; CUMULATIVE.**

Accumulate is far more common than *cumulate* as the transitive verb meaning “to pile up, collect.”

*Cumulate* should be avoided as a NEEDLESS VARIANT. Accumulate has the additional intransitive sense “to increase.”

The adjectives demonstrate more palpable differentiation. In one sense they are synonymous: “increasing by successive addition,” in which meaning cumulative is the usual and therefore the preferred term. Accumulative = acquisitive; inclined to amass. It would be salutary to strengthen this distinction.

**ACCURATE**

(= correct in every detail) is pronounced /ək-yə-rət/—not /ək-a-rət/ or /ək-a-rət/. It’s a matter of precision.

**ACCUSATORY; ACCUSATORIAL; ACCUSATIVE.**

Accusatory (= accusing; of the nature of an accusation) is occasionally confused with accusatorial (= of, relating to, or involving a criminal-law system in which the prosecution and the defense put forward their claims before an independent decision-maker). E.g.: “Before she could utter an accusatorial [read accusatory] word, Stella said, ‘I know what you’re thinking and the answer is no.’” Max Haines, “A Bitter Pill to Swallow,” Toronto Sun, 31 Dec. 1995, at 42. To contrast accusatorial with inquisitorial, see inquisitive.

Accusative should be restricted to its grammatical sense, i.e., the case that marks the direct object of a verb or the object of certain prepositions. But it’s sometimes used incorrectly in place of accusatory—e.g.: “Adopting an accusative [read accusatory] tabloid-TV style, the ad shows the Washington apartment of a lobbying firm where Kerry stayed intermittently over a period of months in 1989.” Frank Phillips, “Weld Calls a Truce on Attack Ads,” Boston Globe, 26 Oct. 1996, at A1.

**ACCUSATORY**


Occasionally *accesee* is erroneously used for accusatory—e.g.: “If these accusations are grounded on truth, then surely the accused [read accused] has a lot less to fear than the accused.” Letter of Brody Stewart, “Readers’ Views,” St. Cloud Times [read St. Cloud Times] (Minn.), 12 Mar. 2002, at B5. See -ee.

**ACCUSATORY**

1. *accesee* for the attributive noun *accused*: Stage 1
   Current ratio: 164:1

2. *accesee* misused for *accusatory*: Stage 1

For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)
accuser; *accusor. The -er form is standard. It has always predominated. See -ER (A).

Current ratio: 869:1

accustomed. Formerly, the idiom was accustomed to do, accustomed to think, etc. But in the mid-20th century the phrasing shifted to accustomed to doing, accustomed to thinking. Today the older usage sounds strange to many ears, but some traditionalists stick to it, especially in BrE—e.g.: “Both stem from the age profile of a profession in which nearly two thirds of teachers are over 40 and accustomed to think of early retirement as the norm.” John Carvel, “Questioning Professionalism of Teachers Can Be Harmful,” Guardian, 14 Jan. 1997, at 2.

Current ratio (accustomed to being vs. accustomed to be): 2:1

acerbic, in AmE, is sometimes said to be inferior to acerb because it is a syllable longer. But acerb is so rare and acerbic so common—much more common than its sibling in modern print sources—that the criticism is misplaced. Acerbic is also standard in BrE, in which acerb is now virtually unknown. (Predominant in the 18th century, acerb rapidly declined in the 19th.) The noun is acerbity.

Current ratio (acerbic vs. acerb): 59:1

achieve, v.t., implies successful effort at something more than merely surviving to a given age. Thus *achieving manhood and *achieving womanhood are ludicrous phrases, but they and others like them are fairly common euphemisms—e.g.: “Others remember the excitement of seeing the world and the satisfaction of achieving [read reaching] adulthood in such difficult times.” Robert Preer, “Fifty Years Later, Pain of War Still Throbs,” Boston Globe, 29 May 1994, South Weekly §, at 1.

Achilles’ heel; Achilles tendon. Since the early 19th century, Achilles’ heel has predominantly sported the possessive apostrophe—though the competition between the with- and without- apostrophe forms has been keen since before 1900. Meanwhile, though, the attributive form Achilles tendon (no apostrophe) has been vastly predominant since the mid-19th century. Hence many (perhaps most) dictionaries justifiably list the terms as they are recorded at the head of this entry.

Current ratio (Achilles’ heel vs. Achilles heel): 1.2:1

Current ratio (Achilles tendon vs. Achilles’ tendon): 22:1

acknowledge. The phrasing This acknowledges your letter of January 15 is pure commercialee. Instead, try for a more relaxed tone: Thank you for your January 15 letter.

acknowledgment; acknowledgement. As with judgment and abridgment, the spelling without the medial -e- has always predominated in AmE. But in BrE the medial -e- is standard (but only since about 1970). See MUTE E.

*aquaintance, a needless variant of acquaintance, adds nothing to the language except another syllable, which we scarcely need. E.g.:

• “Mexicans, having been distanced from Jews for centuries, brought a mixed background to the new acquaintance [read acquaintance].” Adina Cimet, Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico 3 (1997).

• “We eat, pay bills, maneuver through the social pleasantries of an average set of acquaintances [read acquaintances], and try to maintain the cock of whatever hat we have chosen to wear through the terrain of an entire life.” Edward Hoagland, “Sex and the River Styx,” Harper’s Mag., Jan. 2003, at 49, 59.

Language-Change Index
*aquaintanceship for acquaintance: Stage 2 Current ratio (acquaintance vs. *acquaintanceship): 59:1

acquiesce (/ak-wes-es/) takes either in or to—e.g.:

• “We have a strong desire to work with President-elect Bush when our ideas and values intersect, but also a duty not to acquiesce in actions with which we fundamentally disagree.” Evan Bayh, “The Wrong Man,” Wash. Post, 19 Jan. 2001, at A37.

• “The question for Bush is whether to simply acquiesce to the demands of these industries that provided millions for Republican campaigns.” “Bush Pick Signals Big Changes for Western Lands,” USA Today, 16 Jan. 2001, at A14.

Acquiesce in is the more traditional choice; it has always been more common than acquiesce to.

A slight differentiation seems to be emerging. Though one may acquiesce in events (especially unfortunate ones), one acquiesces to proposals and requests, or the people who propose them—e.g.:


• “Attorney General Thomas F. Reilly . . . has blasted the DTE for acquiescing to utilities without investigating their claims of higher costs.” Peter J. Howe, “Agency Approves Electricity Rate Hike,” Boston Globe, 12 Dec. 2000, at C1.


acquiescence. See permission.

acquirement; acquisition. Here’s the difference: traditionally, acquirement denotes the power or faculty of acquiring, acquisition the thing acquired. But both may also mean “the act of acquiring”; acquisition is more usual in that sense.

acquirer. So spelled—not *acquiror.

Current ratio: 9:1

acquisition. See acquirement.

acquit. This verb once took either of or from, but since the early 18th century the preferred and vastly predominant preposition has been of. E.g.: “In the end James was induced to withdraw a letter resigning from the Society, after the Council had passed a resolution acquitting him from [read of] any unfairness.”
that means "to move (mechanical things) to action" and grounds, but it is not strictly incorrect—e.g.: "What

This usage should generally be avoided on stylistic

(Likewise,

fancy substitute for

motivate

actuate; activate.

See

actuality.

actuate; activate. The Evanses wrote that actuate means "to move (mechanical things) to action" and that activate means "to make active" (DCAU at 10). The distinction is a fine one not generally recognized by dictionaries.

The less common term, actuate, often appears as a fancy substitute for motivate in a variety of contexts. (Likewise, actuation sometimes displaces motivation.) This usage should generally be avoided on stylistic grounds, but it is not strictly incorrect—e.g.: "What we are talking about is harassment by a small but determined group of photographers actuated [better: motivated] by greed to the point that they have lost all sense of humanity.”


acumen (= shrewd perception) is traditionally pronounced /ә-kyoo-men/, but in recent decades the variant /ak-ya-men/ has become dominant. Charles Harrington Elster, who writes on pronunciation matters, thinks “that AK-yuh-men was the innovation of younger (not well-enough-) educated speakers who think nothing of shifting an accent here and there in an effort to sound more urbane or savvy. . . . Like most pseudosophisticated innovations, AK-yuh-men soon became a follow-the-leader pronunciation with two quite different ways of saying acumen countennanced by the dictionaries where one, in my opinion, would do just fine.”

BBBM at 8.

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acumen accented on first syllable: Stage 3

ACUTE ACCENT. See diacritical marks.

A.D. See B.C.

ad, short for advertisement, is acceptable in all but the most formal contexts.

adage (= a familiar saying that had its origins in antiquity) often appears in the venially redundant phrase old adage. The phrase is especially inappropriate when the saying is a recent one—e.g.: “Like all mathematical models, the old adage [read adage] of garbage in—garbage out holds true.”


adamant (= unrelenting, unyielding) has no corresponding noun at the ready. Adamantness is awkward at best. There’s a gap in the language, and to fill it some writers have begun using adamantance, on the analogy of brilliant—brilliance, preponderant—preponderance, protuberant—protuberance, and the like. Although the neologism is quite understandable, conservative writers would probably insist (adamantly, one supposes) on adamant stand, adamant attitude, or insistence in sentences such as these:


• “Clarke was taken aback by Neilson’s adamantance on being [read determination to be] back for the second round.”


• “The peace process marked by the Good Friday agreement of 1998 had been endangered by the IRA’s adamantance [read resistance] against giving up its guns and explosives in any manner that might suggest defeat in its guerrilla war for Irish unification.”

“Breakthrough on IRA Arms,” S.F. Examiner, 10 May 2000, at A22.

• “The opposition’s adamantance [read strength of the opposition] stunned the commission and its staff.”

Bryan
Hendricks, “AGFC Cancels Crown Lake Ramp Plans,” 

The OED traces adamance back to 1954, with additional examples from 1961 and 1979. In fact, though, the word appeared in print sources as early as 1931.

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_**Addendum**_ (ad-デンム)= an addition or supplement _forms_ addendum (ad-デンム). The shorter in the adjective (_adaptive_). Current ratio (_adaptation vs. _*adaptation_): 95:1

_Current ratio (_adaptation vs. _*adaptative_): 288:1

_**Addable.**_ So spelled—not _*addible._ See _-able_ (a).

_Current ratio: 4:1

_**Added to.**_ See subject–verb agreement (b).

_**Addendum**_ (= an addition or supplement) forms the plural _addenda._ It’s sloppy to use _addenda_ as a singular—e.g.:


- “Two Cape Cod gunning shorebird decoys that arrived too late for catalogue listing and so were included in an _addenda_ [read _addendum_] are thought to be early carvings done by Crowell in the late 1800s.” Virginia Boblin, “Decoys Gain Prestige, Patina of Folk Art,” Boston Globe, 24 July 2005, at G26.

- “As the new caterer at the Van Wezel, he’ll be creating some pre- and post-events as _an addenda_ [delete _an_] to the performances.” Deborah Seeber, “Party Time,” Sarasota Herald Trib., 1 Oct. 2006, at L78.

See plurals (b).

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_addenda_ used for the singular _addendum_: Stage 2

_Current ratio (_an addendum_ vs. _*an addenda_): 3:1

_**Addicted; dependent.**_ Regarding people’s reactions to drugs, the distinction between these terms can be important. Someone who is _addicted_ to a habit-forming drug has an intense physiological need for it. Someone who is _dependent_ on a drug has a strong psychological reliance on it after having used it for some time. _Addiction_, then, is primarily physical, whereas _dependency_ (also known as _habituation_) is primarily psychological.

**address**

n. & vb. In several of its verb senses, this is a formal word: (1) “to speak to” <Jones addressed the managers in a manner that they considered insubordinate>; (2) “to direct (a statement, question, etc.) to” <Walters addressed the question to Fawcett, not to Majors>; (3) “to call attention to” <the report addressed four issues>; (4) “to deal with” <it’s time to address these problems>.

Whether as a verb or as a noun, _address_ is preferably accented on the second syllable: /ә-dәrs/. But for a residence or business, /әd-dәrs/ is fully acceptable.

**addressee.** See -ee.

_**Adduce; educe; deduce.**_ All three are useful when discussing the evidence marshaled in support of an argument. To _adduce_ is to put forward for consideration something such as evidence or arguments. E.g.: “What I saw were individuals who voted to cripple the education process on the basis of rumors they freely attributed to one or two unnamed sources rather than properly _adduced_ evidence.” “How to Reform Our National Intelligence,” Baltimore Sun, 30 Nov. 1996, at A13.

To _educe_ is to draw out, evoke, or elicit. This term is the rarest of the three, but it occasionally appears in the popular press—e.g.: “Hitherto, how [Thurber] fitted into the screwball reputation of that magazine has had to be _educed_ from his ‘The Years with Ross’ (1959).” John McAleer, “The Thurber Spirit,” Chicago Trib., 17 Dec. 1995, at C1. Sometimes, however, _educe_ is misused for _adduce_—e.g.: “But the only evidence _educed_ [read _adduced_] in support of this theory is a passing and rather inconclusive comment made by the Bronte family cook.” Terry Castle, “Hush Hush, Sweet Charlotte,” New Republic, 22 Jan. 1996, at 32. For still more complications involving this word, see _educe._

To _deduce_ is to draw an inference. E.g.: “As it happens, scientists have _deduced_ the nature of an evolutionary path that a primitive blood-clotting mechanism could have followed to evolve into the more complex cascade.” Boyce Rensberger, “How Science Responds When Creationists Criticize Evolution,” Wash. Post, 8 Jan. 1997, at H1. See _deduce._

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_educe_ misused for _adduce:_ Stage 1

**Adducible.** So spelled—not _*adduceable._ See _-able_ (a).

_Current ratio: 13:1

_**Adequate.**_ And _sufficient_. Though both words were originally used in reference to quantity, _adequate_ now tends toward the qualitative and _sufficient_ toward the quantitative. Hence _adequate_ means “suitable to the occasion or circumstances,” and _sufficient_ means “enough for a particular need or purpose.” For more on _sufficient_, see _enough_, adj.

_B. *Adequate enough.**_ This phrase is redundant. Either word suffices alone—e.g.:

- “While Tyrol doesn’t have a particularly large or sophisticated snowmaking system, it is _adequate enough_ [read _adequate_ to cover 100 percent of the slopes].” Mike Ivey, “Snowboarders Aid in Revival of Tyrol Basin,” Capital Times (Madison), 22 Dec. 1995, at C1.

- “The question [is] whether a translation is _adequate enough_ [read _adequate_] considering not only different legal terminology but also changes from the L1 legal system into the L2 legal system.” Marie J. Myers, “Bilingualism and the Use of Voice Dictation Software for Personal Computers,” in _Language for Special Purposes_ 140, 144 (Felix Mayer ed., 2001).

- “The commander of the garrison was dead. Veranus had been an _adequate enough_ [read _able_] officer—_adequate enough_ [read _able enough_] to be spared for this command—but the Second Legion could ill afford to send another
centurion from the campaign being waged against the hill-forts.” Simon Scarrow, The Eagle and the Wolves 23 (2004).

See ADJECTIVES (h).

adherence; adhesion. Both words derive from the verb adhere, but adherence is generally literal and adherence generally figurative. One should write about adherence to tenets or beliefs, and about adhesion of bubble gum to the sole of one’s shoe. The word more frequently called on is adherence—e.g.: “Clinton’s slavish adherence to a corporate agenda cannot be understated.” Adolph Reed Jr., “A Slave to Finance,” Village Voice, 21 Jan. 1997, at 27. (The writer seems to have misused understated for overstated.)

Occasionally adhesion appears wrongly for adherence—e.g.:


ad hoc, adv. & adj., is a widespread and useful term meaning “for this specific purpose.” Some have questioned its justification in English (e.g., Vigilans [Eric Partridge], Chamber of Horrors 26 [1952]). But it is firmly established and serves the language well when used correctly <ad hoc committee>.

By extension—some would say slipshod extension—the term has come to mean “without any underlying principle that can be consistently applied”—e.g.:


Generally speaking, the phrases on an ad hoc basis and in an ad hoc way are Verbose for the adverb ad hoc. (See basis (A).) Likewise, ad hoc should rarely if ever be qualified by very or fairly. Finally, attempts to condense the phrase into one word (e.g., *adhocking) have failed and should be forgotten, and there is no need to hyphenate it. See PHRASAL ADJECTIVES (H).

ad hominem [L. “to the person”] is shortened from the Latinism argumentum ad hominem (= an argument directed not to the merits of an opponent’s argument but to the personality or character of the opponent). Occasionally the full phrase appears—e.g.: “But supposing it had come to something?” demanded Miss Barton, pinning the argumentum ad hominem with a kind of relish.” Dorothy L. Sayers, Gaudy Night 371 (1936; repr. 1995).

The more usual shortened form is sometimes misspelled *ad hominum—e.g.:

• “He is not without sin; Limbaugh himself has made ad hominum [read ad hominem] attacks on some with whom he disagrees.” Debra J. Saunders, “Rush and the Juice,” S.F. Chron., 8 July 1994, at A23.

• “I don’t believe that they’ll get into a lot of ad hominum personal [read ad hominem] attacks.” Andy Sher, “Quayle Predicting Different Approach by Gore This Time,” Nashville Banner, 9 Oct. 1996, at A1.


adieu /a-dyoo/ (= farewell) for ado /a-doo/ (= fuss, trouble) is a surprisingly common error—e.g.:


Sometimes a pun is clearly intended—e.g.: “And then there’s Whitewater, which has taken on a miserable life of its own. If it ever ends, it’ll be much adieu about nothing.” Herb Caen, “Time of Our Lives,” S.F. Chronicle, 11 Mar. 1998, at D8.

ad infinitum (= continuing without end) is pronounced /ad in-fi-ni-tum/—not /ad in-fin-i-tum/ or /ad in-fi-nee-tum/.

ADJECTIVES. A. Definition. An adjective is a word that modifies a noun. The word is sometimes used sloppily as if it meant “noun”—e.g.:

• “Excellence is an adjective [read a noun] that describes something which is of the highest quality.” “Their Work Stands Out,” Barrister, Summer 1989, at 5. (In that sentence, describes should probably be denotes, and which is should be deleted.)
B. Noncomparable Adjectives. Many adjectives describe absolute states or conditions and cannot take most or more, least or least, or intensives such as very, quite, or largely. The illogic of such combinations is illustrated in this sentence: “It is possible that this idea too has outlived its usefulness and soon will be largely discarded.” The literal meaning of discard impinges on the metaphor here: it is hard to imagine a single idea being halfway discarded, though certainly it could be halfway discredited. Deleting largely clears the meaning.

The best-known noncomparable (\text{kom-par-\text{a-bol}}) adjective is unique (= being one of a kind). Because something is either unique or not unique, there can be no degrees of uniqueness. Hence *more unique* and *very unique* are incorrect. Yet something may be almost unique or not quite unique—if, for example, there were two such things extant. (See unique.) The Hope Diamond is unique; a Gutenberg Bible is almost unique. The diamond is not “more unique,” though. This writer of distinction got the distinction right: “I’ve got a Dante, and a Caxton folio that is practically unique, at Sir Ralph Brocklebury’s sale.” Dorothy L. Sayers, Whose Body? (1923; repr. 1995) (several variants of the folio are known to exist, but none are identical).

Many other words belong to this class, such as preferable: “Stoll said the city also plans dozens of hearings with groups, showing different scenarios of how growth could be handled and getting feedback on what is most preferable [read preferable].” Jack Money, “Technology Useful in City Planning,” Sunday Oklahoman, 27 Apr. 1997, at 2. Cf. COMPARATIVES AND SUPERLATIVES (d).

Among the more common noncomparable adjectives are these:

- absolute
- adequate
- chief
- complete
- devoid
- entire
- false
- fatal
- favorite
- final
- ideal
- impossible
- inevitable
- infinite
- irrevocable
- main
- manifest
- only
- paramount
- perfect
- perpetual
- possible
- preferable
- principal
- singular
- stationary
- sufficient
- unanimous
- unavoidable
- uniform
- unique
- universal
- void
- whole

For example, the phrase *more possible* should typically be *more feasible* or *more practicable*, since something is either possible or impossible. E.g.: “The VA medical centers, which have a long history of hospitalizing patients, have been stepping up outpatient services as they become more and more possible [read compatible] with emerging technology.” Mary McGrath, “Debate Over VA Center Comes Home,” Omaha World-Herald, 16 Feb. 1997, at B1.

This general prohibition against using these words in comparative senses (e.g., “absolutely impossible”) should be tempered with reason. It has exceptions. Good writers occasionally depart from the rule, but knowingly and purposefully. For example, the phrase more perfect appears in the U.S. Constitution: “We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, secure the general Welfare, and provide the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” U.S. Const. pmbl. One writer criticizes this phrase and suggests that it “should read ‘to form a more nearly perfect Union.’” George J. Miller, “On Legal Style,” 43 Ky. L.J. 235, 246 (1955). Although the Constitution is not without stylistic blemishes, this probably isn’t one of them, and the suggested edit seems pedantic. See more perfect.

A few adjectives, such as harmless, are wrongly thought of as noncomparable. It’s hopelessly donnish to insist that something is either harmful or harmless and that you can’t write more harmful, more harmless, or relatively harmless. The same is true of many other words.

C. Coordinate Adjectives. When two adjectives modifying the same noun are related in sense, they should be separated by a comma (or else and). So we say a big, sprawling house and a poignant, uplifting film. But when the consecutive adjectives are unrelated, there shouldn’t be a comma—hence a big white house and a poignant foreign film.

Some consecutive adjectives present close questions—e.g.: “The brief, unsigned Supreme Court opinion said that the lawyers for Ms. Benten had failed to show a substantial likelihood that the case would be won if it were argued before the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.” Phillip J. Hilts, “Justices Refuse to Order Return of Abortion Pill,” N.Y. Times, 18 July 1992, at 1. Is the fact that the opinion is brief related to the fact that it is unsigned? If so, the comma is proper; if not, the comma is improper. Because signed opinions tend to be longer than unsigned opinions, the comma is probably justified. But the string of adjectives is awkward and might be improved: The brief Supreme Court opinion, which was unsigned, said . . . .

For more on the punctuation of successive adjectives, see PUNCTUATION (d).

D. Proper Names as Adjectives. When a proper name is used attributively as an adjective, the writer should capitalize only that portion used in attribution <a University of Florida student> <a John Birch Society member>.

The practice of using as adjectives place names having two or more words should generally be resisted. But it is increasingly common. Although California home and Austin jury are perfectly acceptable, Sacramento, California home and Austin, Texas
jury are not. To make matters worse, some writers place a second comma after the state (on the theory that the state is an appositive). Hence, using a city plus the state as an adjective disrupts the flow of the sentence—e.g.: “Farmland’s president, Marc Goldman, sent out sleuths who traced the missing containers to an Elizabeth, N.J., warehouse he says is filled with discarded bottles of designer water.” Edward Felsenthal, “Nobody’s Crying Yet, but There Must Be Spilled Milk Somewhere,” Wall Street J., 20 June 1990, at B1. Such constructions contribute to noun plague, lessen readability, and bother literate readers. For more on this phenomenon, see functional shift (b).

E. Adjectives vs. Adverbs. English contains a number of linking verbs (or copulas) apart from to be—e.g., appear, become, feel, look, seem, smell, taste. These verbs connect a descriptive word with the subject; hence the descriptive word following the linking verb describes the subject and not the verb. We say He turned professional, not *He turned professionally. Writers frequently fall into error when they use linking verbs. One must analyze the sentence rather than memorize a list of common linking verbs, much as this may help. Often unexpected candidates serve as linking verbs—e.g.:

- “The rule sweeps too broadly [read broad].” (The writer intends not to describe a manner of sweeping, but to say that the rule is broad.)
- “Before the vote, the senator stood uncertainly [read uncertain] for several days.” (The word describes not the manner of standing, but the man himself.)

A similar issue arises with an object complement, in which the sequence is [subject + verb + object + complement]—e.g.:

- “Chop the onions finely [read fine].” (The sentence does not describe the manner of chopping, but the things chopped. The onions are to become fine [= reduced to small particles].)
- “Slice the meat thinly [read thin].” (As above.)

An elliptical form of this construction appears in the dentists’ much-beloved expression, Open wide (= open your mouth wide). Cf. badly (A).

F. Past-Participial Adjectives. In certain phrases, there is a decided tendency for past-participial adjectives to lose their participial endings. Hence ice cream has become cream ice cream, creamed cheese has become cream cheese, high-backed chair has become high-back chair, and skimmed milk has become skim milk. Meanwhile, chartered plane threatens to become charter plane. Yet iced tea stubbornly retains the participial inflection in most print sources. Although purists battle this trend, its inevitability seems clear. Purists, of course, are free to continue using the past participles for the phrases in transition, but they may not get what they were expecting if they order “iced cream.”

G. Phrasal or Compound Adjectives. See phrasal adjectives.

H. Modification of Adjectives Ending in -ed. See very (b).

I. Adjectives Ending in -ly. See adverbs (b).

J. Adjectives That Follow the Noun. See postpositive adjectives.

K. Dates as Adjectives. See dates (c).

L. Comparative and Superlative Adjectives. See comparatives and superlatives.

M. Animal Adjectives. See animal adjectives.

N. Adjectives as Nouns. See functional shift (c).

O. Adjectives as Verbs. See functional shift (b).

P. Nouns as Adjectives. See functional shift (b).

Q. Adjective-Noun Disagreement. See concord (e).

adjournment = (1) the act of suspending proceedings to another time or place; or (2) an adjourned meeting, i.e., a meeting “scheduled for a particular time (and place, if it is not otherwise established) by the assembly’s adjourning to or adjourning until” that time and place. Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised § 9, at 90 (10th ed. 2000). As Robert’s points out, because sense 2 is susceptible to confusion with sense 1, the phrase adjourned meeting is preferable to adjournment in sense 2. Reserve adjournment for its ordinary meaning: sense 1.

adjudicable. So formed—not *adjudicable. See atable.

adjudicative; *adjudicatory; *judicative. The first is standard; the second and third are needless variants.

Current ratio: 19:12:1

adjure. See abjure.

adjurer; *adjuror. The -er spelling is standard. See -er (A).

Current ratio: 3:1

adjuster; *adjustor. Adjuster (= one whose job is to determine the amount of loss suffered when an insurance claim is submitted and to try to settle the claim) is the preferred spelling—the one that has vastly predominated since the words came into common use in the 18th century. See -er (A).

Current ratio: 19:1

administer, v.t.; minister, v.i. Administer, which suffices in most contexts, has four meanings: (1) “to give” <administer treatment> <administer the oath of office>; (2) “to dispense” <administer frontier justice>; (3) “to manage” <administer the state health department>; and (4) “to manage and dispose of” <administer the movie mogul’s estate>. The verb minister, now exclusively intransitive, shares all but the second sense, though only rarely. Minister is most commonly used in the sense of attending to others’ needs or, in religious
contexts, of administering sacraments. And people in need are ministered to. Cf. *administrate.

*administerable. See administrable.

*administreral. See administrative.

administrable; *administerable; *administratable.
The first is the correct form. The other two are needless variants, the last one being an abomination to boot. See -able (d) & -atable.

Current ratio: 75:3:1

*administrate is an objectionable back-formation from administration. Avoid it as a needless variant of administer—e.g.:


- “The only people who would have known just how [much trouble] Jeremy was in were the people involved in administering [read administering] the wages deal.” Christopher Brookmyre, Quite Ugly One Morning 108 (1996).


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*administrate for administer: Stage 1

Current ratio (administer vs. *administrate): 86:1

administrable; *administrational; *administrational. Administrative is the general, all-purpose term meaning “of, relating to, or involving administration or an administration.” The other two are needless variants.

Current ratio: 42,983:18:1

admirable (= having good qualities worthy of respect) is pronounced /ad-mi-rә-bal/—not /ad-mi-rә-bal/.

admissible; *admissable; *admittable. Admissible (the standard word) = (1) allowable; or (2) worthy of admittance (i.e., gaining entry). The other two are needless variants. See -able (a).

Current ratio: 2,754:10:1

admission. A. And admittance. The distinction between these terms is old and useful, but it has a history of being ignored. Admittance is purely physical, as in signs that read “No admittance.” E.g.: “Temple Israel in Boston, one of the largest congregations in the area, has told members that tickets will be required for admittance, ushers will be vigilant about security, and bags might be searched.” Michael S. Rosenwald, “Synagogues Add Security for High Holy Days,” Boston Globe, 6 Sept. 2002, at B8.

Admission is used in figurative and nonphysical senses: “His admission to the bar in 1948 began a career that would be long and noteworthy.” Admission is also used, however, in physical senses when rights or privileges are attached to gaining entry: “He supervised 200 people involved in . . . the admission of immigrants at Newark International Airport and the detention of illegal immigrants at Federal detention centers.” Ronald Smothers, “Ex-Official at Office for Aliens Is Sentenced,” N. Y. Times, 22 Apr. 1997, at B4.

Sometimes admittance is misused for admission, as when the subject is being accepted for enrollment in a school—e.g.:


- “To the extent that some private colleges may not require B averages to gain admittance [read admission], it could be tougher to win a state scholarship.” “All Students Receiving Aid Should Have a B Average,” Atlanta J.-Const., 20 Jan. 1995, at A10.

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admittance misused for admission: Stage 2

B. And confession. In criminal law, a distinction has traditionally existed between these words: an admission is a concession that an allegation or factual assertion is true without any acknowledgment of guilt with respect to the criminal charges, whereas a confession involves an acknowledgment of guilt as well as of the truth of factual allegations.

admit. In the sense “to acknowledge (something negative) as true or valid,” the phrase admit to is invariably inferior to admit—e.g.: “But now it turns out they did not completely admit to [delete to] their losses, thanks to an accounting gambit that is breathtaking in its audacity,” Floyd Norris, “Cooking Books: How Hurricane Losses Vanished,” N. Y. Times, 5 Sept. 1993, § 3, at 1. Cf. confess (A).

*admittable. See admissible.

admittance. See admission (A).

admittedly. See sentence adverbs.

admonition. A. And monition. Both terms mean “a warning; caution.” Admonition is the more common, less technical term—e.g.: “Then Jack Kemp chimes in with an admonition to listeners to beg Congress to ban the procedure in question ‘before one more life is lost.’” Nell Bernstein, “Abortion Wars: A Smaller Sequel,” Newsday (N.Y.), 9 Mar. 1997, at G5. This word has the additional sense “a mild reprimand”—e.g.: “Righter could face sanctions ranging from an official admonition to being stripped of his priesthood and rank as a bishop.” Mark O’Keefe, “Bishop’s Heresy Trial May Split Pro- and Anti-Gay Episcopal Factions,” San Diego Union-Trib., 29 Sept. 1995, at E4.

Monition, a specialized term, means either (1) “a summons to appear and answer in court as a defendant or to contempt charges”; or (2) “a formal notice from a bishop mandating that an offense within the clergy be corrected.”

B. And admonishment. Strictly speaking, admonishment is the act of admonishing, while admonition is the warning or reproof itself. Whenever admonishment can be replaced with admonition, it should be.
adolescent. See teenager.

adopt. See adapt.

adoptive; adopted. *Adoptive = (1) related by adoption <adoptive parents>; or (2) tending to adopt <first he took an adoptive posture toward the proposal, but then he rejected it>.

• “More frustrating than the targeted, test-marketed media coverage . . . is the intellectual echo chamber that diagnoses *ad nauseam* [read *ad nauseum*] with nary a cure.” Letter of Dan Sullivan, “Audible Sigh,” Harper’s Mag., Jan. 2003, at 5.

• “Notice that Mark Geragos mentions . . . innuendo and references *ad nauseam* [read *ad nauseum*] to the satanic cult theory perpetrated for the last two months.” Loretta Dillon, Stone Cold Guilty: The People v. Scott Lee Peterson 56 (2005).

**Language-Change Index**

| ad nauseam misspelled *ad nauseum| Stage: 2 |
| Current ratio: 4:1 |

**adolescent.** See teenager.

**adoption; adopted.** *Adoptive* = (1) related by adoption <adoptive parents>; or (2) tending to adopt <first he took an adoptive posture toward the proposal, but then he rejected it>. The phrase *adopted father* is an example of hypallage, to be avoided in favor of *adoptive father*. The Latin sourceword, *adoptivus*, applied both to the adopting parent and to the adopted child. But today *adoptive* is almost always used to refer to the adults rather than the children. This has been true, however, only since about 1940. In the 19th century, *adopted father* predominated. But it has fallen off greatly since the mid-20th century.

Another way of looking at it is to say that *adoptive* is the active form: an adoptive parent is one who has adopted a child. *Adopted* is the passive form: an adopted child is one who has been adopted by a parent. So what happens in extended senses?

In reference to a city or country, *adopted* is the better, more logical, and much more common choice—e.g.: “[Elton] John had faith in his *adopted* city, or at least in Agassi and Sampras.” Todd Holcomb, “Agassi, Sampras Show Knack for Court Comedy,” Atlanta J.-Const., 15 Dec. 2000, at D5. Although *adoptive* sometimes appears in such contexts, it is comparatively uncommon and usually less metaphorically accurate (since people can typically choose where to live)—e.g.: “My grandparents . . . were very proud of their native land [Italy]. However, their *adoptive* [read *adopted*] country was first and foremost in their minds and hearts.” James Cimino, “Why Give Cubans Preferential Treatment?” USA Today, 10 Apr. 2000, at A26.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *adopted mother for adoptive mother*: Stage 3
   Current ratio (adoptive mother vs. *adopted mother*): 3:1

2. *adoptive country for adopted country*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (adopted country vs. *adoptive country*): 20:1

**admirable.** See *admire*.

**admonitory; *admonitorial; monitory; *monitory.* The -ory forms predominate.

**ad nauseam** is frequently misspelled *ad nauseum*—e.g.: 

- “Notice that Mark Geragos mentions . . . innuendo and references *ad nauseam* [read *ad nauseum*] to the satanic cult theory perpetrated for the last two months.” Loretta Dillon, *Stone Cold Guilty: The People v. Scott Lee Peterson* 56 (2005).

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**adultery** (b). (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

| Stage: 2 |
| Current ratio: 23 |

**adulterous**; *adulterate, adj.; adulterant, adj.; adulterated; adulterine. *Adulterous and *adulterate* both mean “of, characterized by, or pertaining to adultery,” the former term being the more common. E.g.: “There are revelations about *adulterous* wrinkles in his generally happy fourth marriage to Lauren Bacall—an affair with a makeup artist for him and an affair with Frank Sinatra for her.” L.S. Klepp, “Play it Again, Sam, and Again,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 11 Apr. 1997, at 78. *Adulterate*, adj., more common in Shakespeare's
day than in ours, has been relegated to the status of a needless variant.

Adulterant = tending to adulterate <adulterant chemicals in the mixture>. Adulterated = (1) corrupted or debased <an adulterated culture>; or (2) corrupted by an impure addition; made spurious <the vintage wine was thoroughly adulterated once the water was added>. Adulterine = (1) spurious; (2) illegal; or (3) born of adultery <adulterine bastard>.

adultery. A. And fornication; cohabitation. Adultery = sexual intercourse engaged in voluntarily by a married person with a person who is not the lawful spouse. Generally today, it doesn’t matter whether the other participant is married. (But see adulterer.) Fornication often implies that neither party is married, but it may also refer to the act of an unmarried person who has sex with a married person. Cohabitation is “the fact, state, or condition of living together, esp. as partners in life, usu. with the suggestion of sexual relations” (Black’s Law Dictionary 316 [10th ed. 2014]). It’s often a euphemism for an unmarried couple’s living together—but unlike adultery or fornication, it now carries little suggestion of wrongdoing.

B. And adulteration. Adulteration = (1) the act of debasing, corrupting, or making impure; (2) a corrupted or debased state; or (3) something corrupted or debased. The Latin verb adulterare, from which both adultery and adulteration derive, encompasses all these senses.

adumbrate (= [1] to foreshadow, or [2] to outline) is a formal word that has been called an affectation. For example, two influential writers said in 1901 that the word is “so high-sounding as hardly to be allowable even in elaborate writing.” James Bradstreet Greenough & George Lyman Kittredge, Words and Their Ways in English Speech 7 (1901). But contemporary writers (especially critics and English professors) sometimes find it serviceable in formal literary contexts—e.g.: “Auden was already of the view that all genuine poetry is in a sense the formation of private spheres out of public chaos, a claim that adumbrates his more developed sense of literature as making a secondary world, to be set against the primary world over which otherwise we have little or no control.” Denis Donoghue, “W. H. Auden,” Wash. Times, 9 Feb. 1997, Books §, at B8.

Traditionally pronounced /ə-dəm-brayt/, it is today more often pronounced /ad-am-brayt/.

advance; advancement. Generally, advance refers to steady progress; advancement refers to progression (1) beyond what is normal or ordinary, and (2) involving an outside agent or force. Hence the advancement of science suggests a bigger step forward than the advance of science. And although someone might get an occupational advancement, we speak of the advance of civilization. In senses suggesting the action of moving up or bringing forth, advancement is the proper word <National Association for the Advancement of Colored People>.

The distinction gets fuzzier in financial contexts. Although we speak (properly) of cash advances and advances on royalties, in law advancement commonly refers to a parent’s expenditure made for a child with the idea that it’s to be deducted from the child’s inheritance.

The phrases *advance notice, *advance plans, *advance warning, and the like are redundant.

advanced, adj., = (1) having progressed beyond most others <an advanced way of thinking>; (2) being beyond an elementary level <advanced studies> <advanced students>; (3) sophisticated <advanced weaponry>; or (4) toward the end of a span of time or distance <people who are advanced in age>. Though it has these several meanings, advanced does not mean “in advance”—a meaning for which advance, adj., suffices. Yet writers increasingly misuse advanced for this sense—e.g.:


• “These are the parents who rarely give schools advanced notice of planned trips and who let their children stay home from school for minor problems.” Tamara Henry, “Skipping School for Travel,” USA Today, 27 Mar. 1997, at D10.

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• “These are the parents who rarely give schools advanced notice of planned trips and who let their children stay home from school for minor problems.” Tamara Henry, “Skipping School for Travel,” USA Today, 27 Mar. 1997, at D10.

In both examples, advance is the intended word—yet it should be deleted as a REDUNDANCY. Cf. advance guard.

*advancee is an 18th-century creation meaning either (1) “someone who advances,” or (2) “someone who receives an advance payment.” The word seems both unattractive and unnecessary—e.g.:

• “If the advancee [read recipient of the advance] predeceases the intestate, no other person is affected or burdened . . . .” Lawrence Newman & Richard V. Wellman, Comparative Law Studies 389 (1976).

• “The division’s biggest advancee [read gainer?] should be the Phoenix Cardinals (4–12), particularly if Joe Bugel’s offensive line finds a comfort zone with young talent.” John Hawkins, “Speed Reigns in NFL’s Best Division,” Wash. Times, 5 Sept. 1993, at G20. (A possible revision: The Phoenix Cardinals (4–12) stand to gain the most in the division, particularly . . . .)

• “There were 12 teams and 74 individuals that made their way out of a sectional tournament this past school year . . . . And most of those advancees [read advancing to regionals] come from the Ohio area.” Bryan Walters, “Regional Runs,” Point Pleasant Register (W. Va.), 25 June 2013, Sports §, at 6.

See -EE (A).

advance guard (= a military contingent sent before the main troops) is sometimes written *advanced guard, a spelling that was dominant for most of the 19th century. The standard spelling today is advance guard, but the variant still often occurs—e.g.: “On the afternoon of April 1, after skirmishing all morning, Gen. Wilson’s advanced guard [read advance guard] ran into Gen. Forrest’s line of battle.” William Rambo,
Adverbs fall into awkward, unidiomatic sentences when they misguidedly avoid splitting up verb phrases. Although most authorities squarely say that the best place for the adverb is in the midst of the verb phrase, many writers nevertheless harbor a misplaced aversion, probably because they confuse a split verb phrase with the split infinitive. H.W. Fowler explained long ago what writers still have problems understanding: "When an adverb is to be used with [a compound] verb, its normal place is between the auxiliary (or sometimes the first auxiliary if there are two or more) and the rest. Not only is there no objection to thus splitting a compound verb . . . , but any other position for the adverb requires special justification" (FMEU1 at 448).

Other authorities agree and have long done so, as the following sampling shows—e.g.:

- "[The adverb] frequently stands between the auxiliary and the verb, as 'He . . . was attentively heard by the whole audience.'" Robert Lowth, A Short Introduction to English Grammar 135 (rev. ed. 1782).
- "Those [adverbs] . . . which belong to compound verbs, are commonly placed after the first auxiliary." Goold Brown, The Institutes of English Grammar 167 (rev. ed. 1852).
- "When the tense of a transitive verb is compound, the adverb follows the first auxiliary if the verb is in the active voice [e.g., the boy has always obeyed his father], and immediately precedes the principal verb if the verb is in the passive voice [e.g., the house can be quickly built]." Josephine Turck Baker, Correct English: Complete Grammar and Drill Book 180 (1938).
- "When there is a compound verb form, it is usual to put the adverb between the auxiliary and the main verb. 'I have always wanted to do so.' 'He has rarely failed us.'" W.P. Jowett, Chatting About English 184 (1945).
- "Barring the infinitive, verb groups should be split . . . . In verb groups formed by parts of the verbs 'be,' 'have,' 'do,' 'can,' 'may,' and 'must,' adverbs are best placed immediately before the main verb." R.G. Ralph, Put It Plainly 60 (1952).
- "The truth is that more often than not the proper and natural place for an adverb is between the parts of a compound verb." Theodore M. Bernstein, The Careful Writer 26 (1965).
- "There is a frequent need to link an adverb with a compound verb ('I have always been'), and the regular place for the modifier is shown in the example." Jacques Barzun, Simple & Direct 63 (1975).

But confusion on this point is all but ubiquitous. The result is an unidiomatic, unnatural style—e.g.:

- "Capitalistic economies easily can adjust [read can easily adjust] to more unequal distributions of purchasing power." Lester C. Thurow, "Inequalities in Wealth a Political, Not Economic Problem," USA Today, 23 Nov. 1999, at A19 (also asserting that "policies . . . easily could be designed [read either could easily be designed or could be easily designed]").

The following example, the first adverb is awkwardly placed and the second is right: "If you're doing serious research, possibly for a college course, then you already have [read have already] begun (or will soon begin to involve yourself in) Internet research." H. Eric Branscomb, Casting Your Net 1 (2000). For more on this point of splitting verb phrases, see Superstitions (c).

A few general adverbs of time occur between subject and verb—"I usually play golf on Saturday," "We never do much in that room," "He always takes the credit for himself." Yet adverbs of place don't appear between subject and verb, and people never say, "I there saw her standing," "We here will stake our claim," "She anywhere loves to travel." The linguist W.F. Twaddell first noticed this point about adverbs of time as opposed to adverbs of place. He calls it "a rather complicated rule of English grammar," adding that "speakers of English are largely unaware of it, but the English they speak is consistent in conformation to it." W.F. Twaddell, "Meanings, Habits and Rules," in A Linguistics Reader 10, 11 (Graham Wilson ed., 1967).

B. Awkward Adverbs. Adjectives ending in -ly and -le often make cumbersome adverbs, e.g., chillily, friendliness, ghastly, holily, jollily, juvenile, jovially, lovelily, sillily, statellly, supply, surily, uglily, willy, and so on. You needn't be timid in writing or pronouncing such adverbs when they're genuinely needed—e.g.: "During the year’s cold months, when the abundant fenestration of her home office kept the room chilly, [the therapist] wore a pelisse of hand-tanned Native American buckskin that formed a somewhat ghastily moist-looking flesh-colored background for the enclosing shapes her hands formed in her lap." David Foster Wallace, "The Depressed Person," Harper’s Mag., 1 Jan. 1998, at 57. But if they seem unnatural, you can easily rephrase the sentence, e.g., "in a silly..."
manner. A few words, however, act as both adjectives and adverbs; examples are daily, early, hourly, kindly, stately, and timely.

The same is true, to a lesser extent, of many adverbs derived from adjectives that end in -ly, such as funny (making funnily). But they have a more widespread acceptance—e.g.: “His long play about the Civil War is obviously and unfunnily bad, but a hundred pages are devoted to reproducing the manuscript and another fifty to endless jawing about its relation to art, justice, and order.” Jonathan Franzen, “Mr. Difficult,” New Yorker, 30 Sept. 2002, at 100, 111.

If you do use unusual adverbs, use them sparingly. Some writers display an unfortunate fondness for them, as by using such forms as considerably, corollarily, and the spurious *widely. Cf. -edly.

C. Double Adverbs. Several adverbs not ending in -ly—especially doubtless, fast, ill, much, seldom, thus—have nonword counterparts ending in -ly. Using *doubtlessly, *fastly, etc. is poor style. The terms with the superfluous -ly reveal an ignorance of idiom.

D. Adverbs vs. Adjectives. See adjectives (E).

adversary, adj.; adversarial. Adversary, which can act as both noun and adjective, appears in phrases such as adversary relationship and adversary system—e.g.: “Granted, it is the job of an opposing political chairman working in the adversary system of American politics to try to make the worst case against the elected leader of the opposition party,” Bill Hall, “The Premature Failure of Gary Locke’s First Year,” Lewiston Morning Trib. (Idaho), 26 Feb. 1997, at A10.

Though it has only recently made its way into dictionaries, adversarial has become fairly common in place of the adjective adversary—e.g.: “Our adversarial, court-based system of collecting child support creates hate and misunderstanding,” Robin Miller, “Day in Court No Solace for Deadbeat Dad,” Baltimore Sun, 10 Mar. 1995, at A13. This shift in usage occurred mostly during the 1980s. Adversarial often connotes animosity <adversarial conferences>, whereas adversary is more neutral and even clinical.

Current ratio (adversarial relationship vs. adversary relationship): 14:1

adverse; averse. To be adverse to something is to be turned in opposition against it <Thailand was adverse to Japan during most of World War II>. The phrase usually refers to things, not people. To be averse to something is to have feelings against it <averse to risk>. The phrase usually describes a person’s attitude. Both words may take the preposition to, but averse also takes from.

Each word is occasionally misused for the other—e.g.:

- “People with chronic liver problems can lead normal lives until an adverse [read averse] reaction to something such as a viral infection or a fatty diet pushes them over the edge into liver failure.” Linda Marsa, “An Artificial Liver May Bridge a Gap,” L.A. Times, 20 Jan. 2003, at F3.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. adverse misused for averse: Stage 2
2. averse misused for adverse: Stage 1

advert; avert. To advert to something is to refer to it, to bring it up in speech or writing, or to turn attention to it. In AmE the word is best reserved for formal contexts, especially legal writing—e.g.:

- “He sometimes adverted to that distinction and thought that it was an obstacle to his being appreciated by English readers such as Ruskin.” Denis Donohue, “Of ‘Song of Myself,’” Hudson Rev., 1 July 2012, at 247 (referring to Walt Whitman).

To avert is to turn away or avoid, or to ward off—e.g.:

- “Clinton said even ‘5 million police officers’ could not avert this kind of tragedy if children are not taught the difference between right and wrong.” “Clinton Cites Need for Role Models,” Chicago Sun-Times, 18 Oct. 1994, at 3.
- “Tuning in on the radio is like listening to the couple in the apartment next to you scream at each other. You just can’t avert your ears.” Bill Torpy, “How Awful Are the Braves? Just Listen,” Atlanta J.-Const., 10 Sept. 2015, at B1.

Occasionally, advert is misused for avert—e.g.:

- “Although five persons were injured, a real tragedy was adverted [read averted] because of the way firefighters and quick-acting neighbors in the area worked together.” Stephen Byrd, “Smoking Blamed in Independence Fire,” Kansas City Star, 20 May 1996, at B1. See malapropisms.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
advert misused for avert: Stage 1

advertise. So spelled. But the erroneous form *advertize occasionally occurs—e.g.: “A GOP consultant . . . was forced to quit Bob Dole’s campaign yesterday after two tabloids reported he advertizes [read advertises] for group sex partners,” Helen Kennedy, “Sex Flap Hits GOPers,” Daily News (N.Y.), 13 Sept. 1996, at 21.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
advertise misspelled *advertize: Stage 1

Current ratio: 222:1

advertisement is chiefly pronounced /ad-var-tiz-mant/ or /ad-var-tiz-mant/ in AmE and /ad-var-tiz-mant/ in BrE.

advice; advise. Advice /ad-vis/ (= counsel that one person gives another) is a noun. Advise /ad-viz/ (= to counsel; try to help by guiding) is a verb. The spellings are sometimes confounded—e.g.: “All the programs take pains to inform you with large disclaimers that
they are no substitute for real medical professionals (good advise [read advice]) and as such cannot be responsible if you use them improperly." Bob Bielk, "Dr. Disc," Asbury Park Press (Neptune, N.J.), 10 June 1997, at D1. See advise.

Language-Change Index

advise misused for advice: Stage 1

Current ratio (good advice vs. *good advise): 278:1

*aadvisory. See advisory.

advise for tell, say, explain, inform, or warn is a composition to be avoided—e.g.:

• "The judge advised [read told or warned] Smith that he would not have the benefit of a skilled attorney who could identify legal issues or problems with the state's evidence." Kathryn Kranholm, "Mother's Plea Fails to Sway Suspect," Hartford Courant, 19 Oct. 1995, at A1.


For examples confounding advise with advice, see advice.

adviser has been the standard spelling since the early 17th century. Advisor is a variant that became common in the 20th century but remains marginally less frequent. Note, however, that the adjectival form is advisory. See -ER (A).

Current ratio (adviser vs. advisor): 1:1:1

advisory; *advisatory. The latter is a NECESSARY VARIANT.

Current ratio: 27,552:1

advocate; *advocator. The latter is a NECESSARY VARIANT.

Current ratio: 1,828:1

AE. In many words, ae is a remnant of the Latin digraph, formerly ligatured (æ), appearing in words of Latin and Greek origin. In many words in which this digraph once appeared, the first vowel has been dropped, esp. in AmE. One sees this tendency at work in (a)eon, (a)estivate, (a)ether, (a)etiology, encyclop(a)edia, et (c)aetera, and f(a)eces. But in some words, the ae- forms are established—for example, aegis, aeolian, aerial, aerobic, aerosol, aerospace, aesthetic, diareesis, paean, and proctor.

Some words in BrE retain digraphs (e.g., anaesthetic and foetus) that AmE has shortened (e.g., anaesthetic and fetus). Note that the preferred AmE forms are aesthetic but anesthetic. A definitive across-the-board statement about -ae- isn't possible—just as it isn't about most other usage matters.

aegis /ee-jis/ (= auspices, sponsorship) was originally a mythological term meaning "protective shield" or "defensive armor." The word is now used exclusively in figurative senses, usually in the phrase under the aegis (not with the aegis)—e.g.: "And they appreciate that for creditors, there are some benefits to having companies either liquidated or reorganized under the aegis of the bankruptcy code." Kim Strosnider, "Involuntary Bankruptcy?" Portland Press Herald, 15 Oct. 1996, at C5. The phrase is often equivalent to under the auspices. See auspices.

Be careful not to confuse aegis with leadership in general—e.g.: "Under Waxman's aegis [read With Waxman directing or With Waxman as director], [Neil Simon's Lost in] Yonkers fails to achieve the razor-sharp pacing and the superb characterizations that marked its Royal Alex engagement a few years ago." John Coulbourn, "Simon's Finest Found with 'Lost in Yonkers,'" Toronto Sun, 6 Feb. 1997, at 56.

The variant spelling *egis is all but defunct.

Current ratio (aegis vs. *egis): 181:1

aeolian; *eolian (= carried, deposited, or affected by the wind) derives from the name of the Greek wind god Αεolus. The word retains its ae digraph in English (decoupled), unlike so many other Greek derivatives that drop the a, such as estuary. Although W11 lists *eolian as the predominant spelling, that form is today less frequent than aeolian in AmE print sources and is little known in BrE. The word is pronounced /ee-oh-lee-on/.

Current ratio: 2:1

*aeon. See eon.

aerie. See eyrie.

Aesop (the Greek fabulist) is pronounced /ee-sop/ or /ee-sap/:—not /ay-sop/.

aesthetic; *esthetic. Although some dictionaries have long recorded *esthetic as the primary form in AmE, the form aesthetic remains much more common in AmE and BrE alike. See AE.

Current ratio (World English): 23:1

*aestivate. See estimate.

aetiology. See etiology.

affect; effect. In ordinary usage, affect is always a verb; it means "to influence; to have an effect on." Effect, as suggested by its use in that definition, is primarily a noun meaning "result" or "consequence." To affect something is to have an effect on it. But as a verb, effect means "to bring about; produce."

Perhaps the most common error with these words is misusing effect for affect—here illustrated plentifully: "Katrina effected [read affected] everyone in the state of Mississippi in some way. . . . As the recovery from Hurricane Katrina began, thousands of effected [read affected] homeowners on the Coast began getting the bad news. . . . Even before the power had been restored in some effected [read affected] areas,
Gulf Coast residents were looking for relief . . . . [T]he Scruggs Katrina Group . . . would be dedicated to representing homeowners affected [read affected] by the storms.” Alan Lange & Tom Dawson, Kings of Tort 96, 97, 98, 100 (2009).

Using affect (= to influence) for effect (= to bring about) is also an old error that looks as if it will be increasingly difficult to stamp out. The mistake is especially common in the phrase to affect change(s)—e.g.:


H.W. Fowler treated only the verb forms of these words, apparently because they didn’t seem susceptible to confusion as nouns. But today even the confusion of nouns is fairly common—e.g.:

• “She doubted the majority flip would have a huge affect [read effect] on the council.” Rona Kobell, “Republicans Ride Ehrlich Wave,” Baltimore Sun, 6 Nov. 2002, at B8.


Likewise, effect is sometimes misused for affect. See affect (b). Cf. impact.

Affect may also mean “to pretend, feign, or assume (a characteristic) artificially”—e.g.: “One wonders at her choice to have all the actors affect Russian accents.” Marshall Fine, “K-19,” J. News (Westchester Co., N.Y.), 18 July 2002, at G5.

Although affect is almost always a verb, it does have a rare, somewhat vague noun sense in the fields of psychology and psychiatry: “In general, [affect] is characterized as a state brought about by actions almost wholly devoid of intentional control in accordance with moral and objective viewpoints. The term is also found in the literature as practically synonymous with ‘emotion’ in certain senses.” 1 Encyclopedia of Psychology 28 (H.J. Eysenck et al. eds., 1972). Other definitions seem no clearer. One text defines affect as “the feeling-tone accompaniment of an idea or mental representation.” Leland E. Hinsie & Robert Jean Campbell, Psychiatric Dictionary 18 (4th ed. 1970). The term certainly doesn’t belong outside highly specialized contexts. And it seems questionable whether it justifiably belongs within them.

**Language-Change Index**

1. affect misused for effect, n. & vb.: Stage 1
   Current ratio (the bad effects vs. *the bad affects): 1,001:1
2. effect misused for affect, vb.: Stage 2
   Current ratio (affect our lives vs. *effect our lives): 55:1

**affectable.** So spelled—not *affectible. See -ABLE (A). Current ratio: 6:1

**affectation.** See affection.

**affected, adj.; affective; affectational; affectionate.** Affected, adj., = artificially assumed; pretended <a highly affected accent>. Affective = emotional <bipolar affective disorder>. Affectational = pertaining to affection <affectational displays>. Affectionate = loving, fond <affectation children>.

Just as affect is sometimes misused for effect, so affective sometimes wrongly displaces effective—e.g.: “Physicians are also finding some non-opiate medications used to treat disease are affective [read effective] in controlling pain, Lingam said.” Candace L. Preston, “Doctors Offer Balm of Nepenthe,” Bus. First (Columbus), 27 June 1997, at 15. See affect.

**Language-Change Index**

**affectionate.** Used for affective.

**affidavit** (= a voluntary declaration of facts written down and sworn to by the declarant before an officer authorized to administer oaths) sometimes appears in the redundancy *sworn affidavit*—e.g.:

• “[The] defendant gave no evidence whatsoever, but put in a sworn affidavit [read an affidavit], pleading in extenuation of her offence the treacherous conduct of the Fitzgeralds.” Daphne du Maurier, Mary Anne: A Novel 333 (1972).


**affiliated.** So formed—not *affiliated. See -ABLE (D) & -ATABLE.

**affined; affianced.** Affined = closely related; connected. Affianced = engaged, betrothed.

**affirm (= [1] to declare emphatically, or [2] [of an appellate court] to uphold a lower court’s judgment) is sometimes misused for vindicate (= to justify by outcome): “The results tonight affirmed [read vindicated] Mr. McCain’s decision to skip the Iowa caucuses.” Richard L. Berke, “McCain Romps in First Primary,” N.Y. Times, 2 Feb. 2000, at A1. Although one definition of affirm is “to validate or confirm,” here vindicated or even justified would have been a better choice.
affirmative, in the negative. These phrases have been criticized as jargonic and pompous. (See, e.g., Quiller-Couch's statement quoted under JARGON.) They appear frequently in legal and pseudolegal writing. They can usually be improved—e.g.:  
• “All the other questions were answered in the affirmative [read yes], including a query on whether the evidence showed that Mr. Simpson had acted with malice.” Paul Pringle, “Jury Holds Simpson Liable in Slayings,” Dallas Morning News, 5 Feb. 1997, at A1.  
• “But the council did vote in the affirmative on [read grant] a request from the Contributory Retirement Board to accept a state law that indemnifies board members if civil actions are brought against them.” David T. Turcotte, “Plan to Buy Goose Dog Advances in Gardner,” Telegram & Gaz. (Worcester), 4 Mar. 1997, at B4.  
• “The more I thought about these questions, the more it seemed to me that they had to be answered in the negative [read no].” Jonathan Schell, “American Democracy Defines Itself,” Newsday (N.Y.), 1 Dec. 1996, at A34.  

Cf. yes & no.  
afflatus; *afflattion; *inflatus. For the sense “inspiration” or “supernatural impulse,” afflatus is the standard—though rare—term. E.g.: “Richard Brookhiser, the author and editor, reminded us that it is generally alien to Dole’s temperament to act as the advocate, charged with disseminating his afflatus—he is more a technician.” William F. Buckley, “Are the Conservatives Mutinous?” Buffalo News, 10 Apr. 1996, at B3.  
*Afflattion and *inflatus are needless variants.  
The plural of afflatus is afflatuses, not *afflati. See hypercorrection (A) & plurals (B).  

afflict. See inflict.  
affluence; affluent. These words are preferably accented on the first syllable (/af-loo-әn[t]s/, /af-loo-әnt/), not the second (/ә-floo-әn[t]s/, /ә-floo-әnt/). See pronunciation (B).  
afford. See accord (A).  
affront. See effrontery (A).  
*affrontery. See effrontery (B).  

Afghan; Afghani. A person from Afghanistan is an Afghan. A thing from Afghanistan is an Afghan thing. It’s a common error to make the noun or adjective Afghani, which correctly refers only to the basic monetary unit of the country and is not capitalized—e.g.:  

See denizen labels.  
Afghan is also (1) an alternative term for the Pashto language, (2) a short form of Afghan hound, and (3) (not capitalized) a crocheted or knitted blanket or shawl.  

Language-Change Index  
Afghani misused for Afghan: Stage 2  
aficnado is often misspelled *afficnado—e.g.:  
• “You will be shocked at the wealth of information in those tomes if you are not already an almanac aficionado [read aficionado].” David Hass, Is Your Life Out of Whack? 40 (2002).  

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aficnado misspelled *afficionado: Stage 1  
Current ratio: 39:1  
à fond; au fond. These gallicisms have different meanings. While à fond means “to the bottom,” au fond means “at bottom.” The terms also carry different figurative senses: à fond (/ә-fond/) means “fully, thoroughly” <she knows the subject of mineralogy à fond>; au fond (/ә-oh-fond/) means “basically, fundamentally” <every good proofreader is, au fond, attentive to detail>. You’re surely better off sticking to English phrases.  
a fortiori (/ә-fәr-tiәr-y/) or /әy for-shee-or-y/, a term most commonly used in logic and argumentation, is an adverb meaning “by even greater force of logic; so much the more.” The phrase is sometimes effective, but only if the intended readers are sure to get it—e.g.:  
• “Federal judges already have pointed out that the constitutional right to abortion, that is, to destroy a life, a fortiori implies a right to assisted suicide, the right to destroy one’s own life.” Leon J. Podles, “The ’Big Tent’ Case Against Abortion,” Wash. Times, 22 Apr. 1996, at 28. (The argument is by greater force of logic, according to this writer, because if a person can take another life, surely one can take one’s own.)  
• “Indeed, human bloodshed even by an animal must be avenged, and, a fortiori, bloodshed by a man’s own
brother—a clear reference to Cain and Abel,” Leon R. Kass, “A Genealogy of Justice,” Commentary, July 1996, at 44. (The argument is by greater force of logic because human bloodshed by a brother is more reprehensible.)

The phrase is used illogically when the proposition following a fortiori is no stronger than the one preceding it—e.g.:

• “The argument for ‘mixing’ the Jewish studies program at Queens College, of course, applies a fortiori to many other studies programs that have sprung up in recent years,” “PC Absurdity at Queens,” Times Union (Albany), 19 July 1996, at A14. (Why is the argument even stronger for non-Jewish programs? Because the sentence is reasoning from the particular to the general, a proficient editor would probably substitute equally for a fortiori.)


Writers sometimes use a fortiori as an adjective, a usage to be resisted—e.g.; “Clearly, if laws depend so heavily on public acquiescence, the case of conventions is an a fortiori [read even more compelling] one.” P.S. Atiyah, Law and Modern Society 59 (1983).

Afrikaner; *Afrikaanser; *Afrikaander; Africander; *Afrikaander. These terms, frankly, are a mess. But let’s sort through them. The first is the standard term for a South African of European, especially Dutch, descent. The second and third are variants of that word: *Afrikaanser reflects the spelling of the language Afrikaans, just as the end of *Afrikaander (the predominant form until World War II) reflects the end of Hollander. The word Africander, meanwhile, denotes a breed of tall, red, humpbacked cattle prominent in South Africa; but it is also an obsolescent term for a breed of tall, red, humpbacked cattle prominent in South Africa; but it is also an obsolescent term for Afrikaner, and Afrikaaner is an acceptable variant of Africander. *Afrikaander is a variant spelling of the name of the cattle breed. All clear now? See denizen labels. Africander is pronounced /af-ri-kah-nar/; Africander and *Afrikaander are pronounced /af-ri-kan-dar/.

aftereffect. One word.

*after having [+ past participle]. This construction is ordinarily incorrect for after [+ present participle]. That is, although either having gone on for ten years or after going on for ten years makes sense, coupling after with having [+ past participle] makes a redundancy—e.g.:


• “The nearest [precedent] is to be found in the sad tale of Queen Caroline, the estranged consort of George IV, who died at Hammersmith in 1821, three weeks after having been [read after being] excluded from the Coronation in Westminster Abbey.” Kenneth Rose, “Precedent, Protocol and the Stately Ceremonial of Death,” Sunday Telegraph, 7 Sept. 1997, at 29. (On the ambiguous who in that sentence, see remote relatives (A)).

• “Religion was the topic that finally got the teenager talking . . . while he was being interrogated by the Montreal police and RCMP after having robbed [read after robbing] a convenience store in Lachine earlier that month.” Paul Cherry, “Debating Religion Got Teen Talking During Interrogation,” Montreal Gaz., 10 Sept. 2015, at A2.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*after having been for after being: Stage 3 Current ratio (after being vs. *after having been): 6:1

afterward; afterword. Afterward (= later) is preferred over afterwards by American editors, though in popular usage the two forms are used interchangeably. Afterword is a noun meaning “epilogue.” Cf. foreword.

For more on afterward(s), see directional words (A).

again, like against, is preferably pronounced in AmE with an /e/ in the second syllable—hence /ә-gen/ and /ә-genst/. The pronunciations /ә-ɡayn/ and /ә-ɡaynst/ are chiefly BrE variants—though DARE records that these pronunciations may be found in AmE in Atlantic States, adding that they “may be considered affected” (1 DARE at 19). The pronunciations /ә-ɡin/ and /ә-ɡinst/ are frequent among less educated speakers (ibid.).

agape. There are two words so spelled, with unrelated senses, different pronunciations, and even different syllabification. As a noun, agape (/ә-gayp/) comes from a Greek word for “brotherly love” and denotes (1) “spiritual love in contrast to earthly or sensual love,” or (2) “a love feast.” As an adverb, agape (/ә-ɡayp/) means “with mouth wide open, esp. in awe, surprise, or fear.”

aged. A Pronunciation. As an adjective, the word may be either one syllable (/әjید/) <aged cheese> or two (/ә-ydad/) <an aged mentor>, depending on its sense. In the first of those uses, the word means “having been allowed to age”; in the second, it means “elderly.” As an attributive noun similar to elderly <the sick, the weak, and the aged>, the word has two syllables (/ә-yjad/).

B. Used Adverbially in BrE. British publications have adopted a shorthand adverbial used of aged, found most commonly in obituaries. Essentially, BrE uses aged where AmE would use the phrase at the age of—e.g.:


• “Professor John Lawlor, scholar of medieval English, died on May 31 aged 81.” “Professor John Lawlor” (obit.), Times (London), 7 July 1999, at 23.

• “James Farmer, who has died aged 79, was one of America’s four leading civil rights leaders during the 1960s.” “James Farmer” (obit.), Guardian, 13 July 1999, at 20.
The word remains jargon and should be voted down.

Even Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. nodded once, using aggravate for irritate in one of his letters to Sir Frederick Pollock in 1895: "Our two countries aggravate each other from time to time." 1 Holmes–Pollock Letters 66 (1941). The lapse is common in modern writing—e.g.: "It has aggravated [read irritated] me when I have seen billboards that contained misspelled words, punctuation errors and other things that are fundamental to the English language." Letter of Shael Morgan, "Newspaper Critic Should Watch TV," Fla. Today, 31 Jan. 1998, at A12.

In some contexts, it's genuinely difficult to tell whether the word aggravating is an adjective or a present participle—e.g.: "The City of Washington is notorious for aggravating allergies, and Mr. Clinton said he expected his to be more severe there than in Arkansas." Lawrence K. Altman, "Clinton, in Detailed Interview, Calls His Health 'Very Good,'" N.Y. Times, 14 Oct. 1996, at A1, A14. The second half of that compound sentence suggests that the writer is using aggravating correctly. But taken alone, the phrase in the first half of the sentence (Washington is notorious for aggravating allergies) could refer to either (1) making allergies worse (preferred), or (2) allergies that are irritating or frustrating.

The confusion also occurs between the noun forms—e.g.: • "Washington Coach Jim Lambright's insistence that his Huskies deserve to go to the Cotton Bowl instead of Oregon, and that the Ducks are overrated and lucky, has been met with bemusement and aggravation [read irritation] in Eugene." "Cotton Bowl Flap," Austin Am.-Statesman, 16 Nov. 1995, at C4.

"Rush Limbaugh, still the industry giant, has an extra tone of aggravation [read irritation] as he denounces the unwieldy poll leads of 'the Schlickmeister' and 'noted hetero fun-seeker,' President Clinton." Francis X. Clines, "Cool to Dole's Campaigning, Talk Radio Tries to Start Fire," N.Y. Times, 25 Sept. 1996, at A12.

Often when one word is commonly misused for a second word, part of the blame can go to a third word that sounds like the first but means something close to the second. Perhaps exasperate contributes to the misuse of aggravate (which sounds a bit like exasperate) in the sense of irritate (which is close in meaning to exasperate). Also, when aggravate is used in this sense, it often implies something more intense than merely irritate. It is closer in meaning to exasperate.

*agendize, an ugly bureaucratic neologism meaning "to put on an agenda," originated in the late 1980s and has spread—e.g.: "If Mr. Eliot did not make a decision on his own," he [Robert Bacon] said. "We made an error and did not agendize that item." Craig Quintana, "West Covina Renewal Deals to Get Closer Look," L.A. Times, 28 Apr. 1988, San Gabriel Valley §, at 1.


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aggregable; aggregatable. The first has long been the standard adjective. But in the mid-1990s, aggregatable overtook its shorter sibling in frequency of use—and it shows no signs of declining. The word became popular in Internet terminology, especially in the phrase aggregatable global unicast address. See -able (d) & -atable.

aggregate, n.; aggregation. Both may mean “a mass of discrete things or individuals taken as a whole,”aggregate being the more usual term. Aggregate /əg-rə-git/ stresses the notion “taken as a whole” (as in the phrase in the aggregate), and aggregation /əg-rə-gə-shən/ is more nearly “a mass of discrete things.” For “the act of aggregating,” only aggregation will suffice.

aggregate, vb. A. Sense. Aggregate (/əg-rə-gayt/) = to bring together a mass of discrete things or individuals into a whole. The verb is sometimes misused for total in reference to sums—e.g.: “Trade between China and Taiwan has grown steadily in the past decade, aggregating [read totaling] almost $21 billion.” V.H. Krulek, “China’s Weapon Against Taiwan,” San Diego Union-Trib., 9 Mar. 1996, at B8.

B. Aggregate together. This phrase is redundant—e.g.: “Terrestrial dust is mostly tiny fragments abraded from larger things; some of it may be even smaller things aggregating together [read aggregating or clumping together] to form motes of dust.” C. Claiborne Ray, “Q&A,” N.Y. Times, 13 Feb. 1996, at C5.

aggregation. See aggregate, n.

aggress. See BACK-FORMATIONS.

agreement. See agree, n.

*agreement. See grievance.

agilely, adv., is occasionally misspelled *agiley—e.g.: “But it’s pointless to bemoan the status quo; what we need to do is work as agiley [read agilely] and cannily as we can with the situation as given to get across the many exciting and provocative and challenging works that continue to be written—and widely read.” “Will Publishing Survive?” L.A. Times, 25 Feb. 2001, Book Rev. §, at 6. Cf. futilely & solely. See ADVERBS (b).

agilely. Stage I

aging; ageism. Aging is the standard spelling for the present participle for age, vb. Ageing is a chiefly BrE variant. (See MUTE E.) Yet ageism (= discriminatory feelings or practices toward a particular age group, esp. the elderly) has become standard probably because, as a fairly recent coinage (1969), it more readily suggests its meaning (and pronunciation) than *agism.

agitate. So formed—not *agitatable. See -ABLE (D) & -ATABLE.

agnostic. See atheist.

*agogue. This suffix derives from the Greek word meaning “to lead; drive.” Traditionalists prefer retaining the -ue—hence demagogue (lit., “a leader of people”) and pedagogue (lit., “a leader of children”). Among other advantages, these spellings prevent any possible confusion with the adjective and adverb agog (= intensely excited) <all agog over the Christ- mas presents>.

William Safire has predicted the demise of -ue forms: “Note the lack of a u in . . . [what] most of us would until recently spell [read have spelled] as demagoguing. But we live in a non-U world; just as catalogue and dialogue have been dropping their ue endings, so too will demagogue soon enough be spelled demagog, with its gerund demagoging.” William Safire, “On Language,” N.Y. Times, 21 May 2000, § 6, at 28, 30. For now, the traditionalist will continue to use the -ue forms—and their disappearance, if Safire is right, will be gradual enough that no one will get all agog over it. Cf. demagogue.

agree. A. Preposition with. Agree with means “to be in accord with (another)” ; agree to means “to acquiesce in (usu. the performance or specifications of something).” One agrees with someone on or about a certain settlement <I agree with you about the color>. Agree on refers to the subject of the agreement <we agree on the color>.

B. Transitive or Intransitive. In BrE, agree is coming to be used as a transitive verb <they agreed the change> where AmE would make it intransitive <they agreed to the change>. The usage may appear to be a typo when you first see it, but notice that it appears in the title as well as the first line of this: “The German cabinet yesterday agreed sweeping changes to unemployment benefits, aimed at making savings of DM17bn ($11bn) by 2000.” Judy Dempsey, “Bonn Agrees Heavy Cut in Jobless Costs,” Fin. Times, 13 June 1996, at 2.

agreement, Grammatical. See CONCORD & SUBJECT–VERB AGREEMENT.

agriculturist; agriculturalist. The shorter form (agriculturist) has traditionally been considered preferable, but the longer form is now nearly as common in AmE. Actually, farmer is even better if it applies.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 2:1

ague (= a fever accompanied by chills) is pronounced /aj-gyoo/.

ahold. This noun is an American CASUALISM equivalent to hold. It ordinarily follows the verb get. Though omitted from most British dictionaries, it appears in most American dictionaries and surfaces fairly often in informal contexts—e.g.:

• “Brand, the Clay juvenile officer, said she isn’t surprised the kids were able to get ahold of fireworks.” Julianna Gittler & Cammi Clark, “Illegal, Dangerous, and Always Around,” Post-Standard (Syracuse), 2 July 1998, at 13.

• “It’s not as easy to get ahold of Hennepin County Sheriff Pat McGowan as recent news has led us to believe.” Doug Grow, “Would Others Get Grams Treatment?” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 13 Dec. 1999, at B2.

• “He got ahold of Theodore while clenching his teeth and saying, ‘We’ll see about this,’ forcing the boy into his shoes.” Jan Faull, “Parenting,” Seattle Times, 3 Feb. 2001, at F1.
Even so, *get hold of* is much more frequent than *get ahold of* in AmE and BrE alike.

The dialectal variant *aholt* is quite uncommon even in recorded speech, and is much more provincial-sounding—e.g.: “‘The Lord’s going to get aholt of people,’ she smiles.” Bo Emerson, “Joyful Noise,” Atlanta J.-Const., 29 June 1997, Dixie Living §, at 1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *ahold for hold*: Stage 2
   - Current ratio (*get hold vs. get ahold*): 18:1
   - *ahold for hold*: Stage 1
   - Current ratio (*ahold vs. *aholt*): 50:1

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

**Airlinese**

The jargon of the airline business is notable in several ways. First, it has an odd vocabulary, in which *equipment* refers to the airplane you wish you were boarding (“The flight has been delayed because we don’t have any equipment—it’s in Pittsburgh”). Second, it relies heavily on *doublespeak*, with a heavy dose of *zombie nouns*: *seat cushions may be used as flotation devices* means “if we crash in water, use your seat cushion to float”; *in the event of a loss in cabin pressure* means “if we lose cabin pressure so that no one can breathe”; *please use the trash dispenser for anything other than bathroom tissue* means “don’t try to flush paper towels or anything other than bathroom tissue down the commode.” (For still another example, see *only*(b)).

Among other recent coinages are these:

- enplane: “PFCs are $1 to $3 fees that airports can tack on to the ticket price paid by each enplaned passenger, in order to finance the expansion of airfields and terminals.” Jon McKenna, “Trends in the Region,” Bond Buyer, 5 Sept. 1996, at 29.
- enplanement: “Though it recorded more than 600,000 enplanements in the mid-’70s, the state is now struggling to board about 350,000 passengers a year.” Rick Steelhammer, “Airport Group Seeking Increased Federal Role,” Charleston Gaz., 14 Aug. 1996, at C1.
- interline: “Southwest does not interline with other carriers, in part because it is simply unwilling to spend the extra time and money on the ground, waiting to board...
passengers from connecting flights that are often delayed." Kevin Freiberg & Jackie Freiberg, Nuts! Southwest Airlines’ Crazy Recipe for Business and Personal Success 52 (1996).

- **load factor:** "Instead of raising fares when load factors (ratio of passenger capacity to tickets sold) are up, Southwest increases the number of flights and expands the market." Ibid. at 53.

- **pushback:** "[The] ramp agent unhooks the pushback from the aircraft and the plane taxis toward the runway." Ibid. at 59.

Although these neologisms serve a genuine purpose, airlines otherwise typifies some of the worst qualities of modern AmE (e.g., "We’ll be on the ground momentarily"—see momentarily). And it has a debilitating effect because so many people are so frequently exposed to it. Small wonder that some of them feel tempted to dash for an emergency exit. See obscurity.

**airworthy**, used in reference to aircraft, means “fit for flying.” The word, surprisingly enough first used in 1829, was analogized from seaworthy. See airlinese & seaworthy.

**ait** (BrE for “a small island”) is predominantly so spelled—not *cyot*, a variant that was never common. Current ratio: 7:1

*aitiology. See etiology.

**a la; à la.** This gallicism, meaning "in the manner or style of," was borrowed into English in the late 16th century. It appears in such well-known phrases as à la carte (= according to the menu's individual pricing for an item) and à la mode (= [1] fashionable, stylish, or [2] topped with ice cream). The phrase often serves a comparative function <he's bound to be a record-breaking baseball player a la Hank Aaron> <a recipe à la mode (= [1] fashionable, stylish, or [2] topped with ice cream)>. Generally, it is written without the diacritical mark and with -á-. See pronunciation labels.

**Alabamian; ✳Alabaman.** The first, pronounced /al-a-bәm/, is sometimes mispronounced with an intrusive -l-, as if it were /al-blәm/. See pronunciation (B), (C).

**Albuquerque**; Alburquerque. The accepted spelling of the city in New Mexico is Albuquerque. But the original spelling—used in the title of Rudolfo Anaya’s novel by that name (published in 1992)—was Alburquerque. The place name is frequently misspelled * Albuquerque or *Albuquerque. Current ratio (Albuquerque vs. Alburquerque vs. *Albuquerque vs. *Albuquerque): 1,149:25:1:1

**Albuquerquean; *Albuquerquean.** The first is standard; the second is an uncommon variant. See denizen labels.

**aleatory; fortuitous; stochastic.** These words have similar but distinct meanings. The first two are especially close, meaning "depending wholly on chance." Aleatory derives from the Latin word for the game of dice: *alea jacta est (= the die is cast). Fortuitous, meanwhile, carries the suggestion of an accident, usually but not always a happy one. (See fortuitous.) As it happens, aleatory usually refers to present descriptions or future events <the aleatory process of flipping a coin seems much too capricious for settling...
a dispute>, fortuitous to past events <how fortuitous that we met here, and on this day>. Stochastic, the most rarefied of these words, means "random"; it is fairly common in the writing of economic analysts and statisticians.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson. See Tennyson.

algae; *algee. The plural word for the mostly aquatic, plantlike organisms capable of photosynthesis is algae (/alj/). No other spelling has been recorded in dictionaries, yet the phonetic misspelling *algee occasionally and surprisingly appears in edited scholarship—e.g.: "Typha latifolia, Typha augustinifolia, Phragmites australis, Scirpus sp., and different algee [read algae] were the prevalent plant species in the wetland." V.S.T. Cininelli, "Biohydrometallurgy," in 11 Process Metallurgy Series 583 (2001).

The (rare) singular alga is pronounced /əl-gə/.

alias is both adverb (= otherwise [called or named]), as an elliptical form of alias dictus, and noun (= an assumed name), today usually the latter. Alias refers only to names and should not be used synonymously with guise (= assumed appearance, pretense). See pseudonym.

alibi. A. As a Noun for excuse. Strictly speaking, the words are not synonymous, although the confusion of their meanings is understandable. Alibi is a specific legal term referring to the defense of having been at a place other than the scene of a crime. By slipshod extension it came to be used (beginning in the 1920s) for an excuse or explanation for misconduct, usually one that shifts blame to someone else. This broader meaning has its defenders—e.g.: “Cynicism and the common man’s distrust of the law have tinged alibi with a suggestion of improbability and even of dishonesty. Purists insist that it should be restricted to its legal meaning, and those who wish to be formally correct will so restrict it. In so doing, however, they will lose the connotation of cunning and dishonesty which distinguishes it from excuse.” DCAU at 24. Their point is well taken, but alibi to denote a cunning excuse remains at best a casualism.

Language-Change Index alibi as a verb: Stage 3

alient, adj., takes the preposition to or, less commonly, from. For purposes of differentiation, H.W. Fowler noted, “there is perhaps a slight preference for from where mere difference or separation is meant (We are entangling ourselves in matters alien from our subject), and for to when repugnance is suggested (cruelty is alien to his nature)” (FMEU1 at 15).

Current ratio (alien to vs. alien from): 13:1

alienable (= transferable to another) is so formed—not *alienatable. See -able (d) & -atabl.

aliquot, adj.; aliquant, adj. Aliquot = contained in a larger whole an exact number of times <4 is an aliquot part of 16>. Aliquant = contained in a larger number or quantity but not an exact number of times <4 is an aliquant part of 15>.

all. A. All (of). The better construction is to omit of and write, when possible, “All the attempts failed.” Since the beginnings of Modern English, the phrasing all the (+ plural noun) has vastly predominated over all of (+ plural noun): the of-variant was essentially nonexistent till the turn of the 20th century, and even now it is not nearly as frequent in print sources, whether in AmE or BrE. E.g.: “With the end to fighting, the group was disbanded, and all its members were ordered to burn their identity papers and go into hiding.” P.H. Ferguson, “End of War Gave Life to Would-Be Kamikazes,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 3 Sept. 1995, at A20. Although all of is more common in AmE than in BrE, it should generally be avoided in all formal writing. See of (A).

In two circumstances, though, all of is the better choice. The first occurs when a pronoun follows all of them, unless the pronoun is serving as an
adjective, either possessive <all my belongings> or demonstrative <all that jazz>. The second occurs when a possessive noun follows—e.g.: ‘Beyond all of Jones’ ego-stroking maneuvers and incessant need for attention, this is what he is talking about.” Paul Daugherty, “Cowboys Owner Smarter than Average Bear,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 8 Sept. 1995, at B1.

Current ratio (all the vs. all of the): 8:1

**B. With Negatives.** Not all—as opposed to *all . . . not—is usually the appropriate sequence in negative constructions. E.g.:• ‘All literary sentences are not elaborate.” George P. Krapp, The Knowledge of English 72 (1927). (A possible revision: Not all literary sentences are elaborate.)

• “All people do not possess Life’s intuitive perception that the word is so ‘monstrous’ that even to list it as a dialect variation is to merit scorn.” Bergen Evans, “But What’s a Dictionary For?” in The Ways of Language 77, 81 (Raymond J. Pflug ed., 1967). (A possible revision: Not all people possess Life’s intuitive perception . . .

• “Students rightfully protest; and while all of their complaints do not [read not all their complaints] have merit, they too should be heard.” William O. Douglas, Points of Rebellion 14 (1970).

• “When he screened Foster’s office files two days after his death, Nussbaum decided that all of the papers were not relevant to the suicide inquiry.” “Cops: White House Aide Foiled Probe,” Chicago Trib., 4 Feb. 1994, at N14. (Two possible revisions to remedy the ambiguity of the original: Nussbaum decided that none of the papers were relevant./ Nussbaum decided that some of the papers were not relevant.)

• “Since all teachers do not [read not all teachers] teach the FSA subjects, other tests, like end-of-course exams, must be used.” Sue Legg, “Testing—When Is Enough, Enough?,” Gainesville Sun, 6 Sept. 2015. Opinion §.


**C. As Subject.** All, as subject, may take either a singular or a plural verb. When a plural noun is implied after all, the verb should be plural <all were present>—e.g.: “Until this morning, all were official residents of the three Dadaab refugee camps near the Kenya–Somalia border.” David Finkel, “African Refugees Start Journey to Homes in Distant U.S.,” Miami Herald, 25 Aug. 2002, at A16. But when all denotes a collective abstraction (as a mass noun), it should take a singular verb <all is well>—e.g.: “All she wants is people to be touched by the gifts she believes God has given her.” Johanna D. Wilson, “Back Roads,” Sun-News (Myrtle Beach, S.C.), 19 Aug. 2002, at C1. Writers sometimes err, especially when a collective all has a plural complement in the predicate—e.g.: “All she needs are [read is] the open-house listings in the Sunday Real Estate section.” Elliott Rehun, “Checking Out the Scenery in Apt. 3C,” N.Y. Times, 26 May 2001, at A11. The Christmas song “All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth” gets it right.

**D. And any.** All follows a superlative adjective <the best of all>; any follows a comparative adjective <more than any other>. Constructions such as *more than . . . all* are illogical. See best of all & COMPARATIVES AND SUPERLATIVES.

**All-American, n.; All-America, adj.** As the headwords suggest, All-American is predominantly a noun <Jones is an All-American>. In the athletic sense, the preferred adjective has long been All-America <three Nebraska linemen were selected for the All-America team>, though usage is almost equally divided. In the more general sense, however, all-American boy or all-American girl is the only idiomatic phrasing.

Current ratio (All-America team vs. All-American team): 1:1

Current ratio (all-American kid vs. *all-America kid*): [none possible because the latter phrasing does not appear]

all-around, adj.; all-round. The first is the standard AmE form, the second the BrE form. In fact, though, all-round predominated in AmE till about 1950, when the slightly longer form overtook it in frequency of use. In both varieties of English, the other form is a variant. When Americans use all-round, they have traditionally felt the need to show the elision of a with an apostrophe: “The apostrophe is needed to indicate that the word is a shortening of ‘around,’ not the adjective ‘round.’ An all round man” would mean one who is completely curved, of globular construction.” Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work 216 (1940). See around.

*allegator.* See alleger.

allege; contend. To allege is to formally state a matter of fact as being true or provable, without yet having proved it. The word once denoted stating under oath, but this meaning no longer applies. To contend is to strive against—or, in the advocate’s sense, to state one’s position in a polemical way.

Allege should not be used as a synonym of assert, maintain, declare, or claim. Allege has peculiarly accusatory connotations. One need not allege only the commission of crimes; but certainly the acts alleged must concern bad conduct or negligence. Of course, journalists commonly use the word when speaking about things that a suspect is thought to have done <the witnesses alleged that he stole the car from the Joneses’ garage>—and they do it to avoid legal trouble.

alleged, adj. If the thing that is alleged has already been verified, then alleged is the wrong word. So the word is inappropriate when describing something that is known to have occurred. If the police believe that some particular person has committed a crime, that person is a genuine suspect, not an alleged one—e.g.: “The story goes that Pierce had a verbal beef a year ago with one of the three alleged suspects [read suspects], and, by chance, they crossed paths again.” Will McDonough, “Cops and Players II,” Boston Globe, 30 Sept. 2000, at G1.
Alliteration is pronounced with two syllables (/a-lej/id/), not three.

**allegedly** (/a-lej/id-lee/) does not mean “in an alleged manner,” as it would if the adverb had been formed as English adverbs generally are. Wilson Follett considered adverbs like this one ugly and unjustified—especially reported (MAU at 279). Yet allegedly is a convenient space- and time-saver for it is alleged that according to the allegations. Though not logically formed, allegedly is well established and, if used in moderation, unobjectionable. See -edly. Cf. shamefacedly.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

**allegedly:** Stage 5

alleger; *allegator.* The latter is a miserable excuse for a needless variant.


Current ratio: 3:1

**allergen-friendly.** See -friendly.

**allievable.** So formed—not *allieviable.* See -able (d) & -atable.

**Alliteration. A. Pleasant Examples.** How language affects the ear should be a critical concern of every writer. Writers frequently harness sounds for any of several effects. When they repeat sounds in nearby words, the result is called alliteration (which has two subsets: *assonance* for vowels <reverie in poetry>, *consonance* for consonants <put pen to paper>). Sometimes alliteration reinforces sarcasm, as when Vice President Spiro Agnew referred to the *nattering nabobs of negativity* or when Fred Rodell, a Yale professor, referred to due process as *that lovely limpid legalism.* Rodell, in fact, relished sarcastic alliteration, once referring to “the tweeddledum-tweedledee twaddle of much that passes for learned legal argument.” Fred Rodell, *Nine Men* 331 (1955).

At other times alliteration merely creates memorable phrasing—e.g.:

- *“Only active measures, promptly applied, can provide this poor, pusillanimous poop with the proper pep;”* P.G. Wodehouse, *Right Ho, Jeeves* 129 (1934; repr. 1986) (consonance).
- “Music is unique among the fine arts in that it calls for a response not only from the head and the heart but also, frequently, from one or more of the feet.” Frank Muir, *An Irreverent and Thornily Incomplete Social History of Almost Everything* 1 (1976) (consonance).
- “A moment later, the banister gave way, and the pair on the stair were in the air.” Roger Zelazny, *A Night in the Lonesome October* 200 (1993) (assonance).

Sometimes alliteration is risky. If it leads you into sesquipedality just for the sake of sound, it will probably annoy some readers—e.g.: “Lukacs has an eagle eye for the etiology of error and the seductions of false logic.” Ron Rosenbaum, “Springtime for Hitler,” *L.A. Times,* 23 Nov. 1997, at 12. If that writer hadn’t been lured by alliteration, he almost certainly would have used cause rather than etiology there. See *etiology.*

B. Unpleasant Examples. The unconscious repetition of sounds, especially excessive sibilance (too many /s/ sounds, as in the phrase *especially excessive sibilance*), can easily distract readers: “When used by accident it falls on the ear very disagreeably.” W. Somerset Maugham, “Lucidity, Simplicity, Euphony,” in *The Summing Up* 321, 325 (1938). E.g.: “Everybody with a stake in solving the problem will have to bear their fair share of the costs involved.” Robert Ebel, “Personal View: Soviet Reactors Need a Western Focus,” *Fin. Times,* 13 July 1995, at 11. (A possible revision, which also solves the everybody . . . their problem: Everybody with a stake in solving the problem will have to bear some of the costs.)

The best way to avoid the infelicity of undue alliteration is to read one’s prose aloud when editing. See *sound of prose.*

Yet sometimes unpleasant alliteration isn’t merely a matter of whether it’s conscious or unconscious. That is to say, a writer may use it quite consciously but also quite unpleasantly, through poor literary judgment—e.g.: “The necessarily contextual, contested, and contingent character of substantive liberal principles necessarily prevents them, qua principles, from effectively inhibiting human brutality.” Lief H. Carter, “Law and Politics as Play,” 83 *Chicago-Kent L. Rev.* 1333, 1333 (2008).

*all . . . not. See all (b).*

**allocable.** So formed—not *allocatable.* See -able (d) & -atable.

Current ratio: 45:1

**allocation.** See *elocution.*

**all of.** See all (a).

**all of a sudden.** This is the idiomatic phrase, not *all of the sudden*—e.g.:

- “I wasn’t thinking of anything, but all of a sudden [read all of a sudden] I was no longer tired.” Sam Brumbaugh, *Goodbye, Goodness: A Novel* 108 (2005).

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-ii.)

**Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but . . . **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but . . . **Stage 5:** Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
allow

- “All of the sudden [read All of a sudden] there was a huge flash and explosion.” Ray A. Jones, 110 Questions and Answers on Electrical Safety 4 (2011).
- “She came, saw and conquered, and all of the sudden [read all of a sudden], every second A-list pop star wanted a residency on the strip.” Brendan Kelly, “‘Crazy’ Gamble Pays Off in Vegas,” Edmonton J., 29 Aug. 2015, at D1 (referring to Celine Dion).

Language-Change Index
*all of the sudden for all of a sudden: Stage 1
Current ratio (all of the sudden vs. all of a sudden): 48:1

allow; permit. These words have an important connotative difference. Allow suggests merely the absence of opposition, or refraining from a proscription. Permit, in contrast, suggests affirmative sanction or approval.

all ready. See already.

all right; *alright. *Alright for all right has never been accepted as standard. Gertrude Stein used the shorter form, but that is not much of a recommendation: “The question mark is alright [read all right] when it is all alone.” Gertrude Stein, “Poetry and Grammar” (1935), in Perspectives on Style 44, 48 (Frederick Candelaria ed., 1968). This short version may be gaining a shadowy acceptance—e.g.:

- “They are obviously thoroughly British and so are alright and should be reintroduced if possible.” Richard Ryder, “Hands Off Our Ruddy Ducks,” Independent, 30 June 1995, at 20.
- “There are to be ‘tough new criminal penalties’, including a doubling of the maximum sentence for fraud; alright, everyone can understand that, but a financial crisis SWAT team?” Bronwen Maddox, “Devil in the Detail Weakens President’s Fervour,” Times (London), 10 July 2002, at 14.

Still, the combined version cannot yet be considered good usage—or even colloquially all right.

Language-Change Index
*all right for all right: Stage 2
Current ratio (all right vs. *alright): 8:1

all-round. See all-around.

all that. In negative statements, conditions, and questions, all that frequently means “to the expected degree”—essentially as an equivalent of so very <not all that exciting>. The expression is a CASUALISM dating back to the 17th century. E.g.:

- Negative statement: “Sure, we may smile ruefully at the memories of these past missteps, but they’ll never really be all that funny.” Ken Potts, “Remembering Mistakes Helps You Learn from Them,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 13 Jan. 2001, at 4.
- Condition: “If these bogus graduates are all that smart and computer-savvy, why don’t they design their own phony diplomas instead of paying ‘thousands of dollars’ to someone else?” “Furthermore,” Omaha World-Herald, 28 Dec. 2000, at 12.
- Question: “As dysfunctional as the Los Angeles Lakers seem at the moment, is it really all that strange that notorious malcontent Isaiah Rider would actually sound like the team’s voice of reason?” David Leon Moore, “O’Neal–Bryant Flap Has L.A. Teammates Scratching Heads,” USA Today, 12 Jan. 2001, at C8.

See that (E).

all the; all these. See all (A).

all the time. Margaret Nicholson criticizes this expression when used in a context that doesn’t indicate a definite period (DAEU at 17). Hence she labels the following usage “slang”: “Actors act while they are on stage, but he acts all the time.”

This may have been one of Nicholson’s pet peeves, since no other usage commentator has objected to the phrase. Though slightly informal, all the time in the nonliteral sense is acceptable English.

All the time is more polished phrasing than the unidiomatic *all of the time. See all (A).

all together. See altogether.

all told. One archaic meaning of tell is “to count.” Hence the idiom is all told <all, there were 14 casualties>, which dates from the mid-19th century. Some people write *all told, perhaps because toll can mean “to announce with a bell or other signal.” But this is an error—e.g.:

- “All told [read All told], perhaps half the people eligible to participate will do so.” “Getting Out the Vote,” Columbia (Vancouver, Wash.), 17 Oct. 2002, at C6.
- “In 1999–2000, each of the eight Ivy League colleges received at least 10,000 applications; all told [read all told], the Ivy League colleges received 121,948 applications that year and admitted only 23,532, fewer than one in five.” Christopher Avery, Andrew Fairbanks & Richard Zeckhauser, The Early Admissions Game: Joining the Elite 7 (2003).

Language-Change Index
*all told for all told: Stage 1
Current ratio (all told vs. *all told): 300:1

allude. A. And advert & refer. To allude is to refer to (something) indirectly or by suggestion only. To advert or refer is to bring up directly, advert being the more FORMAL WORD. (See advert.) Allude is misused for refer when the indirect nature of a comment or suggestion is missing—e.g.:

- “The generous wrath which had caused her to allude [read refer] to her betrothed as a pig in human shape had vanished completely.” P.G. Wodehouse, The Return of the Jeeves 37 (1954) (the angry fiancée had just said, “You’re simply a pig in human shape!”).

In the following sentence, the writer creates an OXYMORON because an allusion can’t be explicit: “The images in the grid alluded explicitly to homosexuality
B. And **illude & elude.** To **illude** (a rare verb) is to deceive with an illusion; to **elude** (a common verb) is to avoid or escape. Both words are sometimes misused for **allude**—e.g.:  

- "He later added that 'It's more difficult than just having the money, **illuding** [read **alluding**] to the politics that is played in owning a major professional sports team." Charles L. Griggs, "Black Athletes Lost in Sports Power Struggle," *Jacksonville Free Press*, 12 Mar. 1997, at 5. (For the use of the singular is with politics, see **politics**.)  

The reverse error—**allude for elude**—is somewhat less common. E.g.: "Glenn said Derogatis also was charged with aggravated assault, possession of cocaine and **alluding** [read **eluding**] police." "Law & Order," *Star-Ledger* (Newark), 19 Dec. 2002, Essex §, at 39.

**Language-Change Index**  
1. **illude** misused for **elude**: Stage 1  
   Current ratio (**illude** to vs. **illude to**): 56,182:1  
2. **elude** misused for **allude**: Stage 1  
   Current ratio (**elude** to vs. **elude to**): 513:1  
3. **allude** misused for **stage**: Stage 1  
   Current ratio (**eluded him** vs. (**alluded him**): 254:1

C. For **suggest.** This is an attenuated use of **allude** to be avoided—e.g.: "As Johnson **alluded** [read **suggested**], who among us has no sin?" Letter of Karen M. Piet, "Jesus Forgive Sins of Those Who Repented and Told Them to Sin No More," *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), 3 Sept. 1997, at A40.

**Language-Change Index**  
**allude** misused for suggest: Stage 1

**Allusion.** While an **allusion** is an indirect reference (<literary allusions>, an **illusion** is a deception <optical illusion>). But some writers bungle the two—e.g.:  

- "Full of jokes, literary **illusions** [read **allusions**], fractured Shakespeare and physical comedy; it's a show that appeals to young and old." Nadine Goff, "'Buck Mulligan Has Something for Everyone," *Wis. State J.*, 18 Sept. 1995, at C5.  
- "I try not to be too annoying,' he said, admitting that Councilwoman Ramona Martinez once asked if she could get 'extra credit' for enduring his literary **illusions** [read **allusions**]." Susan Greene, "Stalwart Pursues New Role," *Denver Post*, 9 Apr. 2003, at A19.

For the difference between **illusion** and **delusion**, see **illusion.** See **malapropisms**.

**Language-Change Index**  
**illusion** misused for **allusion**: Stage 1  
Current ratio (**literary allusions** vs. *literary illusions*): 84:1

**B. And reference.** See **allude** (a).

**Allusion.** See **literary allusion**.

**allusive; *allusory.** The latter is a **NEEDLESS VARIANT.** See **elusive**.

Current ratio: 192:1

**al with.** As a noun, the accent is on the first syllable: /әl-/. As a verb, the accent is on the second: /ә-l/.  
**almond** is preferably pronounced /әl-mәnd/—not /әl-mәnd/ or (worse) /әl-mәnd/. The pronunciation /әm-әnd/ is also sometimes heard. See **pronunciation** (b).

**almost.** A. Placement. This word is sometimes misplaced in a sentence—e.g.: "There is almost a childlike simplicity [read an almost childlike simplicity] in their straightforward depictions." Myra Yellin Outwater, "Early American 'Naive' Art a Surprise for Sophisticates," *Morning Call* (Allentown, Pa.), 10 Mar. 1996, at F1. Like only, the word **almost** should be placed immediately before the word it modifies. See **only** (A).

B. **Almost quite**. H.W. Fowler branded this phrasing an "illiteracy," and so it remains today—e.g.:  

- "'They're feeding at the door,' a competing bookseller says jealously, and **almost quite** [read **almost**] literally." Raphael Sagalyn, "Bookstore Wars," *Wash. Post* (Mag.), 11 Mar. 1979, at 28.  
- "Treacle tart and cream was terrific, with enough lemon cutting the syrup to make it feel **almost quite** [read **almost or quite**] health-giving," Fay Maschler, "How to Keep Cool on a Tightrope," *Evening Standard*, 4 July 1995, at 23.  
- "A Density of Souls’ runs straight as a string until the last third, when all hell breaks loose (**almost quite literally**) [delete the entire parenthetical] and Rice's carefully constructed melodrama goes up like a transformer in a hurricane." Kevin Allman, "Grand Guignol 90210." *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 3 Sept. 2000, Travel §, at 6.

Oddly, however, this phrasing wasn't uncommon in the 17th and 18th centuries. It trailed off in the 19th century and was stigmatized in the 20th. See **quite**.

**Language-Change Index**  
**almost quite**: Stage 1

**alms** (= money or food given to the poor) is pronounced with the /әl/ silent: /әhmz/—not /әhlmz/ or /әmz/.

**alone.** See **lone.**
alongside, prep., = at the side of. Hence one car is parked alongside another and logs are stacked alongside one another. It is unnecessary—and poor style—to write *alongside of. See of (A).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*alongside of for alongside: Stage 3
Current ratio (alongside the vs. *alongside of the): 25:1

along with. Like together with, this connective phrase does not affect the grammatical number of the sentence. E.g.: "He admitted that he, along with other board members, are [read is] no longer sure about anything concerning the [controversy]." Elizabeth W. Crowley, "Salem Dispute Drags On," Patriot Ledger (Quincy, Mass.), 7 Aug. 2002, at 1. See SUBJECT–VERB AGREEMENT (B).

When the sense is necessarily plural, use and instead of along with—e.g.: "He along with [read and] his wife, Edith, were the owners of the Snug Club before they sold it in 1997." "Thomas E. McDonald Sr." (obit.), Daily Oklahoman, 8 Aug. 2002, at C8.

a lot (= many) is the standard spelling. *A lot has always been considered nonstandard—e.g.: • "A lot [read A lot] of people have noticed that the two teams playing in the World Series have one very important thing in common." Charles A. Jaffe, "Investors Can Learn a Thing from Baseball," Boston Globe, 22 Oct. 2000, at F10.
• "A lot [read A lot] of kids found out yesterday that the easiest thing to do on ice skates is fall down." Eve Rubenstein, "Skating Stars, Past and Future," S.F. Chron., 22 Nov. 2000, at A27.

Cf. all right.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*a lot for a lot: Stage 2
Current ratio (a lot vs. *a lot): 659:1

aloud; out loud. The latter is colloquial when used in place of the former in expressions such as read aloud. Because of this—and because read aloud is 12 times as common as read out loud in modern print sources—read aloud should be preferred in edited prose. E.g.:
• "McGuffey's fifth and sixth readers had an abundance of the kind of poetry that demands to be read out loud [read aloud], like 'The Raven' by Edgar Allan Poe," Diane Ravitch, "Children's Books," N.Y. Times, 17 May 1987, § 7, at 46.
• "Oprah loves writing that begs to be read out loud [read aloud]." Marilyn Johnson, "Oprah Winfrey: A Life in Books," Life, Sept. 1997, at 44.

al Qaeda is preferably pronounced /al ɡe-dʌ/, a fair Anglophone approximation of the Arabic pronunciation—not /al kay-da/. As one authority says, "When faced with two anglicizations of a foreign name, it is generally better (and more politic) to choose the one closer to the original, [and] al-KY-duh is closer to the Arabic than al-KAY-duh, which probably arose merely because Qae- suggested -KAY- to many speakers." BBBM at 22 (with a full five-paragraph discussion of the issue). See HOBSON-JOBSONISM.

already; all ready. Already has to do with time <finished already>, all ready with preparation <we are all ready>. The terms are occasionally misused—e.g.: "The Bahumbug with lack of tact / Now called attention to the fact, / Which made it feel to Edmund Gravel / He was already [read all ready] to unravel." Edward Gorey, The Headless Bust 4 (1997).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
already misused for all ready: Stage 1

*a right. See all right.

also. This word is a close synonym of too (= as well), but its syntactic flexibility is greater <she was also there> <she also was there> <she was there, also>. Avoid treating the word as if it were a conjunction—e.g.: "The dishes were dirty, also [read and] several of them were broken." This poor use of also creates a RUN-ON SENTENCE.

For more on also, see too (A).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
also as a conjunction: Stage 2

also not. This phrasing, which ordinarily follows a negative statement, is usually inferior to nor—e.g.:
• "Race should also not [read Nor should race] be a matter in law enforcement, prosecution or sentencing, but it is." Letter of Stanley S. White, "Unavoidable Reality," Atlanta J.-Const., 23 Jan. 1997, at 15.
• "He was also not [read Nor was he] told until later, he says, about the allegations of military doctor Maj. Barry Armstrong that one of the Somali men may have been killed execution-style." David Pugliese, "Criminal Probe Delayed, Top Officer Tells Inquiry," Windsor Star, 28 Jan. 1997, at A8.
• "Tosco is also not [read Nor is Tosco] afraid to duke it out with the unions." Arthur Goldgaber, "Tosco's Gusher," Fin. World, 18 Mar. 1997, at 38.

See nor (A).

But when a contraction precedes the phrase and the tone is intentionally conversational, also not seems the more natural wording—e.g.:
• "They're also not as dangerous as other animals around the compound." Chris Vaughn, "Teen Goes Whole Hog for Hobby," Ft. Worth Star-Telegram, 27 Jan. 1997, at 4.

alter; altar. Alter (= to change) is a verb; altar (= the table or structure used for sacramental purposes) is a noun. But writers have sometimes confused the two—e.g.:
• "Civil liberties have been sacrificed on the altar [read alter] of zero tolerance." Jeff A. Schnepper, "Mandated Morality Leads to Legalized Theft," USA Today (Mag.), Mar. 1994, at 35.
• "We are learning that privacy and truth have been sacrificed on the altar [read altar] of greed, power, safety and

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*alter* misused for *altar*; Stage 1

Current ratio (*at the altar* vs. *at the alter*): 46:1

**alterative; alterant.** Each word may act as both noun and adjective. As adjectives, they both mean "causing alteration." As nouns, however, the meanings diverge. An alterant is anything that alters or modifies. Alterative appears in medical contexts—though rarely now by physicians—in reference to a medicine that gradually changes unhealthy bodily conditions into healthy ones.

**alteration.** The traditional view is that this word refers to "a noisy brawl or dispute," not rising to the seriousness of physical violence. For authority limiting the term to the sense "wordy strife," see the *OED*. But since about 1980 in AmE and BrE alike, the word has often denoted some type of scuffling or fighting, especially in police

**JARGON**—e.g.:

- "A 29-year-old drugstore manager who was punched in the chest last month during an alteration has died of his injuries, Suffolk police reported yesterday." Olivia Winslow, "Man Punched in Chest During Store Spat Dies," Newsday (N.Y.), 12 Sept. 1997, at A32.

- "He was involved in a fight with Cincinnati's Bob Wren, who was cut during the alteration." Pete Dougherty, "Kinnear Will Miss One Game," Times Union (Albany), 17 Oct. 1997, at C1.


Some will lament this development as slipshod extension, but the purely nonphysical sense seems beyond recall. The real battle now is to limit alteration to light roughhousing. That is, it's wrong to say that someone is killed during an alteration. But police (and the reporters who interview them) tend to talk this way—e.g.:


- "Samuel Harrell . . . was killed on April 21 during an alteration with several corrections officers." Amanda J. Prucell, "Legal Action Filed for Harrell," Poughkeepsie J., 9 Sept. 2015, at A1.

Cf. accost.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*alteration* referring to physical violence: Stage 3

*alter ego* (lit., "other I") = a second self. Generally, it means "a kindred spirit" or "a constant companion." E.g.: "Stump Connolly is the alter ego of Scott Jacobs, a political reporter turned video producer." Bob Minzesheimer, "’Trail Fever’ and ‘Stump’ Split Vote on How to Pillory Politics," USA Today, 14 Aug. 1997, at D6. The phrase should not be hyphenated (except possibly as a PHRASAL ADJECTIVE).

**alternative; alterative. A. As Nouns.** Alternative is needed far more often than alterative. An alternative is a choice or option—usually one of two choices, but not necessarily. Etymological purists have argued that the word (fr. L. alter "the other of two") should be confined to contexts involving but two choices. Ernest Gowers termed this contention a fetish (FMEU2 at 196), and it has little or no support among some type of scuffling or fighting, especially in police

**stylistic experts or in actual usage. E.g.: "The county has three alternatives on how to meet the region's needs before its treatment plants reach capacity in 2010." "Officials Oppose Plan Expansion," Seattle Times, 26 Aug. 1997, at B2.

Indeed, alternative carries with it two nuances absent from choice. First, alternative may suggest adequacy for some purpose <an alternative to driving>; and second, it may suggest compulsion to choose <the alternatives are liberty and death>.

**Alternate** = (1) something that proceeds by turns with another; or (2) one that substitutes for another.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

three or more alternatives: Stage 5

**B. As Adjectives.** Alternative = providing a choice between two or more things; available in place of another. E.g.: "Herman would not oppose the light without offering an alternative solution, he said," Mary Gail Hare, "Herman Opposes Traffic Signal at Springfield Ave.,” Baltimore Sun, 29 Aug. 1997, at B1.

**Alternate** = (1) coming each after one of the other kind, every second one <the divorced parents had agreed on visits in alternate months>; or (2) substitute <although he didn't make the first team, he was named the first alternate player>.

**Alternate** is often misused for alternative, an understandable mistake given how close sense 2 of alternate is—e.g.: "Patton responded to the Atlanta Preservation Center's proposal for an alternative [read alternative] site for the classroom building." Christina Chekalos, "Building a Better GSU in Six Years,” Atlanta J.-Const., 7 Sept. 1997, at G5.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*alterate* misused for the adjective

**alternative; alterative.** Stage 2

Current ratio (alternative solution vs. *alternate solution*): 10:1
although; though. As conjunctions, the words are virtually interchangeable. The only distinction is that although is more formal and dignified. In print sources from the 16th century to the present day, though has occurred more frequently. Though serves also as an adverb <he stated as much, though>. Cf. *while.

*Altho and *tho are old-fashioned truncated spellings that were at one time very common, but failed to become standard. They should be avoided.

although . . . yet was formerly a common construction. The two words were considered correlative conjunctions—e.g.: ”*Wrote a 6th century Chinese master: ‘Although they dwell in seven jeweled palaces, and have fine objects, smells, tastes, and sensations, yet they do not regard this as pleasure . . . [and] seek only to leave that place.’” Howard Chuaeaoan, “Other Faiths, Other Visions,” Time, 24 Mar. 1997, at 78. Today the construction is seen only in the most formal contexts. Generally, either conjunction will suffice to give the same meaning, but with a more modern tone.

altogether; all together. Altogether = completely; wholly <the charges were altogether unfounded>. All together = at one place or at the same time <the board members were all together at that meeting>.

alum. See alumnius (A).

aluminum; aluminium. Aluminium is the standard spelling in AmE; alumminum is standard in BrE. In the first decade of the 19th century, the metallic element was named alumminum by the English chemist Sir Humphrey Davy. In 1813, aluminium was offered as being more “classical” in sound, since the -ium suffix harmonizes better with the names of other elements such as sodium, potassium, and magnesium. In his 1828 unabridged American dictionary, Noah Webster recorded the word as alumminum; his British counterparts, who admitted the word somewhat later, recorded it as aluminium. The AmE–BrE difference has existed ever since. It became most strongly pronounced beginning about 1900.

Aluminium /ˈɑːljuːmiːnʌm/ is sometimes, in AmE, mispronounced /ˈɔːljuːmɪnʌm/. The BrE word aluminium is pronounced /əˈljuːmiːnəm/ or /əˈljuːmɪnəm/.

alumnus; alumna. A. Plurals: alumni; alumnae; alums; *alumns. Alumni (ˈɔːləmni) refers either to male graduates or to males and females collectively; the singular form, which is masculine, is alumnus. Alumnae (ˈɔːlməni) refers to female graduates and not, traditionally, to mixed groups; the singular is alumna.

A more common mistake than confusing the gender of these words is confusing their number, as by using alumni or alumnae as a singular—e.g.: ”He was an alumni [read alumnus] of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and UCLA.” “Abraham James Kennison” (obit.), News Trib. (Tacoma), 7 Jan. 1998, at B4. See plural (b).

Alum is a clipped form that dodges the gender issue. This slangy casualism appears often in chatty discussions about high-school and college sports—e.g.: 


• “He still has the support of influential alums, but it may be too late.” Dick Weiss, ”Penders on Ropes in Texas,” Daily News (N.Y.), 29 Mar. 1998, at 93.

Alum is a better and more frequent spelling than *alumn—e.g.: 


• “I’ve been doing nothing all day but spouting bullshit: to the press, to trustees, to parents, to alums [read alums].” Joanne Dobson, Quieter than Sleep 136 (1997).

B. *Former alumnus, alumna. Just as a graduate is always a graduate, an alumnus or alumna is ever thus. Yet the strange redundancy *former alumnus is fairly common—e.g.: 

• “Gregory Bellamy, a friend of Sean Taylor’s, speaks at a memorial service at Gulliver Preparatory School for the slain former alumnæ [delete former] and NFL safety.” Shandel Richardson & Joel Marino, ”Rolle: Taylor Was a Target,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 29 Nov. 2007, at C1 (photo caption).


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. alumnus as a singular: Stage 2
Current ratio (an alumnus of vs. an alumni of): 16:1
2. alumnus as a singular: Stage 1
Current ratio (an alumnus of vs. an alumni of): 36:1
3. alumnus as a clipped form: Stage 5
4. *alumn as the spelling for the clipped form: Stage 1
Current ratio (alums vs. *alumns): 160:1
5. *former alumni for alumni: Stage 1
Current ratio (the alumni vs. *the former alumni): 1,715:1

Alzheimer’s (the brain disease) is pronounced /ˈælθərziˈmərzd/ (rhyming with malts in the first syllable) in AmE and /ˈælts-hərzmərzd/ in BrE. With either version, the first syllable ends with an /s/ sound, not a /z/ sound.

a.m.; AM; p.m.; PM. A. Generally. Whether you use small capitals or lowercase, keep your document consistent throughout. The lowercase letters are now more common, and with lowercase the periods are standard. But many editors prefer the look of AM.

These abbreviations stand for the Latin phrases *ante meridiem (”before noon”) and *post meridiem (”after noon”). But some writers, when using the full phrases, mistake meridiem for meridian—e.g.: ”Twelve noon

**B. Redundant Use.** Because am and pm are well understood to designate "morning" and "night" (or "afternoon" or "evening"), it is not necessary to use both designations—e.g.:

- "It was 11:45 a.m. Saturday morning [delete a.m. or morning] in Bangkok, Thailand." M.A.J. McKenna, "Disease Spreads Fear," *Atlanta J.-Const.*, 2 Apr. 2003, at A1.
- "As of 8 p.m. Tuesday night [delete p.m. or night], Fresno recorded 0.16 of an inch." "Cold Weather Returns to Valley for Weeklong Stay," *Fresno Bee*, 2 Apr. 2003, at B5.

**C. And noon; midnight.** Is noon 12 AM or 12 PM? What about midnight?

Logically—at least in theory and leaving aside the complications of time zones—neither is either. Neither one comes before (ante) or after (post) the moment when the sun is on the meridian (meridiem), that imaginary circle in the sky that includes the point directly overhead and both poles. Rather, noon is the moment from which other times are labeled am or pm. To refer to noon as either 12 AM or 12 PM is not just logically and astronomically wrong, but ambiguous as well. The context may clear things up—few people eat lunch at midnight—but to say that lunch will be served at "12 AM" is sloppy writing that reflects sloppy thinking.

Idiom compounds the conundrum because, by convention, midnight is considered the end of the previous day, not the start of the following day. That would seem to recommend 12 PM midnight, but how can 12:00 PM be followed by 12:00:01 AM?

The simple solution is to shun both AM and PM and stick with the unambiguous words noon [registration starts at noon] and midnight [the deadline for filing taxes is April 15 at midnight]. The numeral 12 is superfluous with either word.

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12 AM or 12 PM for noon or midnight: Stage 2

amalgam; amalgamation. Some differentiation is possible. Amalgam, the older term, means "a combination" [the restaurant serves an amalgam of regional cuisines]. Amalgamation means primarily "the act of combining or uniting; consolidation." Snobelen announced the amalgamation of Metro's seven public-school boards into a single board.>


amass, vb. This is traditionally a transitive verb meaning "to accumulate (something) systematically over time" [the investigators amassed evidence against the suspect]. That is, someone amasses something; the things don't simply "amass." Although the OED records two intransitive uses (separated by some 300 years), it also labels those uses obsolete or archaic. Instances such as the following one violate idiom, accumulate being the better word: "Because Mattes lacked health insurance, and the malaria left her both physically exhausted and financially drained, the medical bills that amassed [read accumulated or piled up] during the illness completely wiped out her life savings." Denny Guge, "Clearing Hurdles," *America West Airlines Mag.*, Aug. 1999, at 128.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
amass used in an intransitive sense: Stage 1 amateur. In best usage, an amateur (/ˈɑːmərər/ or /ˈæmərər/) is a hobbyist, one who engages in an activity out of love and enthusiasm rather than for profit. This is still the meaning in phrases such as amateur astronomer and amateur golfer. In some uses it has long had a negative connotation of undeveloped skills <rank amateur> <an amateurish job>.

In recent years, it has come to be used as a synonym for beginner. A good alternative would be neophyte (both usually neutral in connotation) or even tyro (with connotations of a bumbler). Amateur has also become a genre of low-budget pornography (an odd usage, since it apparently involves "paid" amateurs).

The word is sometimes misspelled *amature—e.g.: "Thanks to travel sites, Web cams and the ego of amature [read amateur] photographers, you can get your fill of colorful leaves by letting your fingers do the peeping." Stephanie Schorow, "Net Life," *Boston Herald*, 4 Oct. 2000, at 59.

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amateur misspelled *amature*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 2,250:1

amatory; *amative. See amorous.

ambassador; *ambassador. The first is the preferred spelling. See embassy.

Current ratio: 176:1

ambiance. See ambience.

ambidextrous. While dexterous is preferably spelled with two e's, ambidextrous has only one. Of the OED's nine citations for this word, only one has the two-e spelling; in modern print sources, the ratio is 43 to 1 in favor of ambidextrous. This inconsistency between dexterous and ambidextrous is something of a mystery. Cf. dexterous.

ambience; ambiance. These words denote the atmosphere of a place. Ambience (/ˈɑmˈbiːəns/) is an anglicized form that entered the language in the late
19th century. It's preferable to *ambiance* (/ahm-bee-ahn[t]s/), a Frenchified affectation that, since its proliferation in the mid-20th century, has become a *vogue word*.

In modern print sources, *ambience* is used more than twice as often as *ambiance*. Though the *New York Times* style manual specifies *ambience*, its editors (like all other editors) have occasionally stumbled—e.g.: "Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, *ambiance* [read *ambience*] and service with price taken into consideration." "What Lies Beneath: Serious Mexican Food," *N.Y. Times*, 11 Sept. 2002, at F6.

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*ambiance* for *ambience*: Stage 4

Current ratio (*ambience* vs. *ambiance*): 2.3:1

*ambulance* /am-bye-lan[t]s/ is often mispronounced *am*-byoo-lan[t]s/.

*ameba*. See amoeba.

ameliorable. So formed—not *ameliorable*. See -ABLE (D) & -ATABLE.

ameliorate; *meliorate*. Ameliorate is the standard term meaning "to make or become better." E.g.: "If injustices abound in that region—as they do almost everywhere—they will not be ameliorated by heaping invective on parties to the conflict." Letter of John B. Aycrigg, *Denver Post*, 23 Apr. 1997, at B6. *Meliorate* is a NECESSARY VARIANT.

Ameliorate does not mean "to lessen"—e.g.: "It would also allow a return to normal inventory management by ameliorating [read lessening or reducing] the likelihood of stumbling into the four pitfalls described earlier." Peter A. Meyer, "No One Is Laughing at Good News vs. Bad News in Corn Processing," *Milling & Baking News*, 18 Feb. 1997, at 19. Cf. *viti ate*.

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*ameliorate* misused for *lessen*: Stage 1

*amen* (the conclusion to a prayer) may be pronounced either /ah-men/ or /ay-men/.

amenability. See amenity.


amend; *emend*. Both derive from the Latin verb *emendare* (= to free from fault). *Amend* = (1) to put right, change; or (2) to add to, supplement. This is the general word. The other is more specialized. *Emend* = to correct (as a text). The corresponding nouns are *amendment* and *emendation*.

amenity; *amenability*. These words, of unrelated origin, are occasionally confused. *Amenity* = (1) agreeableness <as a host, he showed great amenity to his guest's demands>; (2) something that is comfortable or convenient <the many amenities at the hotel make guests quite happy>; or (3) a basic social convention <it's not just that he burps aloud—he seems to be unaware of most gustatory amenities>. *Amenability* = (1) willingness to approve, act, or yield <the bank's amenability to make the loan>; (2) legal responsibility; answerability <the corporation's amenability to suit in New York>; or (3) capability of being treated or tested <the victim's amenability to psychiatric treatment>.

The words are pronounced /ə-men-i-tee/ and /ə-men-ə-bal-tee/.

**American**. As an adjectival limited in application to the United States, this word has long been known to be anomalous. All North Americans and South Americans have claim to being called Americans, and yet the language has never quite recognized this fact: "In strict logic such a use is not justifiable, but common practice and understanding have long since put the word beyond the jurisdiction of logic." 1 George Philip Krapp, *The English Language in America* xiii (1925). Perhaps one reason for the firmly established usage is the lack of any reasonable alternative (United Statesside?).

**American government**. This phrase is acceptable when you're talking about the way the United States is governed, as opposed to "the government" as an entity—e.g.:

- "This seminar, dealing with congressional policies and American government, is presented by the Washington Workshops Foundation and will be attended by high school leaders from across the country." "School News," *Portland Press Herald*, 20 Dec. 1995, at B7.


When you're speaking of the governing powers, though, the proper phrase is *U.S. government*—e.g.:

- "But such a situation also means that while the Chinese deal harshly with pro-democracy forces, the American government [read U.S. government] has very little leverage with which to pressure Beijing to alter its behavior." "Again, What About China?" *Wash. Times*, 23 Dec. 1995, at C2.

- "The man said he was a retired military officer from Syria, which the American [read U.S.] government deems a sponsor of terrorists." Diana Jean Schema, "Diploma Mill Concerns Extend Beyond Fraud," *N.Y. Times*, 29 June 2008, at A14.

When *American government* is used with an or any, the reference is to the presidential administration at any particular time. *An or any American government* is the appropriate hypothetical phrase—e.g.:


The Latin phrase is variously pronounced. The singularists often write amici curiae; jour-

B. And amidst; in the midst of; mid; ‘mid. Amid and amidst are slightly quaint words, especially the latter. Often the word in or amongst serves better. (But see among (b).) Since the mid-19th century, amid has predominated in AmE and BrE alike. Today it is about 20 times as common as amidst.

In the midst of, a wordy equivalent, has always been more common than amid. It often lends a better cadence, as in these titles:


The preposition midst is poetic in all uses except the traditional compounds (e.g., midnight, midstream) or scientific uses; if the word is appropriate, however, midst is better than ‘mid.

*amn’t I? See aren’t I? amöeba; *ameba. Since the mid-19th century, amöeba has been the standard spelling in all varieties of English. During the 1920s, AmE seemed close to adopting *ameba as standard, but that spelling has long since receded.

Current ratio: 11:1

amok; amuck. Amok is now the standard term. Usage authorities once held firmly to the idea that amuck is preferable to amok—solely on the mistaken notion that amuck is older in English and amok (though a better transliteration of the Malay word) was a late-
coming “didacticism.” In fact, both forms date from the 17th century. And in any event, amok became predominant in BrE about 1905 and in AmE about 1955. It is three times as common as amuck in print sources today—e.g.: “But by 2005, federal banking regulators were beginning to worry that mortgage lenders were running amok with exotic and often inscrutable new products.” Edmund L. Andrews, “Fed Shrugged as Subprime Crisis Spread,” N.Y. Times, 18 Dec. 2007, at

A. Generally. Although this book points out many differences between AmE and BrE, that is not its primary pur-

B. Americanisms Invading BrE. During the 20th century, the English language’s center of gravity gradually shifted from England to the United States. As a result, the most influential linguistic innovations occur in AmE, as a further result of which BrE speakers frequently bemoan American encroachments. For example, on 7 February 1995, Steve Ward of Bristol said in a letter published in The Times: “Sir, I am dis-
appointed to see that even The Times’s leader columns are succumbing to the relentless invasion of American English. In your leader of January 28, on the National Lottery, you state that ‘stores which sell tickets for the draw have lottery-only lines on a Saturday.’ Do you mean: ‘Shops . . . have lottery-only queues?'”

C. Briticisms Invading AmE. To some extent, transatlantic linguistic influences are reciprocal. In the late 20th century, it became common in AmE to use the Briticism take a decision (as opposed to the usual AmE make a decision). And many Americans have begun using amongst and whilst. (See among (A) & whilst.) On the whole, though, BrE’s influences on AmE are so slight that few people take any notice.

D. Related Entries. For several other differences between the two major strains of English, see -er (b), -or & spelling (b).

amicable; amiable. The first came directly from Latin, the second from French, but the two forms are at base the same word. Yet they have undergone differentia-
tion. Amiable applies to people <an amiable chap>, amicable to relations between people <an amicable resolution>.

Amicable is pronounced /ə-mik-a-bal/—not /ə-mik-a-bal/. Amiable is pronounced /ay-mee-a-bal/.

amicus curiae; friend of the court. These phrases refer to "someone who is not a party to a lawsuit but who petitions the court or is requested by the court to file a brief in the action because that person has a strong interest in the subject matter." Black’s Law Dictionary 102 (10th ed. 2014). Lawyers write amicus curiae; jour-
nalists often write friend of the court. See LEGALESE.

The Latin phrase is variously pronounced. The singular is /ə-mee-kas kyoor-ee-ti/ or /ə-mi-kas kyoor-i-eel/ and the plural (amicis curiae) is /ə-mee-kee kyoor-
ee-ti/ or /ə-mee-see/ or /ə-mi-kee/ or /ə-mi-see/. Another acceptable pronunciation of the first word—a common pronunciation in AmE—is /əm-a-kas/.

Current ratio (amicus curiae vs. friend of the court): 5:1

amid. A. And among. Amid usually connotes position—e.g.: “Amid the public tributes, the one from Felix Franklin stood out.” Barry Siegel, Claim of Privilege 186 (2008). Among often connotes a mingling—e.g.: “To see the true [Tom] Coughlin, watch him among friends and family, away from football.” John Branch, “Coughlin’s Playful Side Has Deep Roots in Florida,” N.Y. Times, 6 May 2008, at D1.

B. And amidst; in the midst of; mid; ‘mid. Amid and amidst are slightly quaint words, especially the latter. Often the word in or amongst serves better. (But see among (b).) Since the mid-19th century, amid has predominated in AmE and BrE alike. Today it is about 20 times as common as amidst.

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
A1. But some publications fight the trend—e.g.: “One symptom of lobbying run amuck is the proliferation of earmarks—spending placed in legislation without public review, for specific projects.” Mike Allen & Perry Bacon Jr., “Can This Elephant Be Cleared Up?” Time, 15 Jan. 2006, at 22.

The long-term effect of the prevalent spelling may be that it will be mispronounced, as happens when the spelling doesn't match the sound. People may well come to say /mәk/ instead of the correct /ә-mәk/, just as so many mispronounce buttock as /bat-tahk/ instead of the correct /bat-әk/.

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*amok* for *amuck*: Stage 5

Current ratio (*amok* vs. *amuck*): 3:1

among. A. And amongst. Most forms ending in -st, such as whilst and amidst, are archaisms in AmE. *Amongst* is no exception: in AmE it is pretentious at best. E.g.: “Imagine a city where the electricity and water companies are owned by the local authorities and, thanks to progressive planning and construction, prices are amongst [read among] the lowest in the country.” Michael Dibdin, “Seattle Is the America Thatcher Ignored,” Seattle Times, 17 Jan. 1997, at B5.

*Amongst* is more common and more tolerable in BrE, where it doesn't suggest affectation—e.g.:


Cf. amid (b); whilst.

Current ratio (AmE): 17:1

Current ratio (BrE): 8:1

B. With Mass Nouns. Generally, among is used with plural nouns and amid with mass nouns. Hence one is among friends but amid a crowd. (See count nouns and mass nouns & amid.) *Among* is frequently misused for other prepositions—e.g.:


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*among* used with a mass noun: Stage 2

C. And between. See between (A).

amoral. See immoral.
advantage of the midwinter darkness is the ample opportunity it (in theory) provides for gazing at the colorful northern ignis." Wayne Curtis, "In Hot Water," Atlantic, Dec. 2006, at 155. But the distinction between immaterial and material things is hard to sustain in actual usage and leads to idle hairsplitting. Today the word frequently and naturally applies to material substances—e.g.:


amuck. See amok.

amuse. See bemuse.

an. See a (A).

*anachronic. See anachronistic.

anachronism; *parachronism; prochronism; archaism. All these words indicate that, in some respect, the time is out of joint. An anachronism is any error in chronology, or something that is chronologically out of place <the Western movie contained several anachronisms, including a jet's vapor trail visible in the opening scene>. *Parachronism is a needless variant of anachronism. A prochronism is a reference to a person, thing, or event at a date earlier than it existed <Shakespeare's notorious prochronism of putting a striking clock in Julius Caesar>. An archaism is something archaic, outmoded, or old-fashioned <the Senate's creaky archaisms, such as the two snuffboxes filled constantly with fresh snuff, can be endearing>. See archaisms.

anachronistic; *anachronic; *anachronous. The first is the standard adjective. The second and third are needless variants.

Current ratio: 148:1:1

Anachronyms. If you don't have broadband Internet service, you may still connect by dial-up service. If you phone someone but get a busy signal, you may try again by punching the button on your phone that is labeled redial. But try to buy a telephone that actually has a dial on it and you’ll come home empty-handed. The dial in dial-up and redial is an anachronym: a word that lives on in a figurative sense even though technology or culture or history has rendered its literal sense absurd. Anachronyms live on longer than might be expected when there is no ready replacement (say dial and people immediately think telephone). So we still "tune in" to a radio or television program even though there is no conventional tuner in digital sets, because how else are we going to select a station or channel? But anachronyms live on by sheer force of habit as well. We still say tin can even though the cans are made of steel these days. It’s still common to hear tin-foil, even though the technically correct aluminum foil is prevalent. When we send an e-mail, we may still include a carbon copy addressed to a third party. A few old fogeys still keep their beverages cool in the icebox. Cf. retronyms.

anacoluthon (= an instance of syntactic incoherence or grammatical inconsistency within a sentence) predominantly makes the Greek form of the plural (anacolutha) in AmE and BrE alike—not *anacoluthons.

anaemia. See anemia.

anaesthetic. See anesthetic & ae.

analects; analecta. The English plural analects predominates over the Latin plural analecta. See plural (b).

Current ratio: 1:4:1

analog. See analogue.

analogism. See analogy.

analogous; analogical. These words mean different things. Analogous /ə-nəl-o-gəs/ = parallel in certain respects. The word should be avoided where similar suffices, but the two are not perfectly synonymous. What is analogous serves as an analogy for guidance, while similar carries no such connotation.

Analogical /an-ə-loj-i-kal/ = of, by, or expressing an analogy. E.g.: "Much of constitutional law is a tradition of 'common law' development, as judges specify and alter constitutional meaning through analogical reasoning in the course of deciding individual disputes." Cass R. Sunstein, "Making Amends," New Republic, 3 Mar. 1997, at 38.

anologue; analog. An analogue is a thing that is analogous to something else—e.g.: "Apparently, the planned conformity of Levittown and its analogues, coupled with the close proximity of the world’s media capital, makes it the perfect crucible for ambient celebrities." G. Beato, "Long Island’s New Breed of Low-Wattage Celebs," Newsday (N.Y.), 7 Sept. 1997, at G6. The spelling analog should be confined to technical contexts involving physics or computers. For a comment on the decline of the -ue form, see -AGOG(UE).

analogy; analogism. An analogy is a corresponding similarity or likeness. In logic, analogy means "an inference that, if two or more things are similar in some respects, they must be alike in others."
*analyze* is a fairly rare term meaning “reasoning by analogy” <analogism is not the most rigorous form of reasoning).

**analyze.** See *analyze.*

**analysis; *analyzer.* The first, of course, is the standard word. *Analysis*, a pseudo-learned variant of *analyze,* is a nonword—e.g.:


Cf. *paralyzer.*

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*analysis for analysis: Stage 1*

Current ratio (analysis vs. *analysis*): 21,501:1

**analyzer; *analyzer.* The first is standard in reference to a person who analyzes. The second is a neologism for software that examines data for patterns, relationships, etc. The third is a needless variant.

**analytical; *analytic.* No differentiation has surfaced between the two. In modern print sources, the long form is twice as common as the short, perhaps because it is perceived as being generally more euphonious. This being so, *analytic* could justifiably be labeled a needless variant—except in the few set phrases denoting disciplines or schools of thought, such as analytic geometry and analytic philosophy. Current ratio: 2:1

*analyzer. See analysis.*

**analyze; *analyze.* The first is AmE, the second BrE.

**analyzer; *analyzer.* See analyst.*

**anonym. See anonym.**

**anarchy; anarchism.** *Anarchy* is a state of lawlessness or disorder in society. *Anarchism* is a political theory antithetical to any form of government. The preferred adjectival forms are *anarchic* and *anarchistic.*

**Anchorageite; *Anchoragite.* The first spelling is standard. See *denizen* labels.

**anchor baby,** a term dating from the mid-1990s, didn’t come to widespread public attention until the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. The phrase refers to a child born in the United States of a mother who has illegally crossed the border or overstayed her visa specifically to benefit from the Birthright Citizenship Clause of the U.S. Constitution, which makes every person born on U.S. soil a citizen of the country. Although the extent of the anchor-baby “problem” is a matter of debate, its existence is not. It is not clear whether opponents of the term object to the term itself or to the public highlighting of the existence of the issue. When asked to suggest an alternative term, opponents often cite *baby*—which, of course, is a vague hypernym that obscures the denotive fact that *anchor baby* is intended to convey. Arguments about the term and what it denotes will play out in coming years. Some will argue that it’s a snarl-phrase, and others will insist that it’s a straightforward descriptor uttered without malice or enmity. Any proposed synonym that doesn’t approach doublespeak is likely to inflame the debate—which suggests that the difficulty is not merely with the words themselves.

**anchorite; *anchoriet.* This word, meaning “hermit,” is predominantly spelled *anchorite.* In AmE, the preference is overwhelming. Current ratio: 18:1

*anchorperson. See sexism (c).*

**anchors aweigh; anchors away.** The linguistic history here is murky. The original phrase, in the 19th century, was indeed *anchors away*—and that form is about as common today in BrE as *anchors aweigh.* But in AmE, *anchors aweigh* has been the predominant form, thoroughly established, since the 1920s.

Sometimes—in especially poor usage—*aweigh* is corrupted into *way,* often as part of a lame pun. E.g.:


For a related blunder—*under weigh for underway*—see **underway.**

Current ratio: 18:1

**anchovy** (the small salty fish) is pronounced /an-choy-vee/ in AmE—not /an-chah-vee/. In BrE, the second syllable commonly has a schwa sound: /an-chah-vee/.

**ancillary (= connected with or supporting something else) is preferably pronounced /an-si-ler-ee/ in AmE but /an-nil-uh-ree/ in BrE.

**and. A Beginning Sentences with.** It is rank superstition that this coordinating conjunction cannot properly begin a sentence:

- “[T]he idea that a sentence should *never* begin with *and* is absurd. It would be quite as sensible to and worthy of consideration to insist that a sentence should never begin with *but or nor.*” S.W.W., “‘And’ at the Beginning of a Sentence,” 19 N.Y. Teacher & Am. Educ. Monthly 204, 205 (May 1870).
- “Objection is sometimes taken to employment of *but or and* at the beginning of a sentence; but for this there is much good usage.” Adams Sherman Hill, *The Principles of Rhetoric* 88 (rev. ed. 1896).
• “Another stumbling-block to a certain type of academic mind is the conjunction *and.* It is often laid down as a rigid rule that a sentence should never begin with *and.* This was a point on which my own schoolmaster was inflexible. And quite recently a training college student whom I asked to comment on a passage from Malory condemned him for using *‘the objectionable conjunction and’.* And printers have an ugly trick of emasculating my meaning by turning my periods into commas because they happen to be followed by *and.* Taking down my Bible and opening it at random, I find that the eighth chapter of Exodus contains thirty-two sentences, twenty-five of which begin with *and.* Philip Boswood Ballard, *Teaching and Testing English* 26 (1939).

• “In medieval prose . . . *and* is a dominant word, especially at the beginning of the sentence. One sentence follows on another in simple succession, with a conjunction as head-word representing a link in a chain, or (to jump to another metaphor) a single step in the chronological development of the narrative. The pattern, as has already been pointed out, is familiar to us in the Authorized Version.” G.H. Vallins, *The Pattern of English* 83 (1956).

• “That it is a solecism to begin a sentence with *and* is a faintly lingering superstition. The *OED* gives examples ranging from the 10th to the 19th c.; the Bible is full of them.” Ernest Gowers, *FMEU*2 at 29.

• “A prejudice lingers from the days of schoolmarmish rhetoric that a sentence should not begin with *and.* The supposed rule is without foundation in grammar, logic, or art. *And* can join separate sentences and their meanings just as well as *but* can both join sentences and disjoin meanings.” Wilson Follett, *MAU* at 64.

• “Many years ago schoolteachers insisted that it was improper to begin a sentence with *and,* but this convention is now outmoded. Innumerable respected writers use *and* at the beginning of a sentence.” William Morris & Mary Morris, *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* 37 (2d ed. 1985).

• “*And* the idea that *and* must not begin a sentence, or even a paragraph, is an empty superstition. The same goes for *but.* Indeed either word can give unimprovably early warning of the sort of thing that is to follow.” Kingsley Amis, *The King’s English* 14 (1997).

Schoolteachers may have laid down a prohibition against the initial *and* to counterclock elementary-school students’ tendency to begin every sentence with *and.* As Follett and Amis point out, the same superstition has plagued *but.* See *but* (A) & *supersstitious* (D).

The very best writers find occasion to begin sentences with *and*—e.g.:

• “*And* the technique of the approach to poetry has not received half so much serious systematic study as the technique of pole-jumping.” I.A. Richards, “An Experiment in Criticism” (1929), in *Richards on Rhetoric* 25, 31 (Ann E. Berthoff ed., 1991).

• “*And* the thought of being engaged to a girl who talked openly of fairies being born because stars blew their noses, or whatever it was, frankly appalled me.” F.G. Wodehouse, *Right Ho, Jeeves* 95 (1934; repr. 1986).

• “Mr Rossiter quotes the observation of a B.B.C. official that his talks were ‘too much the spoken word for *The Listener.*’ And that in itself is significant. It means that in the medium of print, the long established syntax of the sentence, with its complex relationships, still holds its own. But what will happen in the future it is too early, as yet, to prophesy.” G.H. Vallins, *The Pattern of English* 94 (1956; repr. 1957).

• “A dictionary is good only insofar as it is a comprehensive and accurate description of current usage. *And* to be comprehensive it must include some indication of social and regional associations.” Bergen Evans, “*But What’s a Dictionary For?*” in *The Ways of Language* 77, 79 (Raymond J. Pflug ed., 1967).

• “If we view the paragraph as a *discursive development of a proposition,* we can predict that the topic sentence of the paragraph in question will generate a development based on objectives. *And* this is exactly what we do find.” W. Ross Winterowd, *Rhetoric: A Synthesis* 147 (1968).

• “*And* one had better make use of whatever beauty, elegance, riches the translator’s language possesses, and hope that something emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically equivalent will emerge.” John Simon, *The Sheep from the Goats* 397 (1989).

• “*And* there is, come to think of it, that unsounded b, to keep alive some small doubt.” Christopher Ricks, *Beckett’s Dying Words* 51 (1993).

B. For *or*. Oddly, *and* is frequently misused for *or* where a singular noun, or one of two nouns, is called for—e.g.: “While third-party candidates have mounted serious challenges for senator and [read or] governor in almost two dozen states this year, building an effective third-party apparatus is rare.” Jonathan Rabinovitz, “*Weicker’s Victory: Lasting Legacy?*” *N.Y. Times,* 5 Oct. 1994, at A13. (The phrase should be *senator or governor*; as written, the sentence says that in each of almost 24 states third-party candidates were running for both senator and governor—an idea belied by the context of the article.)

C. In Enumerations. Some writers have a tendency, especially in long enumerations, to omit *and* before the final element. To do so is often infelicitous: the reader is jarred by the abrupt period ending the sentence and may even wonder whether something has been omitted. One may occasionally omit *and* before the final element in an enumeration with a particular nuance in mind. Without *and,* the implication is that the series is incomplete—rhetoricians call this construction “asyndeton.” With *and,* the implication is that the series is complete. This shade in meaning is increasingly subtle in modern prose.

D. Serial Comma Before *and* in Enumerations. On the question of punctuating enumerations, the better practice is to place a comma before the *and* introducing the final element. See enumerations (b) & punctuation (d).

E. *But* misused for *and.* See but (c).
and/or. A legal and business expression dating from the mid-19th century, and/or has been vilified for most of its life—and rightly so. To avoid ambiguity, don't use it. Many writers—especially lawyers—would be surprised at how easy and workable this solution is. Or alone usually suffices. If you are offered coffee or tea, you may pick either (or, in this case, neither), or you may for whatever reason order both. This is the ordinary sense of the word, understood by everyone and universally accommodated by the simple or.

But in two situations this ordinary sense of or does not accomplish everything we need. Both involve the level of exclusivity between the elements on either side of or. One comes up in the standard statement of punishment, "a $1,000 fine or a year in jail or both." The other comes up when the choices are mutually exclusive. If that exclusivity is important to point out—if the judge must choose between a fine and jail, for instance—the writer may substitute but not both for or both in the previous example. But these situations generally arise only when linguistic rigor is imperative, as in legal drafting.

and particularly. See particularly.

and which. See which (d).

*anecdotalist. See anecdotist.

anecdote. A. Adjective Forms: anecdotal; *anecdotic; *anecdotical. The form anecdotal is standard; the other forms are needless variants. In reference to evidence, anecdotal refers not to anecdotes, but to personal experiences reported by one or more people.

Current ratio (the adjectives): 371:3:1

B. And antidote. Anecdote (= a brief story, usu. true and intended to amuse) is sometimes confused with antidote (= something that counteracts poison), resulting in a malapropism—e.g.:

- "One dog was poisoned but we found the anecdote [read antidote]." Dennis Pollock, "Home Alone Is Not This Guy's Choice During Holidays," Fresno Bee, 5 Dec. 1994, at F2.
- "The Oilers were 6–6 and staggering and looking for an anecdote [read antidote] to whatever was poisoning their system." John McClain, "On the Road Again," Houston Chron., 22 Dec. 1996, Sports §, at 4.
- "He went to the hospital quickly but still died because there is no anecdote [read antidote] for glory lily poisoning." Katherine Snow Smith, "Know What to Do if Your Child Eats a Toxic Plant," St. Petersburg Times, 7 Apr. 2002, Neighborhood Times §, at 12.

The opposite error is less common, but it does occur—e.g.:

- "Laughter could be heard. It was the apparent jovial reunion following a successful hunt, no doubt accompanied by a few amusing antidotes [read anecdotes] of Spade's undress," John M. Bishop, Casting Shadows with Shamans 21 (2003).
- "Amanda delighted the two women by playing the consummate hostess, serving tea and cookies to their guest, telling funny anecdotes [read anecdotes] about the cats, and describing the dolls in remarkable detail." R.C. Morris, Tender Prey 162 (2005).

Language-Change Index
1. anecdote misused for antidote: Stage 1
2. antidote misused for anecdote: Stage 1

Current ratio (amusing anecdote vs. *amusing antidote): 190:1

anecdotist; *anecdotalist. The first is standard; the second is a needless variant that flourished for a time in the late 20th century.

anemia; anaemia. Denoting a medical condition in which one's blood has too few red blood cells, anemia has been the standard spelling in AmE only since about 1915. From the time when the word was first used in English in the 1820s, the BrE spelling has predominantly been anaemia. But the two spellings have been locked in close competition in BrE since about 1980.

anemone /ә-nem-ә-nee/ (= [1] a flower of the buttercup family; or [2] a flowerlike sea polyp) is so spelled—not *anenome. But the misspelling (like the mispronunciation /ә-nen-ә-mee/) is common—e.g.:


The phrase any money can be a helpful mnemonic device for spelling, an M on E for pronunciation. See Metathesis.

Language-Change Index

anemone misspelled *anenome: Stage 1

Current ratio: 119:1

anent. Theodore M. Bernstein writes, "Except in legal usage, anent [= about] is archaic and semiprecious." More Language That Needs Watching 24 (1962). He could have omitted except in legal usage and semi. Perhaps the best statement is that anent "is a pompous word and nearly always entirely useless." Percy Marks, The Craft of Writing 47 (1932). Common in the 17th century, it has been in retreat ever since. See Archaisms.

anesthesia. See anesthetic.

anesthesiologist. See anesthetist.

anesthetic, n.; anesthesia. An anesthetic (e.g., ether) causes anesthesia (= loss of sensation). Writers often administer the wrong term—e.g.: "Coroner's investigators said Jackie was 'very nervous' and was given anesthesia [read an anesthetic] by dentist Thien Luong, who was extracting a molar." John Ashby, "Death of Girl Who Choked on Tooth Ruled Accidental," Press Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 27 Aug. 2008, at C1.
AmE prefers the spellings above; the BrE spellings are _anaesthetic_ and _anaesthesia_. See ae.

**Language-Change Index**

_anaesthesia_ misused for _anesthetic_; Stage 2
Current ratio: 6:1

**anesthetist; anesthesiologist.** Generally, _anesthetist_ will serve for “someone who administers an anesthetic.” The term dates from the late 19th century. _Anesthesiologist_, of World War II vintage, refers specifically to a physician specializing in anesthesia and anesthetics.

anurysm (= a bulged blood vessel caused by disease) is the standard spelling. *Anurysm, an etymologically inferior spelling that was common in the 19th century, is best avoided.

Current ratio: 24:1

**Angeleno; *Los Angelean.** The first is the standard term for someone who hails from or lives in Los Angeles. The second is a fairly uncommon equivalent. See _DENIZEN_ LABELS.

Current ratio: 45:1

angina pectoris (= a medical condition that causes chest pains because of a weak heart) is pronounced /an-i-na pek-tor-is/. It is typically shortened to _angina._

angst (= strong anxiety and intense unhappiness brought on by worries) is traditionally pronounced in the German way (/ahngkst/), but today /ayngkst/ or /angkst/ predominates in AmE and BrE alike. See _GERMANISMS._

anilingus; *anilinctus. The term denotes a nonstandard thing, of course, but the standard form is _anilingus._ *Anilinctus is a NEEDLESS VARIANT that many dictionaries record but that almost never appears in print. The term dates from the mid-20th century.

Because of its etymological association with _anal_, writers frequently, by false analogy (ahem) with that word, use a deviant spelling—e.g.:—


Cf. _cunnilingus._

**Language-Change Index**

_anilus_ misspelled *_analilus_; Stage 4
Current ratio (a shocker): 1:1.5

**Animal Adjectives.** If you have an English–Latin dictionary, look up any animal to find the corresponding Latin term. Then look up that term in an unabridged English-language dictionary and you’re likely to find an English adjective—perhaps rare, but there nevertheless—ending in -ine. Some of these, of course, are well known:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>asinine</td>
<td>of, relating to, or like an ass (donkey)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bovine</td>
<td>of, relating to, or like a cow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>canine</td>
<td>of, relating to, or like a dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elephantine</td>
<td>of, relating to, or like an elephant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>equine</td>
<td>of, relating to, or like a horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feline</td>
<td>of, relating to, or like a cat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serpentine</td>
<td>of, relating to, or like a snake</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Others are somewhat less well known. Aficionados of Sherlock Holmes know that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle described Holmes more than once as having an _aquiline_ nose. (That means “eagle-like.”) Others that are middlingly well known appear from time to time—e.g.:

- “Jagger [acted as if he were] in the midst of a shopping spree, and the lean, _leomin_ singer was a pounding, preening song-and-dance man—a kindlier version of the ‘Clockwork Orange’ rounder he played in the ’70s.” Greg Kot, “Stones Are Risk-Free, but Rockers in the End,” _Chicago Trib_. , 25 Sept. 1997, at 2. (_Leomin_ = of, relating to, or like a lion.)
- “You have to treat the bear like a loaded, fully explosive-laden gasoline tanker,” Tamahori said. The _ursine_ star came with his longtime trainers, who oversaw him in ‘The Bear.” Steve Murray, “Call of the Wild Put ‘Edge’ Director into His Element,” _Atlanta J.-Const._, 5 Oct. 1997, at L2. (_Ursine_ = of, relating to, or like a bear.)

For those who dabble in _SESQUIPEDALITY_, the less familiar ones are equally appealing, if the sense fits:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accipitrine</td>
<td>corresponds to <em>hawk</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anserine</td>
<td><em>goose</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avine</td>
<td><em>bird</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cancrine</td>
<td><em>crab</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caprine, hircine</td>
<td><em>goat</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cervine, damine</td>
<td><em>deer</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corvine</td>
<td><em>crow; raven</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crocodiline</td>
<td><em>crocodile</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crotaline</td>
<td><em>rattlesnake</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>falconine</td>
<td><em>falcon</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ferine</td>
<td>any wild animal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hippopotamine</td>
<td><em>hippopotamus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hirundine</td>
<td><em>swallow</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hystricine, porcupine</td>
<td><em>porcupine</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lacertine</td>
<td><em>lizard</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>larine, laridine</td>
<td><em>gull</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leporine</td>
<td><em>hare</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lumbricine</td>
<td><em>earthworm</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lupine</td>
<td><em>wolf</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>murine</td>
<td><em>mouse</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ovine</td>
<td><em>sheep</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pardine</td>
<td><em>leopard; panther</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passerine</td>
<td><em>sparrow</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pavonine</td>
<td><em>peacock</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

animalculum (lit., “little animal”) forms the plural animalcules, not animalcula—e.g.: “John Crawford, a reputable Baltimore physician and an early promoter of contagion theory in America, lost both his reputation and his practice for maintaining, in 1806/7, that disease was spread by microscopic insects or animalcules [read animalcula],” Ronald Rees, “Under the Weather: Climate and Disease, 1700–1900,” 46 History Today 35 (1996). But the more common term is animalculum (pl. animalculæ). See diminutives (b).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

animalculum for animalcula: Stage 2

animalculæ for animalcula: Stage 2

animaus is double-edged. At times the word is neutral, meaning “intention; disposition”—especially in legal texts. But more often in AmE animus denotes ill will, as if it were synonymous with animosity—e.g.: • “Thomas won [the Senate’s] approval by 52–48 and said it was ‘a time for healing, not a time for anger or for animus or animosity.” Aaron Epstein, “Bush Nominee Carries Closest Vote Since 1888,” Phil. Inquirer, 16 Oct. 1991, at A1.
• “There’s no animus, at least outwardly, between the one-year-and-done offensive coordinator and a Ravens franchise that he helped to franchise-record offensive numbers.” Jon Meoli, “Over to the Other Side,” Baltimore Sun, 10 Sept. 2015, at D1.

anise (= a plant with seeds strongly tasting of licorice) is pronounced /æn-i/-, rhyming with Janice.

announce; annunciate; *enounce; enunciate. Announce, the best-known of these terms, may mean (1) “to proclaim” <she announced her independence>; (2) “to give notice of” <he announced that he would leave within the hour>; or (3) “to serve as announcer” <she announced the tournament>. Annunciate is generally a needless variant of announce, except that it sometimes appears in religious contexts to lend a weighty effect. It has no place in other contexts—e.g.: “Mr. Clinton has made it difficult to lend a weighty effect. It has no place in other contexts—e.g.: “Mr. Clinton has made it difficult to announce” <he announced that he would leave within the hour>; or (3) “to serve as announcer” <Henry Longhurst announced the tournament>.

*Annunciating and *annunciation are needless variants of announce.

annexable. So spelled—not *annexible. See -able (a).

annexation; *annexment; *annexion. See annex, n.

annihilable. So formed—not *annihilatable. See -able (d) & -atable.

anniversary (= the day of the year on which an event occurred in a previous year) is today used informally to denote a milestone in months or even weeks. That usage has become increasingly common, perhaps because there is no convenient equivalent for terms shorter than a year (milestone is close, but it doesn’t connote observance and recurrence the way anniversary does). Given the word’s tight association with “year,” however, this loose usage is subject to criticism and should be avoided if possible—e.g.: • “So, how’s he doing at the one-month anniversary of his arrival [read a month after arrival] in Richmond?” Margaret Edds, “Shucet Steers Troubled Roads Department on a Straight Course,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 19 May 2002, at J5.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

anniversary denoting any milestone: Stage 2

*Annexation = (1) the act of attaching or incorporating (as territory within a municipality or nation); or (2) the state of having been attached or incorporated. *Annexment and *annexion are needless variants of annexation.
annoy. See aggravate.

annoyance; *annoyment. The first has always been the standard term in Modern English. The second, when used with a straight face, is worse than a NEEDLESS VARIANT—it’s a NONWORD that is itself what it denotes. E.g.: “Even into July, Howe had not stirred. Nor had Washington been active, to Adams’s considerable annoyance [read annoyance:]” John E. Ferling, John Adams: A Life 178–79 (1996). Occasionally it appears as a jocular antonym that echoes enjoyment—e.g.: “So here, for your enjoyment/annoyance: What new director found his preteen daughter’s pot stashes moments before his big film’s premiere party, and what critic took the rap for it?” Michael Musto, “La Dolce Musto,” Village Voice, 4 Feb. 1997, at 30.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*annoyment for annoyance: Stage 1
Current ratio (annoyance vs. *annoyment): 4:360:1

annulment. So spelled—not *annullment (a common misspelling). See divorce (A).

Current ratio: 355:1

annunciate. See announce.

anoint is sometimes misspelled *annoint—e.g.:


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
anoint misspelled *annoint: Stage 1
Current ratio: 97:1

anomalous; anomalistc. Something that is an anomaly is anomalous. That is, anomalous is the general adjective corresponding to the noun anomaly. But for astronomical anomalies, the adjective is anomalistc. Sometimes, though, this much narrower adjective erroneously displaces the broader one—e.g.:

- “Whether the conflicting findings between the levels of analysis are anomalous [read anomalous] is unclear.” David W. Romero, “Requiem for the Lightweight,” Presidential Studies Q., 1 Sept. 2001, at 454.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
anomalistc misused for anomalous: Stage 1

anomie /a-na-mee/ (= cultural anarchy and social instability) is the standard spelling. *Anomy is a variant. The adjective is anomic (/a-nom-ik/).

Current ratio (anomie vs. *anomy): 31:1

anonym; anonyme; ananym. An anonym (preferably spelled without the -e) is an anonymous person. (See pseudonym.) An ananym is a pseudonym arrived at by spelling the author’s name backward (as, hypothetically, Renrag for Garner).

anorectic; anorexic. Anorectic (= suffering from a loss of appetite) is the general term, anorexic (= suffering from anorexia nervosa) the term specific to the medical condition characterized by self-starvation. As an adjective and also as a noun, both may refer to people with anorexia nervosa, but anorexic is far more common. Anorectic is mostly confined to the medical and scientific communities, while anorexic predominates in general writing.

As an adjective, anorectic has the additional meaning of “causing a loss of appetite” and is used to refer to drugs such as amphetamines and to their physical effects.

another has a schwa in the first syllable (/a-nath-or/)—not /ay-/.

another think coming; *another thing coming. The traditional idiom is “If you think X, you’ve got another think coming.” That phrasing has predominated since the expression became popular in the early 20th century. It may not be funny anymore, but it makes sense: X is wrong, so eventually you’re going to think Y instead. But a surprising number of writers substitute thing for think, which is grammatical but not even vaguely clever. E.g.:

- “If Osama bin Laden imagined, in releasing a threatening videotape days before the presidential election, that he could sway the votes of Kerry supporters like David and Jan Hill and Bush supporters like Paul Christene, he has another thing coming [read another think coming].” Kirk Johnson, “Voters, Their Minds Made Up, Say bin Laden Changes Nothing,” N.Y. Times, 29 Nov. 2004, § 1, at 1.
- “If the leaders of the Democratic Party hope that they can fool the holy people by buying themselves white leatherette-bound Bibles and pink plastic Jesuses and turning up to give testimony at church, they’ve got another thing coming [read another think coming].” Nicholas von Hoffman, “Democrats Should Oppose Empowering the Fious,” N.Y. Observer, 29 Nov. 2004, at 4.
- “If anyone is expecting Francona to gloat, they’ve got another thing coming [read another think coming].” Jeff Horrigan, “Unwelcome Mat: Not Much Brotherly Love in Philly for Francona,” Boston Herald, 24 June 2005, at 123.

The OED lists think as a dialectal or colloquial noun, with several citations from the 19th century. It shows
the phrase to have another thing coming first used in print in a 1937 article in American Speech reporting on the already-established use of that and similar phrases to mean “to be greatly mistaken.”

The heavy-metal band Judas Priest may share some blame for the widespread acceptance of the variant wording; its most commercially successful song was “You’ve Got Another Thing Coming,” first recorded in 1982.

Language-Change Index
*another thing coming for another think coming: Stage 4
Current ratio (another think coming vs. another thing coming): 1.6:1

answer back is a common redundancy, especially in BrE—e.g.: “Hilary and Piers du Pre seem determined to wreak the ultimate revenge on their sister by discrediting her while she lies—unable to answer back [read answer]—in her grave.” Julian Lloyd Webber, “An Insult to Jackie’s Memory,” Daily Telegraph, 4 Jan. 1999, at 15.

In AmE, the phrase is fairly common in sportswriting in the sense “to equal an opponent’s recent scoring effort”—e.g.:

- “Wimberley would answer back with senior wide-out Matt Stroman hauling in a 22-yard TD pass from sophomore quarterback Jojo Weeks to knot the game up at 7–all late in the first quarter.” Mark Rico, “More Than a Game,” San Marcos Daily Record (Tex.), 9 Sept. 2015, Sports §, at 5.

Some writers have used the sports phrase metaphorically—e.g.: “The last time somebody tried to impose prohibition on Chicago, the city answered back with Al Capone.” Peter Annin, “Prohibition Revisited?” Newsweek, 7 Dec. 1998, at 68. Despite the currency of this usage, answer can carry the entire load by itself.

Language-Change Index
answer back for answer (outside sports): Stage 3

antagonist. See protagonist (c).

Antarctica is frequently misspelled and mispronounced *Antarctica—e.g.: “Kroc expanded the golden-arches empire to every continent on the globe (except Antarctica [read Antarctic]).” Bob Ivry, “A Zillion Burgers Later—Perfection,” Record (N.J.), 13 Sept. 1997, Your Time §, at 1. In fact, this misspelling occurs in about 3% of the modern journalistic sources containing the word. See Arctic.

Language-Change Index
Antarctica misspelled *Antarctica: Stage 1
Current ratio: 101:1

ANTE-; ANTI-. The prefix ante- means “before,” and anti- “against.” Thus antecedent (= something that goes before) and antipathy (= feelings against, dislike). In a few words ante- has been changed to anti-, as in anticipate (= to consider or use before the due or natural time) and antipasto (= an Italian appetizer, usu. consisting of an assortment of cheeses, vegetables, meats, and olives).

In some compound words, the prefix anti- may cause ambiguities. See antinuclear protester.

antebellum. One word.

Antecedents, Agreement of Nouns with. See concord.

Antecedents, Remote. See miscues (c) & remote relatives.

antedate; predate. Both words are so common that it would be presumptuous to label either a needless variant. One sees a tendency to use antedate in reference to documentary materials, and predate in reference to physical things and historical facts. The differentiation is worth encouraging. Although antedate has historically been the more common of the two, predate has occurred more frequently in print sources since the late 1970s—in 2008 by a 4-to-1 margin.

For another sense of predate, see predate.

antenna. When the reference is to insects, antennae /an-ten-ee/ is the usual plural. But when the reference is to televisions and electronic transmitters, antennas is better. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (insect antennae vs. insect antennas): 17:1
Current ratio (TV antennas vs. TV antennae): 4:1

antenuptial. See prenuptial.

antepenultimate (= the next to the next-to-last) is sometimes misspelled *antipenultimate—e.g.: “The two versions of the antepenultimate [read antepenultimate] poem on the Houghton manuscript offer an even stronger indication.” Ashby Bland Crowder, “Attribution or Misattribution: New Poems by Robert Browning?” 43 Philological Q. 443 (2012). The corresponding noun antepenult is pronounced either /an-tee-pee-nuhl/ or /an-tee-pi-nuhl/.

anthropocentric; homocentric. Both words may denote a philosophy or worldview that puts human beings at the center of the universe or views them as the reason for creation. While anthropocentric is older and always correct in this sense, homocentric takes this sense only by slipshod extension. Homocentric is primarily a scientific term describing (1) a path that is round and concentric rather than oblique, esp. the path of a planet; or (2) the spreading rays of light from an apparent focal point, esp. rays of sunlight. So anthropocentric is always the better choice—e.g.:

- “I’m not homocentric [read anthropocentric], I don’t think people are the most important thing on the planet. We are part of the community of life.” “Earth Lovers Battle Green Alien,” Baltimore Sun, 11 June 2000, at A2 (quoting Mary Burks).
- “If the astonishing complexity of the double helix argues against a random emergence and argues in favor of intelligent design, and since no evidence of life elsewhere exists, then, though our location is not geocentric, the universe
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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (✳). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

Homo-centric is inferior for another reason: to many people today the homo- prefix suggests primarily sexual orientation, not the species. And homo-centric is now sometimes used in a homosexual sense—e.g.: "The introduction by the late Martin Taylor is a model of explication that discusses the strong homo-erotic element of much of the poetry without ever becoming a tedious, homo-centric [read gay-pride?] rant." Scott Eyman, "Soldiers' Letters Give Civil War a Human Face," Palm Beach Post, 10 Nov. 2002, at J4.

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1. homo-centric for anthropo-centric: Stage 1

Current ratio (anthropo-centric view vs. homo-centric view): 37:1

2. homo-centric in the sense "homosexually oriented": Stage 1

Anti- (= opposed to, against) is most traditionally pronounced /an-tee/ in AmE and BrE alike, but /an-ti/ is perfectly acceptable in AmE and tends to predominate among speakers born after about 1980. See ANTE-.

*an’t I? See aren’t I?

Antiaircraft. See vowel clusters.

Anticipate = (1) to sense beforehand; (2) to take care of beforehand; to preclude by prior action; forestall; (3) to await eagerly <this much-anticipated film is a great disappointment>; or (4) to expect <we anticipate that 40 people will attend>. Senses 3 and 4 have long been considered the result of slipshod extension. Sense 3 no doubt resulted from the unfortunate tendency for people to choose longer words. Generally, avoid anticipate when it’s merely equivalent to expect. See expect.

The poor usage is now seemingly ubiquitous—e.g.: "It is anticipated [read expected or estimated] that the 70-team, invitation-only tourney will realize about $15,000 for the clubs." Bubbles Greer, "Fish Tales Part of Bass Tournament Preparations," Sarasota Herald-Trib., 10 Sept. 1997, at B2. Indeed, sometimes this usage leads to near-ambiguities. In the following example, anticipate means "expect," but it suggests "forestall"—e.g.: "The foreboding of traffic snarls, towing and overall melee in connection with last night's Ohio State University football game may have prevented the problems officials had anticipated." Dean Narciso, "Fears of Football-Related Traffic Frenzy Fizzle Out," Columbus Dispatch, 29 Aug. 1997, at D2.

Anticipatory; *anticipative. The first is standard; the second is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 33:1

Anticipatory Reference (known also as cataphora) here denotes the vice of referring to something that is yet to be mentioned. A sentence will be leading up to the all-important predicate but before reaching it will refer to what is contained in the predicate. Or the reference may not even be explained until a later sentence. The reader is temporarily mystified. E.g.: "Conflict of laws is the study of whether or not, and if so, in what way, the answer to a legal problem will be affected because the elements of the problem have contacts with more than one jurisdiction." (A possible revision: Conflict of laws is the study of whether the answer to a legal problem will be affected because the elements of the problem have contacts with more than one jurisdiction—and, if so, what the effect will be.)

Only rarely can anticipatory reference be used in a way that doesn't bother the reader—e.g.: "We think it's clear—and nobody has disputed this point—that Carla has the first choice in deciding whether to take the furniture." Innocuous examples tend to involve personal pronouns <his most recent biographer called Lindley Murray a blockbuster author>.

Vexatious examples occur in a variety of forms. First, they're frequent with do-constructions—e.g.: • "New Mexico, as do most states, invests a great deal of money in its highways." (Either put as most states do at the end of the sentence or change as do to like.)

• "English professors, as do [read like] novelists and journalists, produce a body of writing that can be analyzed to discern their underlying philosophies."

See like.

Second, sometimes have appears too early in the sentence—e.g.: "The president, as have [read like] many others, has tried to understand the dynamics of this dispute between the company and its workers." Third, problems frequently crop up with pronoun references that anticipate the appearance of the noun itself—e.g.: "Mr. Hytner is a director who knows how to keep the pot on the boil; whether you agree with them [read his points] or not, he makes his points [read them] with boldness and panache." John Gross, "A Badly Brought-Up Bunch of Girls," Sunday Telegraph, 15 July 1990, at ix. (Another possible revision: whether you agree with him or not, he makes his points . . . .)

The best antidote to this problem is to become a stickler for orderly presentation and to develop an abiding empathy for the reader.
**Anticipatory Subjects.** See expletives.

**anticlimactic** /an-tee-klɪ-mə-tɪk/ is the correct form. *Anticlimactic* is a solemnis (referring seemingly to climate) that somehow became fairly widespread in the 20th century—e.g.: “The anticlimactic [read ant climactic] character of this encounter between St. Preux and Julie, in which writing seems to replace or displace person and event, recalls the almost comically ant climactic [read anticlimactic] moment of the consummation of their affair in the first part of the novel.” David Marshall, *The Frame of Art: Fictions of Aesthetic Experience* 121 (2005). But the erroneous form has never seriously rivaled the standard form in print sources. See **climactic**.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
anticlimactic misspelled *anticlimatic: Stage 1
Current ratio: 28:1

**antidote.** See anecdote (n).

**antinomy; antimony.** These words are not to be confused. *Antinomy* = a contradiction in law or logic; a conflict of authority. *Antimony* = a brittle silvery-white nonmetallic chemical element common in alloys.

**antinuclear protester** is technically ambiguous, though everyone should know what is intended. For the literal-minded, however, it might suggest “a protester denouncing the antinuclear cause,” instead of “a protester espousing the antinuclear position.” So it might be preferable to write nuclear-energy (or weapon) protester or antinuclear advocate. The same might be said of antiwar, anti-abortion, and antiglobalization protesters.

**antipathy** (= strong aversion; intense dislike) is sometimes misused for antithesis (= opposite; contrast)—e.g.: “Jiang can wear tri-cornered hats and tour Independence Hall, but his regime represents the antipathy [read antithesis] of America’s democratic values.” “Jiang’s Smiles Are a Thin Mask,” *Wis. State J.*, 30 Oct. 1997, at A13.

*Antipathy* usually takes the preposition toward or against <they feel strong antipathy toward each other> <antipathy against the lame-duck mayor is palpable>. Also, it sometimes takes to or for <in the late 1990s, antipathy to tobacco manufacturers reached an all-time high <society has always had an antipathy for child abuse>.

The adjectival form is **antipathetic**.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
antipathy misused for antithesis: Stage 1

**antipodes** /an-tɪp-ə-dez/. This noun, meaning “the exact opposite or contrary things,” is used most often in the plural form—sometimes even when the sense is singular <greed is the antipodes of charity>.

But the singular antipode /an-tɪ-pəd/ is also quite frequent—e.g.: “Still, the black mood about the group seems the antipode of those heady days over two years ago.” Vito J. Rancanelli, “Will Vodafone Be a Bellwether of the Bottom?” *Barron’s*, 6 May 2002, at MW6. This singular form might be worth encouraging when the meaning is singular because it promotes differentiation and makes intuitive sense. Yet the synonym antithesis is better understood by most readers.

The capitalized plural—Antipodes—refers to Australia, New Zealand, and nearby islands (being on the opposite side of the planet from Europe). E.g.: “He toured the role in the Antipodes a few years ago, but this is Soul’s first shot at the West End.” Jasper Rees, “From Here to Fraternity (or Whatever Happened to David Soul?),” *Independent*, 30 Jan. 1997, Arts §, at 8.

**antsocial, n.** See psychopath.

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**antsocial, n.** See psychopath.

**antiterrorism; counterterrorism.** The military distinguishes between these terms. *Antiterrorism* is defensive, involving measures to protect against vulnerability to a terrorist attack. It is also sometimes called “hardening the target.” *Counterterrorism*, the more frequent term, “includes the full range of offensive measures to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorism.” *U.S. Army Field Manual* FM-78 (1992).

But the distinction is lost outside the military, where the words are used interchangeably. In each of the following examples, they illustrate the vice of inelegant variation:

- “The Department of Defense is pouring billions of dollars into upgrading security and protection for U.S. forces, as well as funding private research and development of antiterrorism technology. . . . For Idaho Technology and the handful of other obscure entrepreneurs that provide highly specialized counterterrorism products and services, business is booming.” Tony Pugh, “In a Changed World, Security Sells,” *Phil. Inquirer*, 13 Oct. 2001, at C1.
- “Despite President Bush’s promise that his antiterrorism chief will have Cabinet-level status and undefined control over 46 agencies and $11 billion in counterterrorism spending, the betting is that the czar won’t get far unless he can give orders and control purse strings.” Lorraine Woellert, “Can Tom Ridge Take On The Terrorists? It’s Up to Bush,” *Bus. Week*, 15 Oct. 2001, at 57.

**antithesis.** For a misuse of this word, see **antipathy**.

**antithetical; *antithetic.** *Antithetical* (= exhibiting direct opposition) has become established in the phrase antithetical to and in most other contexts. The shorter form should be avoided as a needless variant.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*antithetic for antithetical: Stage 2
Current ratio (antithetical vs. *antithetic): 11:1
antitax. So written—without a hyphen.

antivenin (= an antitoxin for venom, esp. from snakes) is often mistakenly written *antivenom. The word venin refers to a toxic constituent of venom, and the name of the countering agent is formed from this word, not venom. But even though no general English-language dictionary recognizes the incorrect form, it now appears in print somewhat more often than the correct form—e.g.:

- "A new approach may lead to better snake antivenoms [read antivenins] than have been possible so far." Stephen Reucroft & John Swain, "Better Antivenoms [read Antivenins]," Boston Globe, 26 Sept. 2000, at D6.

- "He was fine after receiving antivenom [read antivenin]," Evan Henerson, "Preparing for the Hazards of the Season," Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 5 June 2001, at D3.


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antivenom for antivenin: Stage 4

Current ratio (antivenins vs. *antivenoms): 1:1:2

**A number of.** See number of (A).

anxious. This word has a range of meaning. As the adjective corresponding to anxiety, it has long meant "uneasy, disquieted." In the most unimpeachable uses, the word stays close to that association—e.g.: "The latest holdup is the EPA's final approval of the companies' plans to test for lead at the 150 homes . . . . Some residents are getting anxious." Stacy Shelton, "Toxic Investigation," Atlanta J.-Const., 13 Sept. 2002, at D1.

Today the word typically encompasses both worry and anticipation—e.g.: "Creator and anchorman Brian Lamb, the prince of un-chic, tirelessly fields the remarks of obnoxious callers, preening journalists, and anxious authors." "Spanning the Spectrum," Nat'l Authors. "Spanning the Spectrum,"

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
C. Illogical Use. Avoid such ambiguities as this: “She was the best of any senior in the class.” (Read: She was the best senior in the class. Or: She was the best of all the seniors in the class.) See all (b) & best of all.

Language-Change Index
*of any for of all: Stage 3

anybody. See anyone (b) & pronouns (d).

anybody else’s. See else’s & possessives (1).

anyhow (= in any way; in any manner) is a folksy casualism for anyway or nevertheless. E.g.: “I’m not sure they would anyhow [read anyway].” John Ed Pearce, “Old Age: Not for the Unwary,” Courier-J. (Louisville), 8 Jan. 1995, at D3.

Language-Change Index
anyhow for anywhere: Stage 3
Current ratio: 8:1

anymore. A Meaning “now.” In the sense “now,” “nowadays,” or “still,” the word anymore fits in three contexts: (1) negative declaratives <you don’t bring me flowers anymore>, (2) yes/no questions <do you go there anymore?>, and (3) hypothetical clauses introduced by whether or if <1 wonder whether they go there anymore>. In sense 1, the meaning is “now” or “nowadays”; in senses 2 and 3, the meaning is “still.” When anymore is used in some other type of positive statement (not in sense 2 or 3), it is dialectal—e.g.: “The price of housing is outrageous anymore [read these days or nowadays].” In a linguistic study of Missourians, informants considered this dialectal usage “well established, though controversial.” See Gilbert Youmans, “Any More on Anymore,” 61 Am. Speech 61, 61 (1986). That means that the informants were all familiar with it, but many didn’t like it. The findings would probably hold throughout most of the United States. See dialect.

Language-Change Index
anymore misused for nowadays: Stage 1
Current ratio (Nowadays vs. Anymore as first word in sentence): 14:1

B. And any more. While anymore conveys a temporal sense, any more conveys a sense of comparing quantities <I don’t want any more tea, thank you> or degrees <I don’t like it any more than you do>. Sometimes even careful writers muddle this distinction—e.g.: • “Peruse . . . is not a word we use very often any more [read anymore].” Merriam-Webster’s Concise Dictionary of English Usage 584 (2002).
• “By Fowler’s time it apparently was not so rare any more [read anymore], and it is not at all rare today.” Ibid. at 630.

Language-Change Index
any more misused for anymore: Stage 1

anyone. A And any one. For the indefinite pronoun, the one-word spelling is required <anyone could do that>. Though formerly written as two words, the unification of the phrase is now complete. Any one = any single person or thing (of a number). E.g.: “When he died, none of us could remember any one thing he’d said.” Richard Hoffer, “The Player,” Sports Illustrated, 30 Sept. 1996, at 13.

B. And anybody. The two terms are interchangeable, so euphony governs the choice in any given context. In practice, anyone appears in print about three times as often as anybody. Cf. everyone (c); somebody.

C. Anyone . . . they. In all types of writing, sentences like this one are on the rise: “If anyone thought Diana would be chastened, they were wrong.” Jerry Adler & Daniel Pedersen, “Diana’s Battle Royal,” Newsweek, 11 Mar. 1996, at 20. Americans who care about good writing tend to disapprove—and strongly. But the tide against them is great, primarily because the construction is ubiquitous (and so handy) in speech. For more on this subject, see sexism (b) & pronouns (b).

Language-Change Index
anyone . . . they: Stage 4

D. *Anyone . . . are. Although anyone . . . they might arguably be acceptable, *anyone . . . are isn’t—e.g.: “Indeed, anyone who thought he or she could solve their immigration problems by getting hitched are in for a shock.” Julie Tilsner, “Guardians of the Green Cards,” N.Y. Times, 12 Apr. 1997, at 19. (A possible revision: Indeed, those who thought they could solve their immigration problems by getting hitched are in for a shock.)

E. Anyone else’s. See else’s & possessives (1).

*anyplace for anywhere has appreciably crept into print sources only since the early 1960s. It remains nonstandard—e.g.: “The old [athletic director] hasn’t gone anyplace [read anywhere], though.” Ron Bush, “Green Replaces Smith at CSTCC,” Chattanooga Free Press, 31 Jan. 1997, at H5. When the meaning is “any location,” any place should always be two words <at any place>. E.g.: “Readers out there are looking for . . . anyplace [read any place or a place] that serves a good Italian beef sub, like the ones Cousins used to sell.” Jeremy Iggers, “Celebrate Asian New Year in French,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 7 Feb. 1997, at E15. Cf. *noplace & someplace.

Language-Change Index
*anyplace for anywhere: Stage 1
Current ratio (anywhere vs. *anyplace): 64:1

anything: any thing. Anything is the far more general word, meaning “whatever thing.” Any thing, for practical purposes, is limited to plural constructions <do you have any things to donate?> and to contrasts with any person <is there any thing or person that might be of help?>.

anytime, adv., = at any time; whenever. E.g.: “Anytime a seller rents back from a buyer, an interim occupancy agreement should be completed.” Dian Hymer, “Seller Rent-Back Can Benefit Both Sides,” S.F. Examiner, 25 Oct. 1992, at F1. Some writers consider this term a casualism, but it is highly convenient and has—for whatever reason—gained more widespread
acceptance than *anywise (in positive contexts) and *anyplace. Cf. *anywise & *anyplace.

**Language-Change Index**

*anyways. This dialectal variant of *anyway is very much on the rise in AmE speech—although its use is negligible in print sources (outside dialogue). It usually falls at the beginning or end of a sentence, to mean "in any event" or "just the same"—e.g.: "Anyways I was saying before" or "be that as it may" (*anyhow*). At the beginning of a sentence, it often means "as I was saying before" or "be that as it may" (*anyhow would be a better choice)—e.g.: "Anyways I was saying before." See dialect.

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*anywheres. The first is standard. The second is dialectal. Cf. nowhere.

**Language-Change Index**

*anywheres for anywhere: Stage 1

Current ratio (anywhere vs. anywheres): 417:1

*apolog. See apology.

**Apology:** *apologue (= an allegorical story) is the standard spelling. *Apolog is a variant. (Cf. *analogue, *catalogue & *epilogue.) For a comment on the decline of the *ue form, see *agogue.

*apology; *apologs. Apology, in its general sense, applies to an expression of regret for a mistake, usually with the implication of guilt. It may also refer to a defense of one's position, a sense shared with *apologia (*a-pә-loh-jee-әl). But *apologia should preempt this meaning for purposes of differentiation.

*apothegm. See *apothegm.

*apostasy; *apostacy. The latter spelling is inferior, the original Greek word being *apostasia. E.g.: "The church has had its share of negative publicity, most recently stemming from its September 1993 purge of writers and thinkers it accused of *apostasy [read *apostasy] for publishing work the church said preached false doctrine." Lisa Carricaburu, "Media-Wise Men Charting PR Path for LDS Church," *Salt Lake Trib.*, 23 Aug. 1997, at B1.

**Language-Change Index**

*apostacy misspelled *apostasy: Stage 1

Current ratio: 10:1

**Apostrophes.** See punctuation (a).

*apothegm; *apophthegm. These are variant synonyms for *aphorism, *maxim, or *epigram. Although the longer spelling matches the Greek etymon, the shorter *apothegm is now universally accepted. It's also easier to spell and seemingly to say (/ap-ә-theg/)—though in fact the longer spelling is pronounced identically, with a silent -ph-. In his famous dictionary of 1755, Samuel Johnson gave the longer form a boost by listing both terms (two pages apart) but declaring the longer one to be "proper." It predominated till about 1850—not long after Noah Webster gave preference to the shorter form. In AmE there is a decided preference for *apothegm; in BrE the two forms vie, but *apothegm is slightly more common. Doubtless these trends are traceable in large measure to the two great national lexicographers—Johnson (BrE) and Webster (AmE).

Silent in the noun, the hard -g- sound is pronounced in the adjective *apothegmatic (/ap-ә-theg-ә-mat/). The word should not be confused with *apothem, a term in geometry for a line connecting the center of a regular polygon with the center of any of its sides. See pronunciation (d).

Current ratio (apothegm vs. apophthegm in World English): 2:1

*appall; *appal. For this verb meaning "to shock and upset," the standard spelling in BrE was *appall until
shortly after Samuel Johnson listed the word as *appal* in his 1755 *Dictionary of English Language*. Since the mid-1780s, *appal* has predominated in BrE. That spelling predominated also in AmE until the 1860s, when *appall* became preeminent. The dichotomy has remained: *appall* is AmE, *appal* BrE.

*apparatus* has the plural forms *apparatus* (the Latin form) and *apparatuses* (the native English form). Because the word has been thoroughly naturalized, *apparatuses* is standard—e.g.: “This . . . is meant to mean an incapacity, uncured by education, to know what our vocal *apparatuses*, along with our brains, are doing when sounds are uttered.” Anthony Burgess, *A Mouthful of Air* (1992). But the Latin plural does still appear occasionally—e.g.: “Two men were sitting there: one in an armchair, the other at a table where a curious selection of *apparatus* was laid out: mahogany boxes with brass terminals, copper-bound induction coils, and an instrument like a piano keyboard, the keys each marked with a letter of the alphabet.” Phillip Pullman, *The Tin Princess* 173–74 (1994). *See plurals* (b).


Cf. *nexus* & *prospectus*.

**Language-Change Index**

*apparati* for *apparatuses*: Stage 1

Current ratio (*apparatuses* vs. *apparati*): 21:1

*appareled*, vb., makes *apparelled* and *appareling* in AmE, *appareled* and *apparelling* in BrE. *See spelling* (b).

**Language-Change Index**

*appareled* misused for *appellate*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 28:1

*apparant* (= attached, associated) is the standard spelling. *Appendant* is a variant.

Current ratio: 8:1

appear. The phrase *it would appear* is invariably inferior to *it appears* or *it seems*—e.g.: “It would appear [read *It appears*] that more than a few of us are desperate for an easy dinner.” Ruth Fantasia, “Desperate Times Require Desperate Measures,” *Virginian-Pilot & Ledger Star* (Norfolk), 7 Jan. 1998, at F1. *See would & subjunctives*.

On the sequence of tenses in phrases such as *appeared to enjoy* (as opposed to *appeared to have enjoyed*), *see tenses* (b).

**Language-Change Index**

*appellant* misused for *appeal*: Stage 1

*appellant* is ordinarily a noun meaning “a litigant who appeals against an adverse decision.” Although dictionaries may provide some historical support for using *appellant* as an adjective corresponding to the noun *appeal*, this usage violates modern legal idiom, which reserves *appeal* for this purpose. E.g.: “The ruling must be reviewed by an *appellant* [read *appeal* or *appeals*] court before a new test can be scheduled.” “Rifle, Bullet Should Be Retested, Judge Rules in King Case,” *Columbia Daily Tribune*, 21 Feb. 1997, at A10.

**Language-Change Index**

*appellant* misused for *appeal*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 28:1

appendectomy; *appendicectomy*. The first is standard in AmE. The second was long standard in BrE—e.g.: “We early called the process of *appendicectomy* ‘hanger-on-cutting-out.’” Basil Cottle, *The Plight of English* 15 (1975). The longer form was long considered etymologically preferable—and perhaps it still is, in some quarters, since the appendix and not the “append” is removed (*ectomy*)—but today the syncopated form *appendectomy* is the undisputed favorite in World English. The AmE preference for the shorter term was established by 1900; not until the mid-1970s did the shorter form become predominant in BrE.

Current ratio: 8:1
appendant. See appendant.

appendixes; appendices. Both are correct plural forms for appendix, but appendixes has long been considered preferable outside scientific contexts—e.g.:

- "The authors of 'The Bell Curve' tell readers that they may limit their perusal to the summaries that precede each chapter, and that they may skip the main text. Still, 'The Bell Curve' is 845 pages long, and a reader who skips even the appendixes will miss many of the points the authors are at pains to make." Malcolm W. Browne, "What Is Intelligence, and Who Has It?" N.Y. Times, 16 Oct. 1994, § 7, at 3.

Nevertheless, the nonnative plural is more frequent by a 3-to-1 margin. See plurals (b). Cf. index (A).

appertain; pertain. Some differentiation is possible. Both take the preposition to, but appertain usually means "to belong to rightfully" <the privileges appertaining to this degree>, whereas pertain usually means "to relate to; concern" <the meeting pertains to the headmaster's continued employment>.

applause. A. Singular or Plural. This word, derived from the Latin verbal noun applausus, means (1) "loudly expressed approval," or (2) "marked commendation." In English, the word traditionally appears in such a way that its number (singular or plural) is disguised <we could hear the applause> <he gained our applause>. But the OED gives only singular definitions, and when applause is the subject of a verb it takes a singular verb—e.g.: "The biggest applause comes after his nod to party loyalty." Paul Demko, "Here We Go A-Courting," City Pages (Minneapolis), 25 Apr. 2001, at 6.

Yet because the end of the word sounds much like a plural ending in -s, some writers (who deserve misused as a plural: Stage 2 some hoots) erroneously use the word as if it were like a plural ending in -s. Yet because the end of the word sounds much like a plural ending in -s, some writers (who deserve criticism, "to party loyalty." Paul Demko, "Here We Go A-Courting," City Pages (Minneapolis), 25 Apr. 2001, at 6.

Because no new lands will be added until the year 2000, the current brochure will be applicable [read apply] for the next three seasons." Charlie Meyers, "Public Hunting Access Getting a Shot in the Arm," Denver Post, 12 Sept. 1997, at D3.

They call Heath Miller 'Big Money,' but 'Big Country' would be just as applicable for [read apply just as well to or be just as apt for] the veteran tight end. " Dan Gigler, "Pairing Steelers and Food," Pitt. Post-Gaz., 9 Sept. 2015, at C1.

B. Narrowing of Meaning. As suggested in (A), the word has never referred merely to clapping. Huzzahs would count as applause. But today the word is increasingly thought to be interchangeable with clapping—e.g.:

- "His answer was met with hearty applause from those in the audience, to which Clemens jokingly replied, 'Are you clapping because you want me not to be on city council?' " Marquis Brown, " Salem Residents Hear from Candidates," Roanoke Times, 23 Apr. 2008, at B10.
- "At Chelsea Cinema on Saturday there were close on 700 people (mainly women, all ages, and a smattering of homosexual men), whooping, clapping (Samantha, with the best lines, gets the most applause) and crying (look out for Charlotte saying 'no')." Glenda Cooper, " Carrie and Co. Beat Indy in Battle of Films," Daily Telegraph, 2 June 2008, at 5.

apple cider. Strictly speaking, this phrase is a redundancy because cider has traditionally referred to a drink made from apple juice. But for many decades now, beverage manufacturers have marketed other types of 'ciders,' from the juice of peaches, raspberries, and the like. So if apple cider is redundant, it is also sometimes necessary for clarity. Cf. tuna fish.

Language-Change Index

apple cider for cider: Stage 5

*applicable. See applicable (A).

applicable. A. And *applicable; *applicable. These two variants are incorrect. Applicable, the correct form, is properly accepted on the first syllable (/ap-li-ka-bol/), not on the second. See pronunciation (b).

Current ratio: 30,347:5:1

B. And *applicative; *applicatory. These forms are needless variants of applicable. Applicative is also a needless variant of applied, as in the phrase *applicative psychology.

Current ratio: 4,732:35:1

C. Be applicable. This construction is almost always inferior to the simple verb apply—e.g.:

- "Not all of these ideas, of course, are really applicable [read really apply] to my house or my life." Monty S. Leitch, "Home Improvement Via the Satellite Dish," Roanoke Times, 1 Sept. 1997, at A7.
- "Because no new lands will be added until the year 2000, the current brochure will be applicable [read apply] for the next three seasons." Charlie Meyers, "Public Hunting Access Getting a Shot in the Arm," Denver Post, 12 Sept. 1997, at D3.
- "They call Heath Miller 'Big Money,' but 'Big Country' would be just as applicable for [read apply just as well to or be just as apt for] the veteran tight end." Dan Gigler, "Pairing Steelers and Food," Pitt. Post-Gaz., 9 Sept. 2015, at C1.

See be-verbs.
Applicator

"someone who applies for something (as a position in a firm)."

Applicant

Applicant; applicator; *applier. An applicant is "someone who applies for something (as a position in a firm)." Applicator = (1) a device for applying a substance, or (2) someone who applies a substance.

*Applier is a needless variant of applicant.

Current ratio (applicant vs. *applier): 17:1

*applicative; *appactory. See applicable (b).

*applier. See applicant.

* applicable. See applicable (a).

Apposite. See apt (a).

Apposition (= the grammatical relation between two words or phrases that stand for the same idea) is sometimes misused for apposition—an odd malapropism. E.g.: "Their accounts were in stark apposition [read apposition] at several other points, too." Maureen Dowd, "Testimony Conflicts at Military Hearing on Abuse by Fliers," N.Y. Times, 18 Aug. 1993, at A1.

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Apposition misused for apposition: Stage 1

Appositives. An appositive points out the same person or thing by a different name, usually in the form of an explanatory phrase that narrows an earlier, more general phrase. So in the sentence "My brother Brad is a musician," Brad is the appositive of brother. Typically, in phrases less succinct than my brother Brad (in which Brad is restrictive), the appositive is set off by commas or parentheses:

- "'Gotta watch what I do, ' joked the dark-haired 18-year-old, the youngest child of Councilwoman Domenique Thornton and her husband, Richard Thornton," In the Running for First Daughter," Hartford Courant, 11 Sept. 1997, at B7. (Richard Thornton is an appositive of her husband. And the entire phrase the youngest child . . . Thornton is an appositive of 18-year-old.)
- "In that community, individual farming compounds were spaced between the complex of the community leader, the caddi, and the complex of the xinesi, the paramount religious authority." Timothy K. Perttula, Southwest Hist. Q. (Book Rev.), Apr. 2001, at 616. (The caddi is an appositive of the community leader, and the paramount religious authority is an appositive of the xinesi.)

Generally, a pair of commas (or, less frequently, parentheses or dashes) must frame an appositive unless the appositive is restrictive. So a person might write my brother Blair to distinguish Blair from another brother (say, Brad). But if Blair were the only brother, the reference should be to my brother Blair. This is not a hard-and-fast rule, and many publications ignore commas with a name as a short appositive of relationship, for two reasons. The first is stylistic: the written comma <my husband, Bob> does not reflect any audible pause in the spoken sentence <"my husband Bob">. The second is practical: enforcing the rule would require finding out how many brothers the subject has before deciding between his brother Blair or his brother, Blair, and that can be a lot of effort for a small payoff.

One telltale signal that an appositive is restrictive is the definite article the preceding the noun—e.g.: The grammarian Henry Sweet provided Shaw a model for Henry Higgins. (But reverse the order and it comes out differently: Henry Sweet, the grammarian, provided Shaw a model for Henry Higgins.) The signal is not infallible, however. Consider: My favorite restaurant is Abacus. The chef, Kent Rathbun, trained at . . . . Here, the chef is the main information and the name adds to it but could be omitted. In the previous example, though, the grammarian could not stand alone.

Emphatic appositives (also termed "intensive pronouns") are never set off by commas—e.g.: "He himself flunked the test." See pronouns (e).

Some writers erroneously omit the comma that should follow an appositive introduced with a comma—e.g.:

- "In the lawsuit, Douglas Hartman, an Illinois air traffic controller[,] says he was forced to walk through a Tailhook-style gauntlet during a workshop designed by Eberhardt to combat sexual harassment." Jean Marbella, "Daring Tailhook-Style Gauntlet Stirs Up Debate," Detroit News, 12 Oct. 1994, at A12.

As a matter of CONCORD, an appositive should match its noun in part of speech and number. For example, it's wrong to use a noun appositive after a possessive—e.g.: "Merton W. Starnes's (Starnes) claim arrived in this office after the deadline had passed." The better strategy would be to avoid the shorthand definition altogether; on a second reference, Merton W. Starnes becomes Starnes—and no reasonable person would be confused. Likewise, it's wrong to use a singular noun with a plural appositive—e.g.: "The spelling 'kinda' and 'coupla' probably reflects [read spellings 'kinda' and 'coupla' probably reflect] the writer's feeling about the special status of these 'words.'" Dwight Bolinger, "Couple: An English Dual," in Studies in English Linguistics 30, 40 n.5 (Sidney Greenbaum et al. eds., 1979).

For the problem of the "disjointed" appositive, see illogic (d).

Appraisal; appraisement. Although some dictionaries treat these as variants, the OED definitions suggest some divergence in meaning. Both may mean "the act of appraising, the setting of a price, valuation." But appraisement, when connoting the acts of an official appraiser, is the term usually used in reference to valuation of estates.

The more broadly applicable and more frequent term is appraisal in both literal and figurative senses—e.g.:

Strange to say, H.W. Fowler classified *appraisal* among those words “that have failed to become really familiar and remained in the stage in which the average man cannot say with confidence off-hand that they exist” (FMEU1 at 14). Yet *appraisal* has become the standard term in BrE as well as in AmE, largely from the American influence.

Current ratio (*appraisal vs. appraisement*): 70:1

**appraisal valuation**, though fairly common in financial and insurance contexts, is illogical and redundant—e.g.:

- “Clarifications are expected to be issued on performance measurement, accounting policies and *appraisal valuations* [read *appraisals*], according to Richard Carlson.”

**appraise; apprise; *apprize*. To *appraise* is to put a value on or set a price for (a thing). To *apprise* is to inform or notify (someone). Writers often misuse *appraise* when they mean *apprise*—e.g.:

- “Other employees also are kept *appraised* [read *apprised*] of developments within the company,’ Highsmith said.” Elena Bianco, “New Dimensions in Lumber,” *Lewiston Morning Trib.* (Idaho), 4 Nov. 1990, at E1.
- “The elder Hugh called up the Charlotte Bank and *appraised* [read *apprised*] them of the situation.” Katherine Burton et al., “NationsBank’s $8.7 Billion Acquisition Matches CEO’s Drive,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), 1 Sept. 1996, at C1.
- “Bandidos could be *appraised* [read *apprised*] of potential customers through Morse code.” Larry Habegger & Natanya Pearlman, *Central America: True Stories* 130 (2002).

Occasionally, the opposite mistake occurs—e.g. “The maximum loan-to-value is the percentage of the *apprised* [read *appraised*] value of the house the lender will finance.” “Fall Mortgage News,” *Seattle Times*, 20 Oct. 1996, at G1.

The **NEEDED variant** *apprize* (rare) is synonymous with *appraise*, although it is sometimes erroneously used as an equivalent of *apprise*—e.g. “You, in turn, for a fee, would be *apprized* [read *apprised*] of the date the city was notified of the potholes’ existence.” Bruce Williams, “Cities, States Limit Own Liability for Damage,” *Cincinnati Post*, 5 Mar. 2002, at B12.

**appre-**

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<th>Language-Change Index</th>
<th>Description</th>
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Sense 2 is gradually fading. *Misappropriate* = to apply (as another’s money) dishonestly to one’s own use. *Appro priate* has a more neutral, nonaccusatory connotation. Still, in meaning “to take from a particular person or organization for a particular purpose,” it is tinged with some of the negative connotations made explicit in *misappropriate*. See *emblezle*.

**B. And *expropriate*.** *Expropriate* = (1) to exercise eminent domain over; to take, by legal action, private land for public use; or (2) to transfer title to another’s property to oneself. Sense 1 is more usual—e.g.: “The government had every legal right to *expropriate* the land.” Sheryl WuDunn, “Farmers Holding Out Against Japan Airport,” *Dallas Morning News*, 7 Sept. 1997, at A26. Although sense 2 of *appro pi ate* seems generally consonant with sense 1 of *expropriate*, the latter is the better, more concrete term whenever it fits.

**C. As a Contronym.** See *contronyms*.

**approve.** See *approbation*.

**approve. A. Approve (of).** One may either approve something or approve of something. Usually, approve suggests formal sanction <the council approved the stadium plans>, whereas approve of suggests favorable sentiments <she approved of her mother’s remarrying>. As a matter of linguistic frequency, the collocation *approve the* appears in print sources about four times as often as *appro ve of the*. Cf. *disapprove (of)*.

**B. And *endorse*.** The two should be distinguished. To *endorse* is to support actively and explicitly. The word connotes action as well as attitude. To *approve*, apart from the sense of giving official sanction, is to consider right or to have a favorable attitude toward. The verb conveys an attitude or thought. In both senses, approve is more passive than endorse <she approved his stand on most issues but never endorsed his candidacy>.

**C. And *approbation*.** See *approbation*.

**approximate; approximal; proximate.** *Approximate* = (1) closely resembling; (2) nearly accurate; or (3) close together. *Approximal* = contiguous. *Proximate* = (1) very near; or (2) directly related. Sense 3 of *approximate* should usually yield to either *approximal* (if the two things are touching) or *proximate* (if the two things are close). See *proximate*.

*approximately about* is a redundancy. See about (A).

**apricot** (the fruit) is pronounced /ay-pri-kot/ throughout the English-speaking world—/ap-ri-kot/ being a chiefly AmE variant.

**April Fool’s Day; *April Fools’ Day*.** The singular possessive form has been consistently more common since the term became popular in the mid-19th century.

Current ratio: 2:1

**apropos (of).** Both the long form (*apropos of*) and the short form (*apropos*) are generally unnecessary, though they might prove serviceable in informal letters. *Apropos of* (suggested by the French phrase à propos de)—meaning “with respect to”—is well established in English. Yet the *gallicism apropos* may be used as a preposition to mean “concerning, apropos of” <apropos your plans, let me tell you about our schedule>. Hence of can usually be included or omitted, as the writer desires. E.g.:


As for comparative frequency in print sources, apropos of has predominated over the rival form ever since they emerged in English in the early 19th century.

The word is sometimes misused for *appri pri ate*, adj., a mistake often signaled by the use of to—e.g.: “Just three years ago, Sears, Roebuck and Co.’s finance department built a data warehouse [that] the retailer, apropos to its business, calls a data mall.” Leslie Goff, “Beitler Sees the Data Side of Sears,” *Computerworld*, 15 Sept. 1997, at 79. (A possible revision: Just three years ago, Sears, Roebuck and Co.’s finance department built a data warehouse called (appropriately) a data mall.)

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<tr>
<th>apropos misused for appropriate: Stage 1</th>
<th>Current ratio (it is appropriate that vs. <em>it is apropos that</em>)</th>
<th>270:1</th>
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**apt. A. And *apposite*.** Both words mean “fit, suitable.” Whereas *apt* is the ordinary term, *apposite* is a formal word.

**B. And likely.** Although some critics have objected to *apt* in a sense similar to *likely*, this usage has long been considered perfectly acceptable: “Even the dictionary justifies ‘apt in the sense of ‘habitually likely,’ thus graciously acknowledging the custom of many high-grade writers and the crowd.” Edward N. Teall, *Putting Words to Work* (1940). As Ernest Gowers explains, however, “in British usage *apt* always implies a general tendency; for a probability arising from particular circumstances *likely* is the word” (*FMEU2* at 34).

The same distinction between *apt* and *likely* applies in the best American usage. In the following sentences, *apt* is correctly used of general or habitual tendencies, rather than a likelihood in a particular instance—e.g.:

- “But be aware: seedling foliage looks like grass, and it is *apt* to be treated as such by meticulous gardeners.” Nell Lewis, “Freeze Lays Fall Colors to Rest,” *News & Record* (Greensboro), 10 Dec. 1997, at R4.
- “Fund managers . . . are more *apt* than most to dislike sick people and babies.” Brian O’Reilly, “Does Your Fund Manager Play the Piano?” *Fortune*, 29 Dec. 1997, at 139.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *apt* for “habitually likely”: Stage 5
2. *apt* for a particular instance: Stage 4
arbitrager. The anglicized plural arbitrages has been predominant in AmE and World English since the 1980s. In BrE, the predominant plural is still arbitrages, though now by a very slender margin. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (World English): 2:1

arbitrage. See arbitrager.

arbitrable; arbitratability. Although these are the established forms, some writers use the needless variants *arbitratable and *arbitratability, which have an extra syllable—e.g.: *Arbitratable arbitrate. *Arbitratability arbitrage.—e.g.: *Arbitratable arbitrage; arbitratable arbitrage; arbitratability arbitrability. *Arbitratability arbitrage; arbitratable arbitrage; arbitratability

*Arbitratable and *Arbitratability, which have an extra syllable—e.g.: *Arbitratable arbitrate. *Arbitratability arbitrage.—e.g.: *Arbitratable arbitrage; arbitratable arbitrage; arbitratability arbitrability.

arbitrator. See arbitrager.

arbitration. A. And arbitrage. Arbitration = the process of submitting a dispute to a neutral third party whose decision is binding on the participants. Arbitrage = the simultaneous buying and selling of currencies or securities at different values in order to profit by price discrepancies.

Writers occasionally err by substituting arbitrage for arbitration—e.g.:

• “In a terse statement on Wednesday, Sir Leon said the EU ‘will carefully study both the arbitrator’s report and the two panel reports, and of course meanwhile reserve our right of appeal.’ . . . In a parallel ruling, an arbitration [read arbitration] panel decided the U.S. retaliation is legal but excessive.” Elizabeth de Bony, J. of Commerce, 8 Apr. 1999, at A1.


The opposite error is rare but not unknown—e.g.:

“Futures and options based on the Russell 1000 provides arbitrage opportunities for investors . . . . The degree to which such arbitrations take [read arbitrage takes] place is likely to determine the pace at which the Russell 1000 overtakes the S&P 500.” C. Michael Carty, “Favored Large-Cap Barometer Will Change,” Pensions & Investments, 1 Nov. 1999, at 36.

In the Russian Federation, courts that settle commercial disputes are popularly called arbitrage.
courts (reflecting the Russian pronunciation /ahr-bi-trazh/)—e.g.: “Here, she is outside the Federal Arbitrage Court in Kazan in front of a mural of Lenin.” “Judge Discovers Striking Differences in the Way Russian Society Views Women,” Albuquerque J., 4 June 1999, at 14 (photo caption). The federation’s highest such court, however, calls itself the “Supreme Arbitration Court” to avoid confusion with the term of speculation.

B. And mediation. Both terms refer to resolving disputes through a neutral third party. Traditionally, the results of arbitration are binding—that is, the parties to the arbitrator’s decision are bound by it. Because that aspect of the proceedings is not universally understood, the redundancy binding arbitration is unassailable in most contexts. In mediation, to the contrary, the mediator merely tries to help two disputing parties reach an agreeable solution; the parties are not, however, bound by a mediator’s decisions.

This distinction is muddied somewhat by the emergence of nonbinding arbitration in the U.S. and Canada. But nonbinding arbitration generally addresses just one aspect of the dispute, and the decision (there is no award) serves merely to help the parties reach a settlement. The arbitrator, unlike a mediator, does not actively negotiate toward a settlement.

arbitrator; arbiter. An arbitrator is a person chosen to settle differences between two parties. Arbiter, by contrast, is more general, meaning “anyone with power to decide disputes, such as a referee, judge, or commissioner.” The terms overlap considerably, and they cause confusion on both sides of the Atlantic. When referring to legal arbitration, the term should be arbitrator. When legal disputes aren’t at issue, the better term is arbiter.

Hence in the popular phrase final or ultimate arbiter, the word arbitrator is inferior—e.g.: “Foreign attention enhances Assad’s image as the ultimate arbitrator [read ultimate arbiter] in the region.” John Walsh, “Accord: Diplomacy Ends Mideast Border Attacks,” Montgomery Advertiser, 4 May 1996, at A8.

*Arbiter is a frequent misspelling—e.g.:

- “Under the owners’ proposal, they would have the right to reject an arbiter’s [read arbiter’s] ruling and declare the player a free agent.” Dave Fay, “Union Says League Is Holding Up Agreement,” Wash. Times, 30 Nov. 1994, at B2.
- “Ever since the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision, judges, not legislators, have been the arbiters [read arbiters] of social policy.” Paul Craig Roberts, “Victory Trail from the New Majority Corral,” Wash. Times, 11 Aug. 2000, at A17.

One writer aptly says of a similar list: “These are easily avoided by anyone of the least literary sensibility.” Herbert Read, English Prose Style 9 (1952).

B. Mistakes Caused by Archaism. Archaism can be faulted in itself. But a still more embarrassing problem arises when the indulger doesn’t understand how the phrasings work. In Early Modern English, the following singular forms frequently appeared:

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Up to the 17th century, the -eth suffix was merely an alternative third-person singular inflection for an English verb. Used primarily in southern England, it had, by the end of that century, become obsolete. She calls and he answers took the place of she calleth and he answereth. Some writers, straining for an archaic literary touch, use this suffix with no regard to whether the subject is singular or plural. The following title illustrates this tendency: Bill Rogers, “The Bowls Overfloweth [read Overflow],” Canyon News, 25 Dec. 1994, at 9 (referring to the football bowls). This use of -eth with a plural subject has become lamentably common—e.g.

*arbitrator

arboaretum. The predominant plural is arboretums (AmE) or arboreta (BrE). See PLURALS (b).

arc, vb., now uniformly makes arced and arcing, no longer *arccked and *arccking: See -cck.

Current ratio (arch vs. *arccking): 4,915:1
archaeology (= the study of the remains of ancient peoples and their cultures) is the standard spelling in both AmE and BrE. *Archeology is a variant spelling. (See æ.) The word is pronounced /ahr-kee-ol-a-jee/, preferably not /ahr-kay-1/.

Current ratio: 13:1
archaic; obsolete; obsolescent. Archaic = old-fashioned; antiquated; characteristic of an earlier time and rarely used today. Obsolete = no longer in general use; out-of-date. Obsolescent = passing out of use; becoming obsolete. The phrase *totally obsolescent or *completely obsolescent is an oxymoron—e.g.: “Widespread acceptance of that work would render his own much more conventional, delicately impressionist poetry completely obsolescent [read obsolete].”

archaism. See anachronism.

ARCHAISMS. A. Generally. Many writers indulge in antiquated phrasings known primarily through the King James Version of the Bible or through Shakespeare. Avoid them, unless you’re being jocular. Among the ones to be especially wary of are these:

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LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. arbitrator. Arbiter: Stage I
2. arbiter misspelled *arbiter: Stage 1

Current ratio (arbiter vs. *arbiter): 1,538:1

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arboaretum. The predominant plural is arboretums (AmE) or arboreta (BrE). See PLURALS (b).

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Sometimes the second-person -est appears in the third person or even the first person—e.g.:  
• "Whither goest the sport of boxing these days?" Bill Dwyre, "Arum’s Next Big Promotion Definitely Goes the Distance," L.A. Times, 10 Aug. 2013, Sports §, at 2.
• "These silver linings provided balm to some, while the editorial writers and columnists—as always—worried aloud: Whither we goest into this nuclear night?" Bob Hill, "A Glimpse of News and Views at the Dawn of the Atomic Age of World War II," Courier-J. (Louisville), 3 Aug. 1995, at B1.

Sometimes an error creeps in from the mangling of a set phrase. A famous quotation from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, for example, is that "the lady doth protest too much" (3.2.230). Translate this to the first person and you have: "Perhaps I doth protest too much; it’s just that the players’ timing could have been better managed, methinks." Stephen Foster, "Case of Awkward Timing?" Roanoke Times, 8 Aug. 1995, NRV §, at 2. That’s equivalent to saying I doest.

A similar example appears in the phrase the ice man cometh, from Eugene O’Neill’s play by that name. Refer instead to men—or to some other plural noun—and you make a hash of the phrase or at best an inept allusion:
• "Tickets are hot in Denver now that they know the ice men [i.e., hockey players] cometh." "Icy Reception May Await in Nashville," Boston Globe, 25 June 1995, at 94.
• "Cometh the hour, cometh the brothers." Adam Lusher, "Jeremy Corbyns Wants to Run the Country. His Brother Wants to Control the Weather," Independent, 29 Aug. 2015, at 8 (the use of cometh with hour is correct here).

Even when the writer gets the grammar right, it’s not very heartening because the archaisms make the sentence ring false—e.g.:  
• "As an example, what doth one think would happen in Washington if it was discovered that the chief guy in charge of the nation’s finances had made his fortune in part by avoiding American taxes by way of putting his operations under flags of convenience?" Allan Fotheringham, "The Fine Post," Fin. Post, 12 Aug. 1995, § 1, at 19. (This passage is particularly inept because a redundant casualism [chief guy in charge] is mixed with a pseudo-biblical style.)

And even in jocular contexts, the jocularity is typically lame:
• "Yet it’s fitting that a comic rockumentary, Spinal Tap, has come closest to portraying the ridiculous truth of life as it doth rock and thence roll." David Belcher, "Source of the Sound That Goes with the Flow," Herald (Glasgow), 10 Aug. 1995, at 12.
• "So, all the world’s a stage, says Shakes, but doth the world need another staging of Hamlet, say I?" Shannon Harvey, "Bell Rings Up an Accessible Hamlet," West Australian, 5 Aug. 2015, at 6.

Finally, even when the intent is to be humorous, one shouldn’t betray an utter ignorance of how a given form was once used. In the mid-1990s, British Airways ran a commercial in which an Englishman strikes up a mock-Shakespearean dialogue that ends, “Tis the way we make you feeleth.” This construction is doubly bad because feel, in that sentence, is actually an infinitive in an elliptical construction: “Tis the way we make you [to] feel[eth].” How awful. Maybe an ad agency was to blame.

*archeology. See archaeology.

archetype; prototype. These words are close in meaning, but a distinction between them should be encouraged. As commonly used, archetype means “an ideal, a standard or typical example,” and most often applies to living things, especially human characteristics (Mother Teresa was an archetype of benevolence). Prototype, by contrast, means “the original type that has served as a model for successors”; it most often refers to a physical model of a mechanical invention (the investors may want to see a prototype). Inconsistently enough, the corresponding adjectives are archetypal and prototypical. The several by-forms (*archetypic, *archetypical, *prototypal, and *prototypic) are needless variants.

archipelago (= a group of small islands) is pronounced /ahr-ki-PEEL-i-goh/; not /ahr-chi-i-. Pl. archipelagos or (now more frequently) archipelagos. See PLURALS (D).

Current ratio (-os vs. -oes): 2:1

architectural; architectonic. Architectural is usually the literal, and architectonic the figurative, term. Whereas architectural relates to the design of physical structures, architectonic relates to rational organization or to the abstract structure of a thing or idea.

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Although *architectonic* is sometimes used like *architectural*, it should be confined to figurative or abstract senses to make the differentiation complete.

**-ARCHY.** See governmental forms.

*arcked; *arcking. See arc.

**Arctic; Antarctic.** Always spelled (and best pronounced) with the first -c-: */ark-tık/, */ant-ark-tık/. See *Antarctica*.

**ardor; ardour.** The first is AmE, the second BrE. The BrE spelling was the predominant AmE spelling until the 1840s. See -or; -our.

**area,** an abstract word, is sometimes used almost as a space-filler: *a problem in the area of domestic policy should be a problem in domestic policy.* E.g.: “Madeline Andrews, a third-grade teacher from the North School, in Londonderry, . . . has developed activities using computers for each theme and subject matter area [read subject].” “Celebrating All Aspects of Education in NH,” *Union Leader* (Manchester, N.H.), 10 June 1996, at A8. Cf. field.

*aren't I?; *amn't I?; *an't I? *aren't I, though illogical, is the standard contraction corresponding to *am I not.* *Amn't*, a dialectal form, is found mostly in Scotland and Ireland. See *ain't*.

In the 1930s, Frank Vizetelly denounced *aren't I* as a “hopelessly ungrammatical . . . representation of *'an't I,;*” and declared *'an't (pronomounced /ən/()/) to be “correct” and preferable to *aren't if used with a singular pronoun. Vizetelly, *How to Use English* 83 (1932). Even though he acknowledged that there was no support for his position and that the term was archaic and heard only in London dialect, he insisted that educated people use *'an't I* so that the verb would agree with its subject. (Ibid. at 71, 89–90.) Still, however, *'an't occurs only in dialect. And it is not limited to the first-person singular. E.g.:• First-person singular: “Much earlier in the novel, Bone adamently tells Granny that she *'an't no fool and *'an't no bastard* ([page] 144); but, as the years progress, Bone has a harder time rejecting the horrible names that are given to her.” Vincent King, “Helpful Grief: The Prospect of a Postmodernist Feminism in Allison’s Bastard,” *Southern Literary J.*, 1 Oct. 2000, at 128.

• First-person plural: “We don’t never talk, do we?” Dede asks her mother near the end of *Cavedweller.* Delia shakes her head: *‘We *'an't the type.’* Dorothy Allison, “Book Review: *Cavedweller,*” *Boston Globe*, 15 Mar. 1998, at F1.

• Third-person singular: “I say,” said Haley, and leaning back in his chair and gesturing impressively, “I’ll say this now, I al’ays meanted to drive my trade so as to make money on’t, fust and foremost, as much as any man; but then, trade *'an't everything, and money *'an't everything, ’cause we’s all got souls.” Editorial, “A Bill with the Devil,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 18 Sept. 1998, at B6.

**ARGOT.** See jargon.

arguably. See sentence adverbs.

**argument, n.; argumentation.** Argumentation refers to the act or process of arguing, or the art of persuading. *Argument* should be reserved for all other contexts.

**argumentative; *argumentive.** The longer form is the preferred adjective corresponding to argumentation.

*areola; aureola; aureola.* *Areola* /'air-ee-oh-la/ = a circular pigmented area of skin, esp. that surrounding a nipple. Pl. *areolas* (or, in medical contexts, *areolae*). *Aureola* = a corona around the sun or moon. *Aureola* is the short name for *Hakonechloa macra Aureola,* an ornamental Japanese forest grass. But it is also a variant spelling of *areole* and a common misspelling of *areola*—e.g.:

• “When it is still too difficult for the baby to latch on, it is sometimes necessary to use soft silastic nipple shields that cover the *areola* [read *areola*] and nipple and give the baby a papilla that can be utilized.” Fima Lifshitz, *Childhood Nutrition* 26 (1995).

• “The *areola* [read *areola*] surrounds the nipple; it’s darker than the rest of the breast.” Felice Newman, *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book* 25 (1999).

• “She is naked, with one marionette-like arm upraised. Her *aureola* [read *areola*] are surrounded by concentric circles so that her breasts resemble marksmanship targets.” Edward Guthmann, “Still in the Shadows, an Artist in His Own Right,” *S.F. Chron.*, 3 Oct. 2006, at E1.

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*aren't I? for *am I not?: Stage 5

Current ratio (aren't I vs. *amn't I): 71:1

Current ratio: 231:1

**Arkansan; Arkie; *Arkansawyer.* The first is standard; the second is a variant form that, although predominant in the 19th century, now occurs much less often in print. See denizen labels.

Current ratio: 2:1

**Arkansas /ahr-kan-saw/.* But the Arkansas River—which flows from Colorado through Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas into the Mississippi River—is pronounced */ar-kan-zas/ in the Kansas part of its run.
A 19th-century Arkansas statute ineptly prescribes the "only true" pronunciation of the state name: "Be it therefore resolved by both houses of the General Assembly, that the only true pronunciation of the name of the state, in the opinion of this body, is that received by the French from the native Indians and committed to writing in the French word representing the sound. It should be pronounced in three (3) syllables, with the final 's' silent, the 'a' in each syllable with the Italian sound, and the accent on the first and last syllables. The pronunciation with the accent on the second syllable with the sound of 'a' in 'man' and the sounding of the terminal 's' is an innovation to be discouraged." Ark. Code § 1-4-105 (1881). One can only imagine what happens when American speakers try to mimic an "Italian sound." One also wonders how many orthoepists testified before the legislative committee on this statute or were consulted about how the statute should be worded. In any event, no litigation has ever ensued over its interpretation.

*Arkansawyer; Arkie. See Arkansan.


armful. Pl. armfuls—not *armful. See plurals (g).

Armistice Day. See Veterans Day.

**arm's-length**. In phrases such as **arm's-length transaction**, the correct form is to make arm possessive; the phrase is usually and best hyphenated when it appears before the noun it modifies (<arm's-length negotiations>), but not otherwise (<negotiate at arm's-length>). Even when two people are dickering, the figurative distance between them is still a single arm's length. If the word becomes popular enough, it may one day become solid, like beeswax and oneself. But that day is not yet.

Current ratio (at arm's length vs. *at arms length): 19:2:1
Current ratio (arm's-length transaction vs. *arms-length transaction): 7:1

around; round. AmE prefers around <they walked around the gardens>, while BrE prefers round <they walked round the gardens>. See all-around. Cf. about (b).

arouse; rouse. In modern usage, arouse tends to be metaphorical <the speech aroused much interest>, and rouse tends to be literal <the alarm clock roused everyone in the cabin>.

arraignment; indictment. The meanings of these terms vary, depending on the jurisdiction. An indictment is almost universally the instrument charging a person with a felony; it also loosely refers to the act of charging someone with a crime. An arraignment is the reading of the indictment to the defendant or informing the defendant of the substance of the charge and calling for a plea to the charge. For more on **indictment**, see **indictment**.

arrant. See errant.

arrrear(s). The most common use of either of the terms is the phrase in arrear(s) (= behind in the discharge of a debt or other obligation). Current AmE and BrE idioms calls predominantly for this plural form, though in the late 18th and 19th centuries *in arrear* predominated.

*In arrearages is obsolete.*

Current ratio (in arrears vs. *in arrear vs. *in arrearages): 435:86:1

arrivee. See -ee.

arriviste. See nouveau riche (b).

arrogate (= to claim or seize without legal justification) shouldn't be used reflexively. Although it's possible to arrogate something to oneself, one cannot arrogate oneself something—e.g.:

- "The Court of Appeal stated that if such an injunction were granted, the English court would be arrogating itself [read arrogating to itself] the power to resolve the precise dispute between the parties." Aviva Golden, "Digest of Cases Reported in the Hilary Term," Fin. Times, 13 Apr. 1988, at I-20.

- "The hinges were being oiled to open the door for Lewis shamelessly to arrogate himself onto [read to shamelessly arrogate to himself a place on] the sprint relay team to win his unprecedented 10th gold medal." Steve Jacobsen, "Atlanta Olympics," Newsday (N.Y.), 2 Aug. 1996, at A89.


Without the edits, those sentences illustrate the vice described at object-shuffling.

For the distinction between arrogate and abrogate, see abrogate.

**Language-Change Index**

*arrogate oneself for arrogate to oneself: Stage 1 Current ratio (arrogated to himself vs. arrogated to himself): 66:1

arse; ass. Arse is the spelling of the BrE Slang term—in the anatomical sense, that is, not in the horse sense. In AmE, ass is the spelling for both meanings.

There's a story behind this. Today *ass* means both (1) "donkey," and (2) "a person's bottom." Sense 1 is the historical one; sense 2 originated in the mid-18th century as the result of a phonological change, as arse and ass became homophones. By the early 19th century, it was possible to engage in wordplay between the words—as in the 1802 cartoon in which one female rider says to another, “I’ll show my Ass against any
arsenious; *arsenous; arsoneous. Arsenious /ahr-sen-ee-as/ (= of, relating to, or involving arsenic) should not be confused as being an adjectival form of arson (arsonous). As for the arsenic-related adjective, the spelling with the -i- is standard; the other form is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio (arsenious vs. *arsenous): 9:1

artefact. See artifact.

*artesan. See artist (B).

arthritis (the disease in joints) has three syllables: /ahr-thri-tis/. Avoid adding the epenthetic schwa that makes it sound like Arthur-itis.

arthroscopic; orthoscopic. Arthroscopic (= of, relating to, or involving surgery performed with a viewing instrument inserted at a joint in the body) derives from arthro- "joint" + -scopic "viewing." The word is pronounced /ahr-thra-skah-pik/. Yet many people confuse the beginning of this word with the many terms beginning ortho- "straight, correct" (such as orthodontist, orthopedist, and orthotic). So they mistakenly refer to *orthoscopic surgery—e.g.:• “Orthoscopic [read Arthroscopic] surgery, physical therapy and rehabilitation followed.” Chris Antonacci, “Davis Feeling Good Again, Reaching New Highs,” Newsday (N.Y., Nassau ed.), 19 Nov. 2004, at A76.

• “At the time, Isaac, as he was called by friends and family, had recently had orthoscopic [read arthroscopic] surgery on his knee and was using crutches to get around.” Elizabeth Fitzsimons, “Death Becomes Lifesaving Cause,” San Diego Union-Trib., 2 May 2005, at B1.

Just to confuse matters, though, orthoscopic is in fact a word that means “rendering a proportionate image” or “giving a flat, undistorted image” <modern TV’s give an orthoscopic view>.

Language-Change Index orthoscopic misused for arthroscopic: Stage 1

articulable, not *articulatable, is the correct form—e.g.: “The salient conclusion is, therefore, to scratch such invidious issues from one’s articulable [read articular] political concerns.” Letter of John R. Blake, “Modern Anti-Liberal Logic Sometimes Difficult to Grasp,” Seattle Times, 7 Dec. 1991, at A21. See -ABLE (d) & -ATABLE.

Language-Change Index articular for articulable: Stage 1

Current ratio (articulable vs. *articulatable): 36:1

artifact (= an object made or used by humans in an earlier era) is the standard spelling in AmE. Artefact is a chiefly BrE variant, and the predominant form there, though the -i- spelling is almost as frequent in BrE. artifact is sometimes misspelled *artifice—e.g.: “There are subtle lines between art and artifice [read artifice], between performance and reality.” Jerry O’Brien, “No More Cocktail Dresses,” Providence J.-Bull., 10 Nov. 1995, at C1.

Language-Change Index artifice misspelled *artifice: Stage 1

Current ratio: 2,263:1

artist. A. And artiste. Artist (/ahr-tist/) is the general word for someone who creates works of aesthetic value, especially in the fine arts. Artiste (/ahr-teest/), a GALLICISM, is a more specialized word denoting (1) a public performer or entertainer, especially in song and dance; or (2) an affected, often flamboyant top with artistic pretensions. Sense 2, the pejorative one, is now more common—e.g.:• “‘Buskin’s Leontes, in long hair and greatcoat, has been conceived as a pathological artiste; we see him at a piano, lighted by a candelabrum and moodily fingering the keys.” Peter Marks, “The Banked Fire of Winter’s Tale,” Wash. Post, 4 Sept. 2002, at C1.

• “It is the voice of Pearl Jam’s Eddie Vedder, Creed’s Scott Stapp and all the other sulking, groaning artistes who have labored over the past decade to rid rock ‘n’ roll of its unpretentious joy.” Elsys Gardner et al., “Lifehouse Not Up To Code,” USA Today, 17 Sept. 2002, at D4.

• “From the realm of show biz . . . came musical comedy veteran Leigh Scarritt in three roles—Babe the supermarket checker, Roberta the hooker and Dolores the waitressing artiste.” Anne Marie Welsh, “‘Working’ Is Getting a Bit Tired,” San Diego Union-Trib., 23 Sept. 2002, at D1.

B. And artisan. Although these terms were once synonymous, they have undergone DIFFERENTIATION: an artist is someone skilled in any of the fine arts (such as painting), while an artisan is a crafter or one skilled at a trade. (*Artesan and *artizan are variant spellings.) Yet artist has degenerated to the point where many people use it in reference to anyone with a talent—e.g.:• “‘Burlesque is back!’ bubbles Dixie Evans, the legendary 1950s-era striptease artiste.” “Bare-All Reunion,” L.A. Times, 23 May 2002, § 6, at 37.

• “Here is where Rotham comes alive as a natural slapsch artist, her slim frame bending and whipping into frantic shapes as she flies into a panic at the fear of forgetting the signals, blowing the act and getting them both thrown into the clink.” Elaine Liner, “Love You to Death,” Dallas Observer, 18 July 2002, at 55.

• “Story follows a phobic con artist (Cage) and his protege (Rockwell), who are on the verge of pulling off a lucrative swindle when Cage’s teenage daughter (Loehman) arrives unexpectedly.” Dana Harris, “Loehman Joins Matchstick,” Daily Variety, 29 July 2002, at 12.

Current ratio (artisan vs. *artizan vs. *artesan): 1,808:36:1

artless has opposing connotations. On the one hand, it is favorable when contrasted with the idea denoted by artificial—e.g.: “Generally, Ms. Benedis’s works seem as artless as nature itself.” Patricia Malarcher, “Show Features Artwork Formed from Cuttings and Branches,” N.Y. Times, 9 Feb. 1997, at WC13. But it’s
often unfavorable when contrasted with artful—e.g.: “In an age of artless novels, here was an artful book.” Richard Dyer, “Sibling Reveries,” Boston Globe, 22 May 1994, at B15.

as. A. Causal Words: as; because; since; for. In the causal sense, as should generally be avoided because (not as!) it may be misunderstood as having its more usual meaning “while,” especially when it is placed anywhere but at the beginning of the sentence. H.W. Fowler states: “To causal or explanatory as-clauses, if they are placed before the main sentence . . . there is no objection” (FMEU1 at 31). This is most common in BrE—e.g.: “As she didn’t get the original money, could she please have the larger sum?” Martin Waller, “Mail Shot,” Times (London), 30 May 1997, at 29.

As Fowler suggested, however, the reverse order is infelicitous unless the reader necessarily knows what is to be introduced by the as-clause. So don’t use it in mid-sentence—e.g.: “Indeed, some jurors confirmed later that they wished they had been given the manslaughter option as [read because] they didn’t believe the au pair intended to harm the baby.” Kimberly Mills, “Au Pair’ Decision Does Injustice to the Lone Innocent,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 14 Nov. 1997, at A15.

Given the syntactic restrictions on as, we are left with three general-purpose causal conjunctions. Because is the strongest and most logically oriented of these. Since is less demonstratively causal and frequently has temporal connotations. But using since without reference to time is not, despite the popular canard, incorrect. (See superstitions (g).) For, the most subjective of the three, is the least used. If because points out a direct cause-and-effect relationship, for signals a less direct relationship, adding independent explanation or substantiation. Moreover, for is a coordinating conjunction and not, like because and since, a subordinating conjunction; hence it can properly begin a sentence—that is, one consisting only of an independent clause <I want to go home now. For I am tired>.

B. And like. See like.

as against = as compared with. E.g.: “The last Wednesday before the change, the newscast drew a 7.9 rating and 23 percent audience share in its first quarter hour, as against an 8.7 rating and 25 share for Channel 4.” Gail Pennington, “St. Louis Daytime TV Gets New Shows, New Times,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 4 Sept. 1997, at G6. The phrase is most common in Indian English, quite common in BrE, and somewhat uncommon in AmE.

The phrase is sometimes misused for against, especially in American law—e.g.: “Accordingly, for the foregoing reasons, petitioner is awarded summary judgment as against [read against] respondent.”


Speakers of AmE sometimes use the phrase in completely different ways that can give rise to misuses. First, it’s occasionally a shorthand for as being against—e.g.: “I wouldn’t classify our campaign as against [read as being against] Wisconsin,” CMAB official Nancy Fletcher said. “Cheese Wars,” Wis. State J., 12 Sept. 1997, at C1. And sometimes it’s part of an as . . . as construction—e.g.: “Often the law enforcement agencies and the drug czar seem to spend as much time fighting among themselves as against [read as they do against] the drug lords.” Gordon Witkin, “The Troubled Reign of the Nation’s Drug Czar,” U.S. News & World Rep., 8 Sept. 1997, at 26.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

as against misused for against: Stage 1

as . . . as. A. And so . . . as. In positive statements, the as . . . as construction is customary—e.g.: “The corn, which should be as tall as I am at this time of year, is barely half my height.” Eason Jordan, “A Visit to the Land of the Vanishing Lake,” Time, 25 Aug. 1997, at 52.

In the mid-20th century it was commonly held that so . . . as is preferable to as . . . as in negative statements—e.g.: “The Republican governor said he might support future efforts to raise the ballot bar on non-major party candidates, but not so high as Senate Bill 200 tried to set.” Mario F. Cattabiani, “Ridge Vetoes Bill on Ballot Access,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 26 June 1997, at A1. But as . . . as generally serves equally well in such negative statements, and examples abound in good literature.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

as . . . as for so . . . as in negative statements: Stage 5

B. First as Omitted. It is fairly common to see this phrase with the first as left off <they were thick as thieves>. The construction is a casuistry that is often employed with clichés. It is unobjectionable in informal speech and writing, but avoid it in formal contexts.

C. Repetition of Verb After. Often, when the second as in this construction is far removed from the first as—or when there’s otherwise an opportunity for ambiguity—the verb is repeated for clarity. E.g.: “Owner Ray Haynie—tall, slim and baritone-voiced—is as likely to be cleaning tables as is any employee.” Ruth Fantasia, “Not Just Any Port in a Storm Sting,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 3 Dec. 1995, at H5. (If we deleted the is, employees might bring sexual-harassment claims against Ray.) But if the second verb isn’t needed, omit it—e.g.: “Montreal is as likely to survive as is [read as] common civility.” Mike Celzic, “Baseball Players Making Nice,” Record (N.J.), 9 Apr. 1995, Sports §, at 3.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l-li.)
Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
**D. As [+ adj.] a [+ n.] as.** In AmE, writers sometimes err by inserting of after the adjective. But good usage rejects this—e.g.: “From the sidelines, Nunez became nearly as good of a cheerleader [read as good a cheerleader] as he was a running back.” Jaime Aron, “Westlake’s Nunez Leads AP Honor Roll,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 26 Oct. 1994, at C3. See of (b).

**Language-Change Index**

*not as good of a for not as good a: Stage 2 Current ratio (not as good a vs. *not as good of a: 25:1

**E. As . . . than.** Than is sometimes misused for the second as—e.g.: “A Roper Starch poll says that 24 percent of consumers—twice as many than [read as] in 1987—say they never go to malls.” Allison Lucas, “The Fall of the Mall,” Sales & Marketing Mgmt., 1 Apr. 1996, at 13. (But it would be twice more than.) See SWAPPING HORSES.

**Language-Change Index**

*as . . . than misused for as . . . as: Stage 1

as at (= as of) is characteristic chiefly of BrE financial jargon—e.g.:

- “The restructuring was needed, the group said, after a cumulative loss of GBP 75.4m as at December 31, 1996.” “Seafield Plans Restructuring,” Fin. Times, 27 Nov. 1996, at 22.

It’s a construction best avoided.

**as a whole.** See in whole.

**as best; *as best as.** The traditional idiom is as best she can, meaning “in the best way that she can.” The as isn’t part of a comparative as . . . . as construction, which takes the positive form of the adjective (as good as), not the superlative (best). So adding a second as is poor form—e.g.:


**Language-Change Index**

*as best as he can for as best he can: Stage 1 Current ratio (as best he can vs. *as best as he can): 15:1

**asbestos (the gray mineral once used in buildings and in protective clothing) is preferably pronounced /as-bes-tas/-—not /as-bes-tohs/ (a mispronunciation based on the spelling).**

**as between.** See between (e).

**ascendable.** So spelled—not *ascendible* (though, surprisingly, the -i- spelling predominated for a brief period around 1800). For an anomaly in spelling, see descendible. See -ABLE (a).

Current ratio: 13:1

**ascendancy (= a position of dominant control; supremacy) is the standard term. *Ascendancy is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.**

*Ascendancy and *ascendence are variant spellings not recommended.


**ascendant, in the.** Derived from astrology and denoting the part of the zodiac that is rising above the eastern horizon at a particular time, this phrase is sometimes mistakenly written *in the ascendancy—e.g.:

- “No such justification is available to support affirmative action for conservatives, who have never been excluded, and in fact were once greatly in the ascendancy [read ascendant], and who are no longer in the ascendancy [read ascendant] in some disciplines because they have chosen to go into others.” Stanley Fish, “Postmodern Warfare,” Harper’s Mag., 1 July 2002, at 33.

Avoid the variant spelling *ascendent.*

**Language-Change Index**

*in the ascendancy for in the ascendant: Stage 2 Current ratio (in the ascendant vs. *in the ascendancy): 3:1

**ascend. A. And ascension.** Both ascend and ascension mean “the act of ascending.” Ascent, however, has these additional senses: (1) “the act of rising in station or rank, or in natural chronological succession” <the ascent of man>; (2) “a method of ascending” <an unorthodox ascent>; and (3) “the degree of slope or acclivity” <a steep ascent>. And ascension also denotes (1) in Christianity, the ascent of Jesus Christ to heaven 40 days after his resurrection; and (2) in the astronomical term right ascension, the measure of the position of a celestial body along an equator as an arc from the first degree of Aries.

**B. And assent.** Assent (= agreement) is surprisingly often misused for ascent—e.g.:

- “Mehrunnisa is calculating even as a child; by the age of 8, she tells everyone around her that she intends to marry Prince Salim (who is called Jahangir upon his assent [read ascent] to the throne).” Carmela Ciuraru, “ ‘Twentieth Wife’ Opens the Door on Palace Life,” USA Today, 14 Mar. 2002, at D4.

For the difference between assent and consent, see assent.

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assent misused for assent: Stage 1

as concerns. See as regards.

ascribe (= to attribute to a specified cause) is sometimes misused for subscribe in the sense “to think of favorably.” Although the mistake was once thought to be found only among the semiliterate, today it appears in print with some frequency. Perhaps there is some influence from aspire, as the first and second examples suggest—e.g.: “

• “Within the field of family and couple counseling, models are not generally ascribing [read subscribing] to the view of normality as process.” Ray Woolfe & Windy Dryden, Handbook of Counseling Psychology 424 (1996).

• “Maybe there are enough readers in the publishing industry who ascribe [read subscribe] to Oscar Wilde’s aphorism—‘There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.’” Janice D’Arcy, “Happiness’ Sadly Weak as Satire,” Hartford Courant, 23 June 2002, at G3.


Still, ascribe is far more commonly used correctly—e.g.: “Van Gogh’s accelerating cycles of mental disturbance will probably never be fully diagnosed, but they continue to be variously ascribed to epilepsy, manic-depressive illness, and alcohol.” Jo Ann Lewis, “Trove of Van Goghs to Visit Washington,” Wash. Post, 13 Jan. 1998, at A1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index
ascribe misused for subscribe: Stage 2

Current ratio (don’t subscribe to that vs. *don’t ascribe to that): 43:1

as do. See anticipatory reference.

as equally. See equally as.

as far as. In its figurative uses, this phrase must be followed by some complement such as that’s concerned, that goes, or I know—e.g.: “As far as they’re concerned, January 1, 2000, will bring enough of a hangover.” Neil Randall, “Welcome to the Millennium,” PC Mag., 23 Sept. 1997, at 229.

When the complement is omitted, idiom is severely violated. This seems to happen most often in reported speech—e.g.: “‘As far as Ron Lynn [insert is concerned], I have no idea what the inner workings of [his]


Idiom aside, however, as far as usually signals verbosity. So instead of As far as he is concerned, it’s possible to save half the words by writing As for him, . . . .

See insofar as.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index
as far as without a subject and verb following: Stage 2

as follows; *as follow. As follows is always the correct form, even for an enumeration of many things. The expression is elliptical for as it follows—not as they follow.

Although the plural *as follow sometimes appeared in 19th-century and earlier texts, today it is unidiomatic. In fact, the 19th-century grammarian Lindley Murray disfavored *as follow long ago: “The phrases as follow, as appears, form what are called impersonal verbs, and should, therefore, be confined to the singular number: the construction being, ‘as it follows,’ as it appears.” 1 Lindley Murray, An English Grammar 222 (5th ed. 1824) (adding that “analogy and usage favour this mode of expression” [as follows]).

Current ratio: 128:1

as good as or better than; *as good or better than. The second as is obligatory—e.g.: “It follows . . . that the dialogue will be either as good as or better than an exposition along the same lines.” George Rudebusch, “Plato’s Aporetic Style,” in Plato: Critical Assessments 350, 351 (Nicholas D. Smith ed., 1998). Another, less creaky way of putting the idea is this: It follows that the dialogue will be as good as an exposition along the same lines, or even better.

Many writers, however, mangle their grammar by omitting the second as without rearranging the syntax as suggested above—e.g.: “A locally made cheese can be as good as or better than [read as good as or better than] an imported, well-known variety.” Jennifer Darling, New Cook Book 276 (2003). [An alternative wording: A locally made cheese can be as good as or better than an imported, well-known variety—or even better.] Cf. as much as or more than; as well as or better than.

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*as good or better than for as good as or better than: Stage 3

ashen; ashy. A useful differentiation has emerged here. Ashen means “resembling the color of ashes” or, by extension, “pale” <her face became ashen when she heard the news>. Ashy more broadly means “of, relating to, or involving ashes” <an ashy residue>. The following examples track this distinction:

• “Panicked, he had turned pale, almost ashen.” Laura Yee, “The View from the Flower Shop,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 14 Feb. 1997, at F1.

• “It takes more than a frumpy wardrobe, constricted hairdo, overtly ashy makeup and cane to convert France’s venerable, radiant diva of the big screen, Catherine Deneuve, into the glum, bisexual philosophy professor,” Roger Hurlburt, “No Honor Among Bungling ‘Thieves,’” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 31 Jan. 1997, at 7.


Asian; Asiatic. Asian is the predominant adjective for people or things from or related to Asia. Until the 1950s, Asiatic was 8 to 12 times as common in print as Asian. But after WWII, Asian rapidly became preferred and now predominates by a 14-to-1 ratio. Today, Asiatic is limited to academic uses such as Asiatic style (florid rhetoric), Asiatic mode of production (Marxist economic theory), and Asiatic lion (zoology).

aside. A. Mistakenly Meaning “on each side.” Aside, adv., properly means “to one side, on one side” (she lay the book aside and fell asleep). But it’s sometimes used wrongly in the sense “on one side, per side”—e.g.: 

• “For the lawyers, and there are three aside [read for each side] in this case, [jury selection] is vitally important.” Christie Blatchford, “The End of the Beginning,” Toronto Sun, 15 Nov. 1995, at 5.


• “With teams locked 0–0 after regulation time, McCambridge used her pace to exploit the additional space afforded to her as both sides dropped to nine aside [read a side] then seven aside [read a side].” Adam Clifford, “Extra Time Counts as Ships Shoot to Defend Title,” Mercury (Hobart, Aus.), 6 Sept. 2015, at 61.

This usage occurs most commonly in sports contexts—and particularly (though not exclusively) outside the United States, where games with different team-size variants are more popular. Soccer, for instance, is usually played with 11 on each team, but seven-a-side and five-a-side variants are also common. While aside is used adverbially in the examples above, when such phrases are used as adjectives or nouns, they should properly take two hyphens—e.g.: 

• “The sporting world splits into two camps over whether McIlroy was reckless in playing five-side [read five-a-side] football so close to The Open or simply living his life.” Derek Lawrenson, “There Is Life in G-Mac Yet,” Scottish Daily Mail, 10 July 2015, at 82.


B. Aside from vs. apart from. Though once considered inferior to apart from, aside from has become standard in AmE and BrE alike. But apart from appears far more frequently in print sources from both sides of the Atlantic. Cf. outside.

Current ratio (apart from vs. aside from): 6:1 as if; as though. Attempts to distinguish between these idioms have proved futile. As though governs the choice of phrase. As a matter of word frequency, as if has always been the more common phrase in Modern English. Eric Partridge suggested that as if is usually preceded by a comma and that as though rarely is (UEA at 47).

A better distinction is that as if often suggests the more hypothetical proposition when cast in the subjunctive <as if he were a god>. E.g.: “As he came closer to it he felt a great strength flow into him from the west, as if Silence had taken him by the hand after all.” Ursula K. Le Guin, Tales from Earthsea 161 (2001). By contrast, as though suggests a more plausible suggestion <it looks as though it might rain>.

asinine. So spelled. See spelling (a) & animal adjectives.

as is; as was. “He bought the company ‘as is.’” Although a martinet of logic might insist on as was in the preceding sentence, that phrase is jarringly unidiomatic. As is, in the context of that sentence, is really an elliptical form of as it is or on an “as is” basis and is infinitely better than those paraphrases. The purpose of the phrase as is, of course, is for a seller to disclaim warranties and representations.

as it were. The OED defines this phrase as meaning “as if it were so, if one might so put it, in some sort,” and describes it as “a parenthetical phrase used to indicate that a word or statement is perhaps not formally exact though practically right.” It is a highly self-conscious phrase typically found in highly self-conscious writing. Each of the following examples would probably be improved by its deletion:

• “His unit gone ahead without him, Melander accepted an invitation, as it were, to become a runner for a company commander, Lt. Al Ungerlighter.” Ed Lowe, “Unlocking Memories of Liberation,” Newsday (N.Y.), 16 May 1997, at A8.

• “They first assembled during humid two-a-days at the pool of the Collegiate Village Inn, where many players are housed, to walk—or wade, as it were—through their playbook.” Brian Schmitz, “Knights Prepared for Quixotic Quest,” Orlando Sentinel, 13 Sept. 1997, at B1.

• “There was the slight inconvenience of ‘training in a vacuum’ in that first week, preparing for a match, as it were, without knowing who Kerry would be playing in that match.” Paul Brennan, “Draw Keeps Kerry in a Vacuum for Another Week,” Kerryman (Irl.), 2 Sept. 2015, at 66.

Cf. if you will.
asked /ˈɑːskt/ is sometimes mispronounced /ˈæst/ or, through metathesis, /ˈɑːst/. See pronunciation (b).

as much as or more than. The second as must appear in this phrase—e.g.: “In our sample, 31.5% of the wives earned as much as or more than their husbands.” Diane F. Halpern & Susan E. Murphy, From Work–Family Balance to Work–Family Interaction 164 (2005).

A common blemish is to write *as much or more than—e.g.: “Suppositional Departures lead to just as much bitterness, and even more subjunctives, than Actual Departures.” James Thurber, “Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Guide to Modern English Usage,” in The Ways of Language 142, 146 (Raymond J. Pflug ed., 1967).

[As suggested revision: Suppositional Departures lead to just as much bitterness as, and even more subjunctives than, Actual Departures.] Cf. as good as or better than; as well as or better than. See cannibalism & illogic (b).

as of. A Generally. As of should be used with caution. Originally an Americanism, the phrase frequently signifies the effective date of a document, as when the document is backdated, postdated, or signed by various people at different times <this contract is effective as of July 1>. When such a nuance is not intended, as of is the wrong phrase. Often it is inferior to on—e.g.: “Barnaby’s employment with New Jersey Public Service ended as of [read on] September 30.” Cf. as at.

B. As of now. This phrase, along with as of itself, has been criticized as downright uncivilized. Lord Conesford wrote: “An illiteracy is introduced when the words as of precede not a date, but the adverb now. As of now is a barbarism which only a love of illiteracy for its own sake can explain. What is generally meant is at present.” Lord Conesford, “You Americans Are Murdering the Language,” in Advanced Composition 374, 383 (J.E. Warriner et al. eds., 1968).

But as of now does not mean “at present”; rather, it means “up to the present time.” Wilson Follett also disapproved of the phrase—recommending instead up to now or for the present (MAU at 76)—but as of now is today unobjectionable in AmE.

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as of now meaning “up to now”: Stage 5

*as of yet. See *as yet.

*as per is commonly understood to mean “in accordance with.” But writing texts have long condemned the phrase—e.g.:

“*As Per. This hybrid is inexcusable. Instead of *as per your request’ say ‘in accordance with your request, or ‘in compliance with your request.” Maurice H. Wesen, Crowell’s Dictionary of English Grammar 55 (1928).

• “as per, ‘in accordance with,’ is such horrible commercialese that even merchant princes are less than riotously happy when their secretaries wish it on them.” Eric Partridge, U&E A at 47.

• “When used to mean ‘according to’ (per your request, per your order), the expression [per] is business jargon at its worst and should be avoided. Equally annoying is the phrase as per.” Charles T. Brusaw et al., The Business Writer’s Handbook 478 (3d ed. 1987).

Originating in 18th-century commercialese, *as per is redundant for per. Yet even per is a Latinism in place of which any one of several everyday equivalents would be better (as, according to, in accordance with, etc.)—e.g.:

• “As per her request [read At her request or As she had requested], her family scattered her ashes Saturday at the summit of Mt. Washington in New Hampshire, said her husband, James Gardner.” Joe Haberstroh, “Irene S. Gardner, Retired Nurse” (obit.), Newsday (N.Y.), 10 Sept. 1997, at A49.

• “So as per our predictions [read as we predicted], we’ll have to give Foss’ date at South Sound Stadium with River Ridge on Oct. 24 the nod as the key game.” Gary Brooks, “Key Games,” News Trib. (Tacoma), 12 Sept. 1997, at C2.

• “As per usual [read As usual], Trump blew the little uber lefty punk out of the water with his reply.” Roddy D. Biggs, “Game Plan,” Belleville News-Democrat (III.), 10 Sept. 2015, at 242.

The phrase *as per usual, which emerged in the late 19th century and became suddenly popular in the early 21st, is an embarrassing barbarism.

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1. *as per for per or in accordance with: Stage 3
2. *as per usual for as usual: Stage 1

Current ratio (as usual vs. *as per usual): 349:1

aspersions, to cast is a prolix cliché for asperse (= to disparage; criticize harshly), a little-known but useful verb—e.g.:

• “Fazio et al. should cast their bars at ordained character assassins . . . rather than aspersing the American majority that claims to be both Christian and conservative.” “An Undeserved Whacking,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 14 July 1994, at A48.

• “And so to asperse her performance in this shabby way is to report irresponsibly and to forsake a goodly measure of any newspaper’s goal of fairness.” “Ford’s Husband Denounces Use of Unnamed Critics,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 10 Dec. 1999, at B6.

asphyxia; asphyxiation. The first refers to the condition of having insufficient oxygen resulting in suffocation. The second is the action of producing suffocation. Hence: “Asphyxiation [ˈɑːs-fik-see-əˈʃeɪ-ən]”, also known as suffocation, is any interruption of breathing resulting in asphyxia.” Ann Ehrlich & Carol L. Schroeder, Medical Terminology for Health Professions 201 (2004).

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
as regards, a much-maligned phrase, is sometimes called a solecism. Actually, it’s a traditional, perfectly good literary idiom more common in BrE than in AmE—e.g.:

- “We might expect . . . a more wary approach as regards some of the dangers of the test.” L.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* 5 (1929; repr. 1964).
- “Southeast Asia’s troubles could magnify what has already been a difficult summer for many U.S. multinational companies, at least as regards their ability to meet earnings growth targets.” Tom Petruno, “Wall Street, California,” *L.A. Times*, 2 Sept. 1997, at D1.
- “As regards the use of troops, Clinton’s apparent stratagem is to deploy troops by executive action.” James Gardner, “Exactly Which U.S. ‘Values’ Are Right for Bosnia?” *News & Record* (Greensboro), 7 Sept. 1997, at F3.

Though *as regards* is no more objectionable than *with regard to*, the whole lot of such phrases is suspect: “Train your suspicions to bristle up whenever you come upon *as regards*, with regard to, in respect of, in connection with, according as to whether, and the like. They are all dodges of jargon, circumlocutions for evading this or that simple statement.” Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Writing* 114 (2d ed. 1943). They are especially lame when used to start a sentence. See *regard* (A).

ass. See arse.

assassin; assassinator. Generally speaking, the latter can be regarded as a needless variant—e.g.: “Dr. Samuel Mudd was imprisoned there for setting the broken leg of Lincoln assassinator [read assassin] John Wilkes Booth.” Morgan Stinemetz, “Lost in Time,” *Tampa Trib.*, Sports §, 22 June 2001, at 8.

Yet *assassinator* has a rarefied mathematical sense. If you must know, it’s the unique associated prime of a uniform right module over a right noetherian ring (and please don’t ask for further elucidation of this bit of arcana). E.g.:

- “The set of all associated primes of \( M \) is denoted by \( \text{Ass}(M) \) (the ‘assassinator’ of \( M \)).” Paul Moritz Cohn, *Basic Algebra: Groups, Rings, and Fields* 380 (2003).
- “If \( U \) is a uniform right module over a right noetherian ring, the unique associated prime of \( U \) is called the *assassinator* of \( U \).” K.R. Goodearl, *An Introduction to Noncommutative Noetherian Rings* 102 (2004).

Got that?

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*assassinator* as an equivalent of *assassin*: Stage 1

assassination. When does a murder become an assassination? If a political figure is murdered—but not for political reasons or for hire—is it an assassination? The following passage rightly suggests that it is not: “An Egyptian diplomat was shot to death in the parking garage of his Geneva apartment building, authorities said yesterday. The victim was Alaa el-Din Nazmi, the commercial counselor in the Egyptian mission to the United Nations and other international organizations based in Geneva. Police said Nazmi was hit by six bullets. Prosecutors said they were treating the slaying as a possible assassination.” “Egyptian Diplomat Shot to Death in Geneva,” *S.F. Chron.*, 15 Nov. 1995, at C1.

Today, the word’s meaning has been broadened beyond political killing. Here’s a good modern definition of *assassination*: “the act of murdering someone (esp. a public figure) by surprise attack, usu. for hire or for political reasons.” The word also appears figuratively in the sense “malicious ruining or destruction” in the set phrase *character assassination*.

assassinator. See *assassin*.

assault; battery. In popular usage, these two are virtually synonymous. Most people use *assault* in referring to an incident that might begin with a threat and end with hitting and kicking. In fact, most people wouldn’t say that someone had been *assaulted* unless the incident included physical contact. So in the popular mind, *assault* is essentially the same as *battery* (a rarer term).

But in law these terms have precise meanings. Essentially, an *assault* is the use or threat of force that causes the person to whom the force is directed to have a well-founded fear of physical injury or offensive touching. A *battery* is the use of force or violence on another (in the criminal sense), or any repugnant intentional contact with another (in the noncriminal, tort sense).

Shooting a gun just to the side of someone, if that person reasonably feared physical injury, or shooting a blank gun directly at someone, would be an *assault*. Hitting someone with a bullet would make the act a *battery*, even if the shooter never knew about the hit. And in the tort sense, an uninvited kiss by a stranger is considered a *battery*. Cf. *assay*.

**Essay** (as a verb), though sometimes used synonymously with *assay*, most frequently takes on the meaning “to attempt; to try to accomplish.” In this sense it is a formal word—e.g.: “Caesar, a Durham native, played a church singer in the original production, but she has *assayed* the role of the meddling Mother Winters in the subsequent productions.” Bill Morrison, “Blessed Assurance: Caesar Shines,” *News & Observer* (Raleigh), 2 Mar. 1997, at G1. This usage is really an archaism; attempt or try serves better in ordinary contexts. Cf. *endeavor*.
assert. See -er (a).
responding to the verb not assertor, assertedly. See -edly.
So spelled in ordinary contexts—not assert-
assertable. See -able (a).

• text in which word-swapping occurs between the mistaken use ing a right—that is, sense 2 of assert—some writers When it comes to asserting authority or assert -
without exerting yourself>. Exert = (1) to put forth or apply (energy, force, strength, etc.) <the committee never fully asserted its author -
exercise or demonstrate (authority, a right, a privilege, confidence <they asserted that the world is flat>; (2) to assert; exert.

For the confusion of assert with ascent, see ascent (b).

assert; exert. Writers sometimes confuse these quite different words. Assert = (1) to state with force and confidence <they asserted that the world is flat>; (2) to exercise or demonstrate (authority, a right, a privilege, etc.) <the committee never fully asserted its authority>; or (3) to behave or speak forcefully <instead of backing down, assert yourself in the debate>. Exert = (1) to put forth or apply (energy, force, strength, etc.) to something <the team members exerted all their strength and won the tug-of-war>; or (2) to make a physical or mental effort <you can’t possibly write well without exerting yourself>.

When it comes to asserting authority or asserting a right—that is, sense 2 of assert—some writers mistakenly use exert. This seems to be the main context in which word-swapping occurs between the words—e.g.:

• “Engine builders will exert [read assert] executive privi-
lege, making sure the session is nothing more than a light workout.” Don Coble, ”One-Engine Rule Faces Test,” Augusta Chron., 25 May 2002, at C3.

• “The Ojibwe [tribe members] were simply exerting [read asserting] their rights under a treaty between the nation and the United States government.” Steve Arney, “Ojibwe Indian Spreads Culture, Tradition,” Pantagraph (Bloom-
ington, Ill.), 8 Feb 2003, at D1.


assertible. So spelled in ordinary contexts—not assert-
(except in philosophy). See -able (a).

assertedly. See -edly.

assertor, not *asserter, is the usual agent noun cor-
responding to the verb assert. See -er (a).

Current ratio: 1.2:1

assess. See access, vb. (b).
asseverate. See aver (a).
assignment. See assignment.

*assigner. See assignor.

assignment; assignment. Assignment = (1) a task or job; (2) the transfer of property; (3) the property so transferred; or (4) the legal document that brings about the transfer. Assignment = (1) an assignment; (2) a tryst; or (3) an assignee (meaning “one to whom property rights or powers are transferred”). Because assigna-
tion is a needless variant of assignment in sense 1 and of assignee in sense 3, it should be confined to sense 2, in which it is truly useful <despite pre-
cautions, a pregnancy resulted from their middle-
of-the-night assignation>. The word is pronounced /a-sig-nay-shan/—not /a-sin-ay-shan/.

assignor; *assigner. The second has long been said to be the general term, and the first to be the legal spell-
ing (as the correlative of assignee). In fact, though, the -or spelling has always predominated in all varieties of English. See -er (a).

assimilable. So spelled—not *assimilatable. See -atable.

Current ratio: 127:1

assist, n., has come into the language through basket-
ball and ice-hockey lingo <with an assist from her editors>. For now, it remains a casualism.

assist, v.t., is genuinely useful in a few phrases in which help simply wouldn’t do <assist reproductive technology> <physician-assisted suicide>. But when help suffices, it’s the better choice—e.g.:


• “Arvedson . . . slumped to the ice, where he stayed for about three minutes before being assisted [read helped] to the locker room.” “Salo Makes a Point for Islanders,” Star-Ledger (Newark), 17 Dec. 1997, Sports §, at 7.

Assist is even worse when it’s buried in a phrase such as be of assistance to or provide assistance to. Once again, try help instead—e.g.: “Phone lines opened early this year to provide assistance to [read help] people in need.” Mary Sansom, ”Director Seeks Support to Open Tri-County Mission,” Charleston Gaz., 18 Jan. 1995, Metro West Kanawha §, at 5. See zombie nouns.

assisted suicide. See euthanasia (b).

*associate together is a redundancy. *Associate together in groups is even worse. Cf. *congregate together.
associational; associative. These words are virtual synonyms ("of, relating to, or characterized by association"). Associative is now somewhat more common, especially in contexts involving psychology and mathematics <associative memory>. But associational also appears with some frequency, especially in legal contexts <associational rights>.

Assonance. See alliteration.

assuage (= to make less painful or severe) is pronounced /ə-ˈswāj/—not /ə-ˈswāzh/ or (worse) /ə-ˈswāzh/. as such. In this phrase, such is a pronoun requiring an antecedent—e.g.:

- “There has been an abundance of English slang from at least the sixteenth century to the present time, but it has always been recognized as such [i.e., as slang], and has at no time been supposed to be anything but a minor part of the English language.” Sir William Craigie, "Our American English Marches Onward," N. Y. Times, 18 Aug. 1935, § 7, at 15.
- “I saw in this a threat to the British way of life, but I saw also that my seeing it as such [i.e., as a threat] was nonsense.” Anthony Burgess, A Mouthful of Air 20 (1992).
- “Jake Coker was the starter even if Saban didn’t anoint him as such:” "Tide Buzz," Huntsville Times, 11 Sept. 2015, at B6. (Starter is the antecedent of such.)
- “We recognize that parents are the ultimate arbiters of their children’s education, and as such, should be permitted to pull their children out of certain lessons in the curriculum.” "Pulling Out Is Not the Answer," Nat’l Post (Can.), 11 Sept. 2015, at A8. (Arbiters is the antecedent of such.)

Sometimes the phrase causes a ambiguity when the referent isn’t clear. When that is so, substituting in principle or some like phrase is recommended—e.g.:

- “There could, accordingly, be no grounded objection to the existence of images as such.” Arthur C. Danto, "Likeness and Presence," New Republic, 7 Nov. 1994, at 43. (A possible revision: There could, accordingly, be no objection in principle to the existence of images.)

Also, some writers faddishly use as such as if it meant “thus” or “therefore”—e.g.: “These efforts represent a fundamental change in the way responsibility is spread throughout the organization, what practices and behaviors are nurtured and rewarded, and how care will be provided in the future. As such, [delete phrase] the change will not occur immediately nor easily.” Kenneth W. Kizer et al., “The Veterans Healthcare System,” Hosp. & Health Servs. Admin., 22 Sept. 1997, at 283. This misuse is perhaps a slipshod extension from correct sentences such as the following, in which icon is the antecedent of such, but the sentence could be misread in such a way that as such would mean “therefore”: “She will become an icon; as such, she will be a role model for years to come.” Letter of Ruth W. Junk, "It Can Be OK to Imitate, but Not Deify, Good People," Pantagraph (Bloomington, Ill.), 11 Sept. 1997, at A12.

Obviously, this phrase requires much care.

Language-Change Index as such for therefore: Stage 2

assume; presume. Assume means (1) to take upon oneself; to take over duties and responsibilities; or (2) to take for granted or without proof. Presume means (1) to take for granted or without proof; or (2) to undertake without permission. So one may assume a rank or office or authority by right, but another may presume to exercise the privileges of a rank, office, or authority despite a lack of right. Presume often carries a sense of arrogance, of going too far in acting without justification—hence the adjective presumptuous.

assuming. For assuming as an acceptable dangling modifier, see danglers (E).

assumption; presumption. The connotative distinction between these words is that presumptions are more strongly inferential and more probably authoritative than mere assumptions, which are usually more hypothetical. Presumptions may lead to decisions, while assumptions typically don’t.

Assumptive is pretentious for either assumed <assumptive beliefs> or assuming or presumptuous <an assumptive character>.

As for adverbs, always use the common forms derived from presume—that is, presumably (= I presume, it is to be presumed) or presumptively (= there is a presumption that). Stay away from *assumedly and *assumptively.

assurance. See insurance (A).

assure; ensure; insure. A. Assure for ensure. A person assures (makes promises to, convinces) other people <our hosts assured us that we would have comfortable rooms>; a person ensures (makes certain) that things occur or that events take place <our hosts ensured that we had comfortable rooms>. To put it a little technically, if the verb is in the active voice, a predicate beginning with that should be introduced by the verb ensure.

Assure takes a personal object—e.g.: “Davis assured residents they can help decide which trees are to be cut.” Bruce Schultz, "Cajunde Me Neighbors Air Problems," Advocate (Baton Rouge), 12 Sept. 1997, at B3.

In word frequency since 1900 (when the phrases came into common use), ensure that greatly outstrips *assure that. But the discommended usage crops up in other locutions as well—e.g.: “That would defeat the entire purpose of the legislation, which is to assure [read ensure] public perception of total independence.” William Safire, “See-Nothing Congress,” N. Y. Times, 23 June 1994, at A15. Theodore Bernstein doesn’t discuss this point in The Careful Writer, but here’s a less-than-careful usage: "What good writing can do . . . is to assure [read ensure] that the writer is really in communication with the reader, that he is delivering his message unmistakably and, perhaps, excellently. When that happens, the reader takes satisfaction in the reading and the writer takes joy in the

The following sentences illustrate the correct use of ensure:

- “There used to be an Eastern Idaho Sailing Association with more than 100 people, but the members' independent-minded personalities eventually ensured its demise.” Paul Menser, “Wadsworth Set sail into Yachting Business in 1940,” Idaho Falls Post Register, 24 Mar. 1997, at A9.
- “The volcano's shieldlike shape ensures that the air at the summit is... cool and clear.” “Hawaii: Under the Volcano,” Economist, 12 Sept. 2015, at 70.

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Assure for ensure: Stage 3

Current ratio (to ensure that vs. *to assure that): 22:1

B. Insure and ensure. Insure is best restricted to financial contexts involving indemnification; it should refer to what insurance companies do. Ensure should be used in all other senses of the word. Intransitively, insure is commonly followed by the preposition against <insure against loss>; it may also be used transitively <insure one's valuables>. Following is a commonplace <insure against loss>; it may also be used transitively <insure one's valuables>. Intransitively, ensure is commonly followed by the preposition as to. Ensure that the air at the summit is... cool and clear.” “Hawaii: Under the Volcano,” Economist, 12 Sept. 2015, at 70.

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Insure for ensure: Stage 3

Current ratio (ensure that vs. insure that): 37:1

C. Corresponding Nouns. See insurance (A).

Assurer; *assuror. The -er spelling, which has predominated since the late 19th century, is standard. See -er (A).

Current ratio: 90:1

-Aster. See diminutives (A).

Asterisk /as-to-risk/. The mispronunciation of this word, as if it had no second -s-, is well known. (See Pronunciation (B).) Not so well known are the resulting misspellings of the word. The most common one is *asterick—e.g.:*


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A asterisk for astigmatism: Stage 1

as to. A. Defensible Uses. First, it must be said that as to is an all-purpose preposition to be avoided whenever a more specific preposition will do. But as to isn't always indefensible. The phrase is most justifiable when introducing something previously mentioned only cursorily: “As to concerns the fair might lose on-track business if it offered its signal to the OTBs, [Dun said]: 'I figured we were going to lose the handle either way.” Jay Burns, “Farmington Takes Step Forward, Using OTB for New Revenue,” Portland Press Herald, 7 Sept. 1997, at D8. In beginning sentences this way, as to is equivalent to the more colloquial as for. In effect,
the phrase is a passable shorthand form of regarding, with regard to, or on the question of.

The phrase is also (minimally) defensible when used for about, but that word is stylistically preferable in most contexts. As to smells of JARGON—e.g.:• “The bill carries no presumptions as to [read about] the effect of incorporation.” “Citizens and Swift Creek,” News & Observer (Raleigh), 17 Mar. 1997, at A9.
• “Reasonable people may disagree as to [read about] the importance of the school system’s efforts to prevent and detect thefts in the schools.” Roy D. Nichols Jr., “Searches at Granby Are ‘Reasonable,'” Virginian-Pilot & Ledger Star (Norfolk), 6 Sept. 1997, at B8.

B. Poor Uses. The main problem with as to is that it doesn’t clearly establish syntactic or conceptual relationships, so it can hamper comprehensibility. In each of the following examples, another preposition would more directly and forcefully express the thought:

• For on: “It is always possible that your neighbor is not aware of how disturbing his or her behavior is and that he or she can be more sensitive to your concerns, or you can agree as to [read on] certain time parameters [read limits] or (if music is the culprit) what is an acceptable volume level.” Robert Griswold et al., “What to Do When Noise Becomes Intolerable,” San Diego Union-Trib., 24 Aug. 1997, at H6. (On the use of parameters in the second example, see parameters.)
• For for: “There is no change in the prior IRA rules with regard to an individual’s participation in other qualifying retirement plans. As such [read Therefore], the rules remain the same as to [read for] the maximum amount of adjusted gross income a taxpayer can have before the IRA deduction begins to phase out.” George W. Smith III, “New Law Offers Businesses, Workers Retirement Options,” Gaz. Telegraph (Colo. Springs), 12 Mar. 1997, at D1. (On the use of as such in that sentence, see as such.)
• For by or at: “Some people are a little surprised as to [read by or at] how quickly Veniard has gotten to his present level.” Peter Zellen, “Bolles Grad Proves He Can Pitch in Pros,” Fla. Times-Union, 28 June 1997, at 9.
• For into: “During a trip to the Mars Pathfinder Mission Control Center in Pasadena this summer, House Aeronautics and Space Subcommittee member Sheila Jackson-Lee, D-Texas, inquired as to [read into] whether the Pathfinder Mission had taken pictures of the American flag planted by Neil Armstrong in 1969.” Leah Gar- chik, “Getting There,” S.F. Chron., 15 Sept. 1997, at E10. (Another wording, asked whether, would work even better in that sentence.)
• Superluous: “Another equally important question is as to [delete as to] whether technical efficiency improvements due to economic reforms for each province over the periods were statistically important.” K.P. Kalirajji Shiao, “Did the Technical Efficiency of State Enterprises Improve with the Same Speed in All Provinces of China?” Applied Econ., 1 Mar. 1997, at 269. / “With the season down to a dozen games, it’s an open question as to [delete as to] whether Sele would have been placed at risk if he’d been asked to throw a couple of dozen more pitches.” Gordon Edes, “Red Sox Called Out,” Boston Globe, 17 Sept. 1997, at D3. See question whether & whether (b).

as was. See as is.

as well. When used at the beginning of a sentence, this phrase has traditionally been considered poor usage. But in Canada it’s standard as an equivalent of Also, . . . or In addition, . . . . Each of the following examples comes from a Canadian publication. In AmE they would be edited as shown in the brackets:

• “As well, [read And] people would have to work longer to qualify for UI [unemployment insurance].” Derek Ferguson, “Attack on Jobless Riles Labor Chief,” Toronto Star, 16 Apr. 1996, at A5.
• “As well [read Also], people can place a sticker announcing their donor consent on their driver’s license at the time of renewal or on their Care Card.” Pamela Fayerman, “$250,000 TV Ad Blitz Aims to Get More People Donating Organs,” Vancouver Sun, 22 Apr. 1997, at B4.
• “As well, [read And] many of today’s workers are stashing money in RRSPs, an estimated $6.5 billion this year alone.” Mary Janigan, “Making the Middle Class Pay,” Maclean’s, 29 Sept. 1997, at 42.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX as well as a sentence-starter (outside Canada): Stage 2 Current ratio (capitalized Also vs. capitalized As well): 15:1 as well as. See subject–verb agreement (e).

as well as or better than; *as well or better than. Some writers—a slight majority even, judging from the evidence of big data—illogically leave out as after well—e.g.:

• “Women would write in detail why they were working as well or better than [read as well or better than] their male counterparts.” Simon Hoggart, “All Present and Incorrect,” Observer Sunday, 15 Dec. 1991, at 37, 38.
• “The second worry is whether Tennes can do as well or better than [read as well or better than] the model.” Robert Barker, “A New Fund Rides the Big Mo,” Bus. Week, 1 July 2002, at 134.

Cf. as good or better than & as much as or more than. See cannibalism & illogic (b).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX *as well or better than for as well or better than: Stage 3

*as yet; *as of yet. These are both invariably inferior to yet alone, still, thus far, or some other equivalent—e.g.:

• “From the American point of view, at least, there are as yet [read still, or simply delete as yet] relatively few signs that a worrisome deflation cycle is dawning.” Tom Petruno, “Could Deflation Be the Next Bogeyman To Threaten the U.S. Economy?” Buffalo News, 25 Aug. 1997, at C2.
• “There are no plans as yet [read yet] to develop major Java products.” Richard Evans, “Going Soft?” Barron’s, 15 Sept. 1997, at 33.
*As of yet is a vulgarism. Cf. as of (b) & but yet.

Language-Change Index

1. *as yet for yet.* Stage 3
Current ratio (not yet vs. *not as yet): 38:1
2. *as of yet for yet.* Stage 2
Current ratio (not yet vs. *not as of yet): 5:415:1

-atable does not generally appear other than in -able adjectives derived from two-syllable verbs (e.g., create, vacate). It does so in those cases because the -able adjectives would be unrecognizable. H.W. Fowler notes some long exceptions to the general rule (incomplete, incalculable, incalculable, incalculable), and states his standard: "The practice should be to use -atable where the shorter form is felt to be out of the question" (FMEUI at 36). Other examples with which the shorter form is impracticable are anticipable, translatable, and infiltratable (so that infiltrable not be thought to be derived from infiltrate [= to sift or filter in] rather than from infiltrate).

The following words, which occur with some frequency, are better than the -atable forms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>abbreviable</th>
<th>confiscable</th>
<th>manipulable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abdicable</td>
<td>corroborable</td>
<td>medicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accommodable</td>
<td>cultivable</td>
<td>navigable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accumulable</td>
<td>degradable</td>
<td>obligable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activable</td>
<td>delineable</td>
<td>obviatable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>administrable</td>
<td>demonstrable</td>
<td>operable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adulterable</td>
<td>detonable</td>
<td>originatable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affable</td>
<td>differentiable</td>
<td>participable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aggregable</td>
<td>eradicable</td>
<td>penetrable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agitable</td>
<td>evacuable</td>
<td>perpetuable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alienable</td>
<td>evaluable</td>
<td>predictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allegible</td>
<td>expropriable</td>
<td>propable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allocable</td>
<td>generable</td>
<td>regulable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ameliorable</td>
<td>indicable</td>
<td>replicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>annihilable</td>
<td>inexhaleble</td>
<td>repudiable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appreciable</td>
<td>inextricable</td>
<td>segregable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appropriate</td>
<td>infatable</td>
<td>separable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arbitrageable</td>
<td>infurbable</td>
<td>subjugable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>articulable</td>
<td>invalidable</td>
<td>terminable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>calculable</td>
<td>investigable</td>
<td>terminable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communicable</td>
<td>isolable</td>
<td>vindicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compensable</td>
<td>ligirable</td>
<td>violable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At least one pair distinguished by the two suffixes has undergone differentiation. Estimatable = worthy of esteem; estimatable = capable of being estimated.

at about. See about (d).

at all events. See in any event.

at arm’s length. See arm’s-length.

at fault; in fault. Today, at fault is commonly used in the sense “responsible for a wrong committed; blame-worthy” <in a divorce, it’s of little value to try to determine which spouse is more at fault>. An American critic once wrote that “hunting dogs [that] lose the scent are said to be at fault. Hence the phrase means perplexed, puzzled.” He added that in fault means “in error, mistaken,” with this example: “No certified public accountant should be in fault.” Clarence Stratton, Handbook of English 24, 158 (1940). The phrase is virtually never used for perplexed or puzzled anymore. The phrase at fault is seven times as common in modern print sources as in fault.

atheist; agnostic; unbeliever; nonbeliever; freethinker. These terms denote different levels of religious skepticism. An atheist denies the existence of God altogether. An agnostic thinks a person cannot know for sure—in other words, God’s existence cannot be proved or disproved. An unbeliever or nonbeliever might believe in God but not in a particular religion. Finally, a freethinker might belong to a particular religion but refuse to accept that religion’s dogmas as incompatible with reason. See disbelief.

athlete has two syllables (/ath-leet/), not three (/ath-a-leet/). See pronunciation (b). Cf. -athlon.

Language-Change Index

athlete pronounced with three syllables: Stage 2

-athlon. This suffix, from the Greek word for “contest,” has two syllables. Avoid adding an -a- when spelling it and slipping in an epenthetic schwa when pronouncing it. For example, triathlon (an athletic contest featuring swimming, running, and bicycle races) is pronounced /tri-at-lahn/, not /tri-at-a-lahn/. Likewise with pentathlon (swimming, running, steeplechase, fencing, and shooting) and decathlon (three races of varying distances plus high hurdles and six field events). See pronunciation (b). Cf. athlete.

ATM machine. For this redundant initialism, see abbreviations (b).

atomic; atom, adj. These words should generally be confined to their natural parts of speech: atomic as an adjective and atom as a noun. But atom is sometimes used adjectively, especially in the phrase atom bomb.

Current ratio (atomic bomb vs. atom bomb): 5:1

at present. See at the present time.

atrium. Pl. atria (predominant in World English) or atriums (which has made slight inroads since the mid-1970s). See plurals (b).

Current ratio: 17:1

*attached hereto. This phrase, symptomatic of mercia and legalese, is normally redundant. Delete hereto.

attain; obtain. These two—both formal words—are sometimes confused. Attain = to achieve, accomplish.
attempt

attorney general. Pl. attorneys general (both AmE and BrE)—though attorney-general occurs also in BrE. See plurals (g) & postpositive adjectives. Current ratio: 58:1

attribute, n.; attribution. An attribution (ə-tra-bә-yoo-shәn/) is the act or an instance of ascribing a characteristic, quality, or source. An attribute (ə-tra-bә-yoo/) is a characteristic or quality so ascribed.

attribute, v.t. (= to credit [something] as resulting from a specified cause; to ascribe), is sometimes confused with contribute (= to play a significant part in producing something). The blunder is especially common among sportswriters—e.g.:


See MALAPROPSMS. For a brief comment on the misuse of attribute, see accredit.

The verb is pronounced /ә-trә-byoo/.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX: Stage 1

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Language-Change Index

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Language-Change Index

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See MALAPROPSMS. For a brief comment on the misuse of attribute, see accredit.

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*auctorial. See authorial.
auditorium. Pl. auditoriums—preferably not *audito-
ria. See plurals (b).
aud by 1:1
au fon. See à fond.
auger. See augur (a).
aught. A. Generally. Augt (= [1] anything; or [2] all) is an archaism in rapid decline. Today it is generally restricted to BrE—e.g.: "For aught I see they adjust themselves to their stations with all proper hum-

B. For nought. By error, a nought (= a zero) was widely misconstrued as an aught. Thus, aught has come—misunderstood—to bear the sense "zero." One explanation from folk etymology (see etymology (d)) is that, among graduating seniors in 1900, the class of oh-oh sounded too negative; the class of zero-zero sounded like a bunch of losers. So it became aught-aught. E.g.:

• "At the grass roots, a new organization, the National Alumni Forum, is urging its troops to withhold checks from alma mater until she bends her intellectual agenda to terms more favorable to the class of aught nine." Rick Perlstein, "Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change," Nation, 18 Dec. 1995, at 792.

• "Some old-timers say at the turn of the century, high school graduates were the class of double 'aught.'" Rebecca Simmons, "The Class of '00 or 2000: What's It Going to Be?" Knoxville News-Sentinel, 10 Nov. 1996, at E1.


These uses, to the American ear, sound either self-
consciously old-fashioned or very British. The American way of saying 2006 is not "twenty aught six" but "twenty oh six" or "two thousand six." For more on nought, see naught.

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aught in the sense of nought: Stage 5


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

aught misused for ought: Stage 1

au gratin (= sprinkled with breadcrumbs or grated cheese before being browned) is pronounced /oh graht-an/ or /oh grat-an/ in AmE. Avoid /aw/ in the first syllable. In BrE, the quasi-French pronunciation /oh gro-tan/ is common.
auger. n. & vb. A. And auger, n. & vb. These are very different words with similar spellings. They are pronounced identically: /aw-gar/. The more common one is auger. As a noun, it refers to a soothsayer or fortune-teller—e.g.: "[In ancient Rome], a man called an auger was said to be able to tell the future by observing the flight of birds." "No Ducks, No Glory," Wash. Post, 18 Jan. 2001, at C13. The word appears in Deuteronomy (18:10–12, NRSV): "one who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an auger, or a sor-
cerer, or one who casts spells." As a verb, auger means to bore or pare away—most commonly in phrases similar to those in which bode appears: <augurs well> (not <aught ill>). E.g.: "No theatrical spectacle could have been more majestic. It was poignant, it was glorious. And it augured war." Carolly Erickson, Alexandra: The Last Tsarina 219 (2001).

Auger refers to a tool with a center shaft and a heli-
cal flange, used for boring holes or for moving loose material—e.g.: "His machine roughs up the ice with an auger, squirts warm water over the ice and then squeegees that water to leave a smooth-as-glass surface behind the Zamboni." Nancy Lofholm, "Tres Slick: Zamboni in No-Rink Town," Denver Post, 2 Feb. 2001, at A1. The word also refers to a drill-like tool that rotates to gradually release particles of material such as animal feed—e.g.: "A computer-controlled system monitors temperatures and an auger feeds pellets into the furnace as needed." John Spears, "Put Another Blade of Grass on the Fire, Dear," Toronto Star, 7 Jan. 2001, at WB5. As a verb, it means to use such a tool. E.g.: "Durst . . . steered his six-rowhead Case 2166 combine through the fields and augered corn into a wagon driven by his father." Clare Howard, "Watching His Harvest," Peoria J. Star, 30 Sept. 2000, at A1.

Not surprisingly, some writers confuse the two words. Most commonly, auger is misused for aught—e.g.:

• "The highly partisan vote to begin open-ended impeach-
ment proceedings against President Bill Clinton augers [read augurs] ill for the United States and for the world that depends upon its stability and leadership." Parti-

• "The dearth of rainfall that pervades virtually all of the Midlands augered [read augured] against pheasants and other game birds in several deadly ways." Charlie Meyers, "Tough Times Are Ahead for Pheasant Hunters," Denver Post, 23 July 2000, at C3. (Note also the clashing words in dearth of rainfall that pervades.)

And the reverse error sometimes occurs, especially with the noun *(augur* being misused for *auger*)—e.g.: “Chesapeake Fire Chief R. Stephen Best said most of the barrels recovered were found in one location, near the spot where an *augur* [read *auger*] drilled into a buried drum last fall during excavations.” Robert McCabe, “Officials Find More Waste on City Land,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 31 Jan. 2001, at B1.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *auger* misused for *augur*: Stage 1
2. *augur* misused for *auger*: Stage 1

**B. And *augury***, n. An *augury* is an omen, portent, or indication of the future; or it can refer to the art of reading omens and the like. *Augur* is to *augury* as soothsayer is to *omen*—e.g.:

- “The results were invigorating and fearless, an exciting *augury* for the performances still to come.” Joshua Kosman, “S.F. Symphony Gets Stravinsky’s ‘Rite,’” *S.F. Chron.*, 14 June 1999, at E1.
- “Unfortunately for Bush, the *auguries* are disquieting: A recession and a fall in the stock market are both overdue.” John O’Sullivan, “Profiting from Recession,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 26 Dec. 2000, at 33.

The word appears much more commonly in BrE than in AmE. But writers commonly misuse *augur* for *augury*—e.g.:


**Language-Change Index**

*augur* misused for *augury*: Stage 1

**au jus**. This phrase—in French, “with the juice”—is traditionally a *postpositive adjective* meaning “(of a meat) served with its natural juice” <steak *au jus*>. But it has gradually been corrupted into a noun form a meat) served with its natural juice” <steak *au jus*>.

- “We had to ask the waitress to take the plate back, and to return it with horseradish sauce instead of the *au jus*.” Robert Tolf, “Chuck’s Still Cookin’ After All These Years,” *Sun-Sentinel* (Ft. Lauderdale), 27 Sept. 1996, Showtime §, at 39.

These uses are so well ensconced in culinary talk that there seems little hope of ousting them.

To make matters worse, the phrase is typically pronounced /oh *zhoos*/ or even /oh *joos*/ instead of the more nearly correct /oh *zhoos*/.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *au jus* as a noun: Stage 4
2. *au jus* sauce: Stage 3
3. *au jus* mispronounced /oh *joos*/ or /oh *zhoos*/: Stage 3

**autarch; autarky.** Although some dictionaries treat these words as variants, they stem from different roots and should be distinguished. *Autarchy* = absolute rule or sovereignty; autocracy. *Autarky* = national economic self-sufficiency; isolationism. In the mid-1960s, *autarky* overtook *autarchy* in frequency of use.

**authentic; genuine.** Today the words are interchangeable in most sentences, but a couple of distinctions do exist. First, *authentic* is off-target when the sense is “substantial”—e.g.: “No cinema owner has ever lacked for customers with a Woody Allen film. Allen enjoys demi-god status with the intelligentsia but his films are also *authentic* [read real or genuine] crowd-pleasers, with many first-run titles playing for the better part of
autoerotism

a year.” Lisa Nesselson, “Obscure Helmers Have Gaul,” Variety, 26 Aug. 2002, Deaville Film Fest. Supp., at 26. Second, authentic is an awkward choice when the sense is “sincere”—e.g.: “… the stirring color photographs of women and children in liberated Afghanistan, those huge, authentic [read sincere or genuine] smiles from human beings who have been rescued from misogynous thugs,” George Vecsey, “Knicks Face One Rivalry at a Time,” N.Y. Times, 16 Nov. 2001, at S1. Cf. bona fide.

The OED notes that late-18th-century theologians tried to differentiate the words, arguing that a book is authentic if its content is accurate, and genuine if it is correctly attributed to the writer. The point, weak as it was to begin with, has been preserved in some later usage guides.

authentication, so spelled, is occasionally misrendered *authentification—e.g.:


* “When it comes to authentication [read authentification] of a high-five, there are two frequently cited sources.” Jeff Strickler, “Give Her a Hand,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 21 Apr. 2015, at E1.

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* authentification for authentication: Stage 1
  Current ratio: 394:1

author, n. On the use of this word in place of I, see First Person.

author, v.t. A. Status. Since the mid-20th century, author has been rapidly becoming standard as a verb, though many writers still avoid it when they can. Generally it’s a mildly turgid substitute for write, compose, or create—e.g.:

* “Dougherty now represents some of the country’s top archery firms, serves as a consultant, and also stays very busy authoring [read writing] books and articles about bowhunting.” Sam Powell, “Tulsa’s Dougherty Is Due Induction into National Archery Hall of Fame,” Tulsa Trib. & Tulsa World, 22 Dec. 1996, at B15.


Some journalists and lawmakers have taken to using author in reference to a politician who sponsors legislation. This seems irresponsible, given that few legislators today actually write the bills they promote. E.g.:


* “Some did so out of solidarity over a procedural dispute with their partisan colleagues in the Senate—despite the fact that the resolution was authored [read sponsored] by John Warner, a Republican.” Steve Kornacki, “Republican Senators Deepen a Hole for 2008,” N.Y. Observer, 12 Feb. 2007, Opinions §, at 5.

Coauthor has been considered more acceptable as a verb, perhaps because cowrite seems deadpan. Yet cowrite and cowriter are often used in scriptwriting circles. See functional shift (d).

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1. author for write: Stage 3
2. coauthor for cowrite: Stage 5

B. Origin. H.L. Mencken explained the origin of the modern usage in this way: “To author . . . arose on the movie lots to designate the preparation of a script. To say that a given author writes a given script may be inaccurate, for a great deal goes into it besides the mere writing of its text, and sometimes the text is the least part of it. So to author was born—and now, as new verbs have a way of doing, it has begun to displace to write in situations where to write would be quite as accurate and a great deal less slobbergompitous.” H.L. Mencken, “The Birth of New Verbs,” in Aspects of American English 92, 96 (Elizabeth M. Kerr & Ralph M. Aderman eds., 1963). The OED’s treatment of the verb suggests that this account is accurate. It is true, however, that there was an earlier period (ca. 1575–1650) when the verb was used in the sense “to cause” or “to declare.”

authoress. See sexism (d).

authorial; *auctorial. The latter is a stuffy needlessly variant of the former.

Current ratio: 149:1

authority. For an interesting misusage, see autonomy.

autocracy. See governmental forms.

autoerotism; *autoerotism. Although most American dictionaries list the shorter form first, autoerotism is four times as common as *autoerotism. The shift in preference had occurred by the mid-1960s in

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(For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
AmE and by the mid-1990s in BrE. The longer form ought to be accepted as standard.

**Current ratio:** 4:1

**automaton** (= [1] a humanoid robot that moves without visible outside control, or [2] someone who seems emotionless and unreflective) has predominantly formed the plural *automata* since the early 18th century. Although AmE seriously flirted with *automatons* from about 1915 to the early 1950s, that plural has been much in decline ever since.

**Current ratio:** 6:1

**autonomy** (= self-rule) is sometimes misused for *authority*—e.g.: “But Dave Checketts, president of Madison Square Garden, insisted that the 50-year-old Riley wanted part ownership and complete autonomy of [read authority over] the team, and that his heart was no longer in the job when those requests were denied.” Clifton Brown, “Riley Quits over Difference with Management,” *N.Y. Times*, 16 June 1995, at B14. This sentence suggests that Coach Pat Riley wanted the team to be entirely self-governing, but the context shows that he wanted authority for himself.

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*autonomy* misused for *authority*: Stage 1

**autopsy; postmortem.** These equivalents are each current in AmE and BrE. *Autopsy* is slightly more common in both AmE and BrE. *Postmortem* now tends to be used figuratively <Let’s do a postmortem on our performance>.

As a verb, *autopsy* dates back to the late 19th century but wasn’t recorded in the dictionaries until much later. It means “to perform a postmortem examination on.” E.g.: • “Rhoda Walston, veterinary pathologist at the lab, autopsied the carcass and traced a trajectory showing the bear had been shot from the side, not the front.” Kim Murphy, “Shielded Species Get High-Tech Lab Help,” *L.A. Times*, 29 Dec. 1996, at A1. • “All but 15 bodies have been recovered and autopsied.” “Flight 800 Autopsy Reports Released,” *Wash. Post*, 4 Jan. 1997, at A12.

**auxiliary.** So spelled, this word is best pronounced /aw-giul-a-ray-lee/. Perhaps through confusion with *ancillary*, it is often misspelled *auxillary* (and mis/pronounced /aw-giul-a-ray-lee/)—e.g.: • “In the past week, the company has moved operations to its auxiliary [read auxiliary] warehouse.” Jeff Richgels, “Rising from the Ashes,” *Capital Times* (Madison), 10 Aug. 1996, at C1. • “She was a member of the Ladies Auxiliary [read auxilary] of Gerald O’Neill Post #1683 American Legion.” “Helen G. Featherstone” (obit.), *Times Union* (Albany), 14 Jan. 1997, at B6.

**Language-Change Index**

*auxiliary* misspelled *auxiliary*: Stage 1

**avail.** A. As a Verb. *Avail* = (1) to get the benefit of, make use of <to avail oneself of the opportunity>; or (2) to be of advantage or utility <the attempts to rectify the problem availed no one>.

In sense 1, which is always reflexive, it’s an error to use the passive voice—e.g.: “Where the special lump-sum averaging rule is availed of, there is no $20,000 exclusion allowed.” Marshall L. Fineman, “New York State and City Income Tax Consequences of IRA and Pension Distributions,” *CPA J.*, 1 June 1995, at 72. (A possible revision: *If the taxpayer uses the lump-sum averaging rule, no $20,000 exclusion is allowed.*)

In AmE, some jargonistic writers use the passive *be availed* in various incorrect senses. For example, some think it means “to be made available,” a usage without any sanction—e.g.: “The court acknowledged . . . that . . . it was the inherent duty of government to ensure that equitable educational opportunity was availed [read be made available or is made available] to all of its citizenry.” Chet Whyte Jr., “40 Years After Brown Decision, Education Chances Slipping Again,” *Denver Post*, 17 May 1994, at B7. Others seem to think *be availed* means “to be allowed”—e.g.: “On the other hand, in single-income families, only the working spouse is availed [read is allowed] the graduated tax rates.” “The Taxman’s Dual-Income Bias,” *Fin. Post*, 9 Apr. 1994, at 16.

In Ireland, oddly, it is quite common to omit the reflexive object and to use *avail of* in the sense “to take advantage of”—e.g.: • “Draper also believes he has a duty to tell his readers that, yes, his wife availed of [read took advantage of] the Dunnes Stores ‘Saucepans for Stamps’ promotion.” “Parties Try to Outdo Each Other in Their Race to the High Moral Ground,” *Irish Times*, 14 Dec. 1996, at 14.

• “Galway United increased their lead on the hour when they availed of [read took advantage of] a poor clearance by Noel Hartigan.” “First Blood to Galway in Final,” *Irish Times*, 18 Dec. 1996, at 21. (The *they* in reference to a sports team is typical of BrE. See COLLECTIVE NOUNS.) Irish examples of this usage are legion.

Often this verb, when used transitively (sense 2), could be replaced by a simpler word such as *help*, *profit*, or *benefit*—e.g.: • “The sedate slopes averted mildew—death for grapes—and availed [read helped] Evans in his quest for developing a sweet purple grape.” Bart Ripp, “Maritime Memento,” *News Trib.* (Tacoma), 15 Oct. 1995, Soundlife §, at 10.

• “The Tide blitzed Danny Wuerffel, knocked him down, made him hurry. This was the formula plied by FSU, but it availed Alabama not at all [read didn’t help Alabama at all].” Mark Bradley, “Florida 45, Alabama 30,” *Atlanta J.-Const.*, 8 Dec. 1996, at E4.

Often simpler words also better express sense 1—e.g.: “Festival-goers availed [read helped] themselves to a buffet and a bellyful of ragtime, jazz standards and vaudeville classics.” Michael Kuelker, “Ragtime Fest Opens with 6-Hour Session,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 2 Sept. 1995, at D7. In that sentence, *avail* was also mistakenly matched with to rather than of.

**Language-Change Index**

*to be availed* misused for *to make available*: Stage 1
B. As a Noun. Avail is frequently a noun having the sense "beneficial effect, advantage," especially in the phrase to no avail, meaning "without success"—e.g.:


Avenging. A. And revenge, vb. & n. To avenge is to visit fitting retribution on a wrongdoer by reason of (a specified wrong). Avenger and vengeance have to do with justice, and often with the legal process—e.g.:

- "He longs to see his friends' deaths avenged, to get a date with Beth Penrose, and to keep her from the amorous advances of the FBI liaison working on the case." Susan Marx, "A Fruitful Mix of Mystery and Romance," Orange County Register, 27 July 1997, at F24.


But the justice may also be taken upon oneself—e.g.:

- "In its statement, the Islamic Jihad said it carried out the attack to avenge the deaths of more than 30 Palestinian civilians during Israeli army raids in the Gaza Strip this month." Peter Mermann, "Car Bomb Kills at Least 16 in Northern Israel," Baltimore Sun, 22 Oct. 2002, at A16.


Quite often, however, avenge has nothing to do with real justice, but only with evening a score, especially in sports and politics—e.g.:


- "The goal is not only to avenge Al Gore’s failure to capture the state in 2000, but also to set the stage for a Democratic presidential candidate in 2004." Katherine Q. Seelye, "McAuliffe Describes Jeb Bush as the Democrats’ Top Target," N.Y. Times, 24 Oct. 2002, at A31.

To revenge is to inflict suffering or harm upon another out of personal resentment. Revenge has to do with getting even—e.g.: "In 1996, with Leslie at the lead, the Americans avenged that defeat." John Erardi, "Past Forward," Cincinnati Enquirer, 28 Mar. 1997, at F2. Actually, though, sportswriters use the two verbs almost interchangeably. If they’re looking for hype, the word should be revenge.

Often, too, revenge is a reflexive verb—e.g.:

- "Solon, for example, opposed waiting until the dissatisfied class revenged itself with revolution and confiscation." William D. Snider, "A Three-Week Greek Sailing Cruise Turns into a Voyage Back in Time," News & Record (Greensboro), 30 June 1996, at F3.

- "Never having been able to afford the real thing as a young woman, she avenged herself by designing gigantic ropes of pearls and huge crystals." Patricia McLachlin, "Fake Fur: Glamour Without Guilt," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 3 Oct. 1996, Style West §, at 7.

Moreover, revenge can (and usually does) function as a noun, whereas avenging cannot.

B. Avenge for get revenge. Although the OED supports the notion that avenge may also mean "to take vengeance on (a wrongdoer)," this sense is labeled obsolete and the few examples are from the mid-17th century. Today this sense is fairly rare and not at all idiomatic—e.g.：“Not only did they avenge [read get revenge on] the schoolyard bullies and nasty teachers, but they’re also famous for it, because they got their faces all over the news.” Jack Levin & James Alan Fox, "Making Celebrities of Serial Killers Elevates Threat," USA Today, 23 Oct. 2002, at A13.

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Avenge in the sense “to get revenge on”: Stage 2

Current ratio (avenge his vs. *avenge him): 4:1

Aver. A. And asseverate. These are formal words for say or state. Aver has its place in solemn contexts <Allen averred that he would somehow make things right>. Asseverate, a rarer and weightier word, is seldom justified. Both refer to affirmations of fact, usually with no implication that an oath has been taken.

B. Corresponding Noun: avermint or *averral. Averment is the preferred noun corresponding to aver in both AmE and BrE—e.g.: "Gingrich personally and his Contract [with America] are endlessly hammered for ‘ms’-ness, as in columnlist Robert L. Steinbeck’s averment in the Tampa Tribune.” Daniel Seligman, "Our Spirited Republicans, the Great Coed Bathroom Capers,” Fortune, 25 Dec. 1995, at 231 (‘ms’-ness referring to ‘mean-spiritedness’). *Averral is a needless variant, perhaps coined with avowal in mind.

Current ratio: 36:1

Average is a word that assumes a broad sample of subjects. As a verb, it does not mix well with each: “Each Boston member averages ten years of experience.” (Read: Members in Boston have an average of ten years’ experience. Or: The Boston members average ten years’ experience.) See each.

Averageable. So spelled.

Averment; *averral. See aver (b).

Averse. See adverse.

Avert. See advert.
avertable. So spelled—no longer *avertible. Though the -i- spelling was once standard, the -a- spelling became predominant in the 1980s and remains so. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 5:1

aviary; apiary. An aviary is a place for captive birds; an apiary is a place for bees and beehives. The words derive from the Latin terms avis (= bird) and apis (= bee). Aviary has been the victim of slipshod extension in the sense insectarium (= a place for keeping and breeding insects)—e.g.:


• “Salopek said the bees would be taken to his house, where he has an aviary [read apiary] he uses for bees.” Jorge Milian, “Buzz Quieted in Wellington,” Palm Beach Post, 22 Aug. 2015, at B1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
aviary misused for insectarium, etc.: Stage 1

avocado. Pl. avocados—not *avocades. See plurals (d).

Current ratio: 19:1

avocation; vocation. Although these words are quite different, many writers misuse avocation for vocation. The first means “hobby,” whereas the second means “calling or profession.” Here is the common mistake, worsened by redundancy: “My one life—my professional avocation [read vocation]—is to help prevent animal suffering.” Michael Fox, “Animal Doctor,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 28 Feb. 1996, Everyday Mag. ¶, at E2.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
avocation misused for vocation: Stage 1

*avouch. See vouch.

await. A. And wait for. Because await is transitive, it doesn’t take a preposition such as for. Essentially, await means the same thing as wait for: you can await someone’s arrival or wait for the person to arrive. But *await for isn’t good English. Although it appears mostly in the writings of nonnative speakers of English (especially in foreign journals), it does surface in homegrown writing as well—e.g.:

• “He was being held by customs officials at Kennedy Airport, who captured him while awaiting for [read while he awaited or while he waited for] a Pakistan International Airline flight.” “Suspect Held in NYC for 4 Ohio Deaths,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 13 Sept. 1999, at B2.


B. And wait on. A waiter waits on tables. But a dinner partner does not wait on you to arrive. That is the distinction that critics made for more than a century: they objected to wait on in the sense of await or wait for—e.g.: “They waited on [read waited for] the jury’s verdict.” Even if this is not the best phrasing, however, wait on is now so common as a casualism that it can’t be labeled incorrect.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
wait on in the sense “to wait for”: Stage 5

awake(n). See wake.

away; aweigh. See anchors aweigh.

awless; *awless. Since the mid-19th century, awless has been the predominant spelling. But today *awless competes closely with it, doubtless on the analogy of awful.

awesome, in the 1980s and 1990s, became a ubiquitous vogue word <That movie was totally awesome!>. For the time being, the word has been spoiled by overuse.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
awesome for excellent or stupendously good: Stage 4

awful; awfully. The word awful has undergone several transformations. Originally, it referred to people and meant “filled with awe”; later it referred to things and meant “inspiring people with awe.” Its meaning then degenerated to “horrible, terrible” <what an awful accident>. And awfully, meanwhile, became an equivalent of very, but with greater intensity <Joe was awfully sorry about the mix-up>. Nobody objects to these uses in speech, and few would in writing. But some begin to object when awfully intensifies adjectives with positive connotations <they’re awfully good people> <Tiger played awfully well>. Although these uses have been called humorously illogical, they’re actually quite close to the original sense.
Occasionally, of course, awfully can be ambiguous—e.g.: “He is awfully educated.” But in sentences in which that ambiguity doesn’t appear, the intensive awfully must be accepted as standard.

To use awful adverbially typifies dialectal usage—e.g.: “He’s an awful [read awfully] good fellow.”

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. **awful** in the sense “very bad” <what an awful performance>, “shocking” <the casualties were just awful>, or “very great” <we did an awful lot of work>: Stage 5
2. **awful as an adverb** <she’s awful nice>: Stage 1
3. **awfully** for very with positive adjectives <an awfully pleasant evening>: Stage 4

**awhile, a while.** As a noun element, spell it as two words <he rested a while> <it took quite a while> <it took quite a while to learn this>. As an adverb, spell it as one <he rested awhile>. Misuses are common—e.g.-:

- “We lay back and rested a while [read awhile] in the warm breeze.” Henry Miller, Sexus 58 (1949; repr. 1965).
- “She looked up at the sky for awhile [read or for a while], remembering her father’s astronomy lessons.” Deborah Ellis, Parvani’s Journey 54 (2004).

When the choice is between for a while and awhile, prefer the latter. And don’t write *for awhile*.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. **a while** used adverbially for awhile: Stage 4
2. awhile misused for a while: Stage 1

**awing.** The present participle of awe, vb., is so spelled—not *aweing. See mute e.

*awless. See aweless.

awoke(n). See wake.


ax; axe. According to the OED, the spelling ax is “better on every ground of etymology, phonology, and analogy.” But axe is standard in AmE and BrE. Despite what American desktop dictionaries have long said, the form ending in -e has predominated in print sources. Compound words follow the same course—hence **pickaxe and poleaxe**.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

Current ratio (axe vs. ax): 2:1

axel; axle. The first is a figure-skating maneuver; the second is a rod or pin connecting two wheels. But axle sometimes wrongly displaces axel—e.g.-:

- “An Olympic silver medal, a million-dollar professional skating gig and Saturday’s marriage to her agent, Jerry Solomon, have put her a few leaps, bounds and triple axles [read axels] ahead of former rival Tonya Harding.” “For Kerrigan, It’s Happily Ever After,” Sacramento Bee, 10 Sept. 1995, at A2.
- “Gale Tanger has just completed the triple axle [read axel], triple toe jump of figure skating judging.” Gary Rummler, “Figure Skating Judge Worked Years to Reach Her Goal,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 26 Sept. 1996, Neighbors §, at 5.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

axle misused for axel: Stage 1

axes is the plural of both axis (pl. pron. /ak-seez/) and ax (pl. pron. /ak-saz/).

aye (= yes) is the standard spelling of this word, most commonly used in the parliamentary procedure of voting. The word is pronounced /ә/. *Ay* is a variant form.

Current ratio (ayes have vs. *ays have): 16:1

babysit > babysat > babysay. So inflected. The erroneous *babysitted* sometimes appears—e.g.-:


Cf. sit.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*babysitted for babysat: Stage 1

Current ratio (babysat vs. *babysitted): 179:1

baccalaureate /bak-ә-loor-ee-at/ = (1) a bachelor’s degree conferred by a college (such as a bachelor of arts or bachelor of science); (2) a commencement address (esp. a religious one) given at a college graduation; or (3) a religious service held in connection with commencement events. In sense 1, it is redundant to refer to a *baccalaureate degree*. In sense 2, the word is a shortened form of the phrase baccalaureate address or baccalaureate sermon. In sense 3, it’s a shortened form of baccalaureate service.

**baccarat** /bakh-ә-rah/ (the card game) is the standard spelling. *Baccara* is a variant.

Current ratio: 62:1

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

bacchant, n. & adj.; bacchante. Traditionally, the language has distinguished between men and women who worshipped Bacchus, the Greek god of wine and revelry. By extension, a drunken carouser who is male is known as a bacchant (/bak-ant/ or /ba-kant/), whereas one who is female is known as a bacchante (/ba-kant/ or /ba-kahn-tee/). Curiously, the feminine bacchante has occurred about twice as often in print sources as bacchant from 1800 to the present day—in both singular and plural uses. See sexism (p).

The word bacchant is also an adjective and in that role may refer to both men and women <during those months, she led a bacchant life>.

bachelor's degree. So written.

bacillus (= a rod-shaped bacterium) forms the plural bacilli. The words are pronounced /ba-si-əl/ and /ba-si-lə. See plurals (b).

*backadation. See backwardation.

**Back-Formations** are words formed by removing suffixes from longer words that are mistakenly assumed to be derivatives. Most commonly, a -tion noun is shortened to make a verb ending in -te—e.g., from emotion comes emote.

Such back-formations are objectionable when they are merely needless variants of already existing verbs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Back-Formed Verb</th>
<th>Ordinary Verb</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*administrate</td>
<td>administer</td>
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<td>*cohabitate</td>
<td>cohabit</td>
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<td>*delimitate</td>
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<td>*interpretate</td>
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<td>*revocate</td>
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<td>*revolute</td>
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<td>*solicit</td>
<td>solicit</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Many back-formations never gain real legitimacy (e.g., *elocute, *enthuse), some are aborted early in their existence (e.g., *ebullit, *evolute), and still others are of questionable vigor (e.g., *aggress, attrit, effulge, evanesce, frivol). Burgle (back-formed from burglary) continues to have a jocular effect (in AmE), as do effuse, emote, laze, and the learned word metamorphose. See burglarize.

Still, many examples have survived respectfully, among them collide, diagnose, donate, edit, elide, groove, orate, peeve, resurrect, and sculpt. *Enthuse may one day be among these respectable words; although it first appeared in the early 19th century, it still struggles for approval. Many other back-formations have filled gaps in the language and won acceptance through sheer utility.

The best rule of thumb is to avoid newborn back-formations that appear newfangled, but not better-established ones that, being only faintly recognizable as back-formations, are genuinely useful. Only philologists today recognize (much less condemn) as back-formations beg (from beggar), jell (from jelly), peddle (from peddler), and type (from typewriter).

For specific discussions elsewhere in the dictionary, see liaise, registrate, remediate & surveil.

**back of; in back of. In the sense "behind," these Americanisms strike a casual tone. Although back of was long considered a better form than in back of, the latter is now almost as common. (No one, after all, questions in front of.) Still, good editors tend to replace either phrase with behind—e.g.:

- "Deer are starting to move now, and I have been seeing indications of that in the woods in back of [read behind] our house." Randy Julius, "Kids Get First Shot," Enterprise (Brockton, Mass.), 6 Sept. 2015, at 33.

Back of dates from late-18th-century AmE; it was adopted in BrE by the 1820s. In back of didn't become common until the 1930s in AmE and a decade later in BrE.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *back of for behind*: Stage 5  
2. *in back of for behind*: Stage 4

**backwardation; *backadation.** This term—meaning "a fee paid by the seller of securities to allow for delivery after the delivery date originally agreed to" (Black’s Law Dictionary 166 [10th ed. 2014])—is preferably spelled spelled backwardation. H.W. Fowler included the term in his "ill-favored list" of hybrid derivatives (FMEU1 at 241), but it has become standard. See HYBRIDS. It originated in BrE in the early 19th century.

**backward(s).** See DIRECTIONAL WORDS (A).

**bacteria, the plural form of bacterium, takes a plural verb.** From the mid-19th century, the term has predominantly been treated as a plural—e.g.:

- "Some bacteria are pathogenic (disease causing) but many are beneficial, even essential to our health." Richard T. Bosshardt, "If Yogurt Doesn’t Help, Probiotics May Be Solution," Orlando Sentinel, 1 Sept. 2002, Lake §, at K12.

See PLURALS (b).

Yet since the late 19th century, some writers have ignored the plural form and erroneously treated bacteria as singular—e.g.:

- "In all, 178 people were stricken with salmonella—a common bacteria [read the common bacteria] that causes
badminton (the tennis-like game played with a shuttlecock) is pronounced /bad-min-tan/, with the medial n—preferably not /bad-mit-an/.

Bagehot. The name of Walter Bagehot (1826–1877)—the economist and journalist—is frequently encountered in literary works. But few people know how to pronounce it: /baj-at/.

bagful. Pl. bagfuls—not *bagsful. See plurals (g).

baggage; luggage. Signs in U.S. airports direct travelers to the baggage claim where they wait while baggage handlers unload the aircraft. In the U.K., travelers, especially in railroad stations, are accustomed to seeing signs for left luggage and luggage vans into which suitcases and packages are loaded. Although baggage predominated in AmE until the 1980s and is still favored, luggage has become almost equally common. In BrE, luggage is dominant.

In AmE and BrE alike, baggage has negative extended senses, some pejorative. For instance, one refers to metaphorically carrying psychological baggage or political baggage. In BrE slang, disliked women are referred to as bags or baggage. These may be factors for sometimes preferring luggage.

Bahamian (= a resident of the Bahamas) is pronounced /bo-hay-mee-әn/. See denizens labels.

bail; bale. You bail water out of a boat but bale hay. In this particular sense, bail means “to dip out (water, etc.) with a bucket.” But some writers mistakenly use bale in this sense, a confusion that has existed since the mid-19th century—e.g.:• “The yacht started spinning in circles as the crew furiously bailed [read bailed] water.” Cup Yacht Ends in a Spin,” Evening Standard, 6 Jan. 1992, at 46.
• “The scenario was replayed up and down Village Road as homeowners, who were evacuated by boat Friday night, were back yesterday bailing [read bailing] out water.” Christine Sciavio, “Flood Waters Hit Home 18th Time in 30 Years,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 23 Jan. 1996, at B1.
• “Some residents were forced to bale [read bail] water from their pools in a bucket brigade to drench flames as they neared homes.” “Fire Destroys at Least 43 Homes in Florida,” L.A. Times, 17 Apr. 1999, at A10.

To bale hay or cotton is to put it into a large bundle, usually compressed and wrapped. But a few writers (not many) mistakenly use bail in this sense, a confusion that has existed since the mid-19th century—e.g.:• “I helped our neighbor bail [read bale] hay or clean the barn.” Wayde I. Goodall, The Fruit of the Spirit 37 (2000).
• “But a few days later, when Jahns drove to Lee to record Romney bailing [read bailing] hay on one of his campaign ‘work days,’ she was politely turned away.” Joanna Weiss, “Video Puts Campaigns on Record,” Boston Globe, 20 Aug. 2002, Metro/Region &, at A1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, I-ll)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
In a related sense, of course, *bale* is also a noun: the product of *baling hay* is a *bale of hay*. But once again writers occasionally err—e.g.:

- “I can remember when we opened a *bail* [read *bale*] of hay that Dad would save,” Carl Allen, “We Had to Save Everything,” Ledger (Lakeland, Fla.), 13 Mar. 1995, at C6.
- “Matt threw the last *bail* [read *bale*] of hay inside the fence.” Steve Galley, Nicky’s Time 77 (2005).

### LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. *baling water for bailing water*: Stage 2
   - Current ratio (*baling water vs. *baling water*): 4:1
2. *bailing hay for baling hay*: Stage 2
   - Current ratio (*baling hay vs. *bailing hay*): 5:1
3. *bail of hay for bale of hay*: Stage 1
   - Current ratio (*bale of hay vs. *bail of hay*): 24:1

**baited breath.** See *bated breath*.

### bald-faced; barefaced; boldface(d)

What is *bald-faced* is unobscured by facial hair (<bald-faced pirate>), trees (<bald-faced mountain>), or other features (<bald-faced heifer>). Figuratively, and more commonly as an Americanism dating from the early 20th century, it describes something that is obvious, brazen, and shameless. Most often the term appears in the catchphrase *bald-faced lie*, but it goes as easily with other shameful acts—e.g., “[H]ere the configuration reeks of *bald-faced* contrivance.” Dan Craft, “Despite ‘Signs,’ It’s Not About Them,” Pantagraph (Bloomington, Ill.), 8 Aug. 2002, at D2.

The part-participial form (*bald-faced*) is grammatically correct and is preferred by those with finer-tuned ears over *bald-face*, which is also correct. The second form is far from rare—e.g., “The chief U.S. negotiator, Dennis Ross, calls that a *bald-face* lie.” Editorial, “Media Shows Its Bias for Palestinian Cause,” News & Record (Greensboro), 30 May 2002, at A8.

What is *barefaced* is unobscured either by facial hair (<a barefaced friar among all the bearded ones>) or by a mask (<though most of the robbers were masked, at least one was barefaced>). From the 18th century on, especially in BrE, the word has meant “unscrupulous” (<barefaced warmongering>). Unlike the other terms in this entry, it makes an -ly adverb: *barefacedly* (/ˈbɛːr-fɛsəd-li/).

Occasionally a writer will mistakenly substitute *boldfaced* for one of the other words, thereby savaging the essence of the phrase—e.g., “Getting my father to move to the nursing home was quite a feat, and I needed the help of my wife, my father’s best friend, and a *baldfaced* [read *bald-faced*] lie.” Kenneth A. McClane, “Driving: Family; Alzheimer’s Disease Patients,” Antioch Rev., 22 Sept. 2006, at 604.

What is *boldface* is lettered in a thick typeface (<boldface headline>)—e.g., “[H]ospital officials backed out after the proposal trumpeted in *boldface* type that no money would change hands.” Andy Staples, “Pasco Picks Safety over Bureaucracy,” Tampa Trib., 21 Aug. 2002, Pasco §, at 5. Figuratively, what is *boldface* is emphasized or especially important—e.g., “Over the years, those friends have included virtually every *bold-face* name to set foot on the East End.” Blair Golson, “Goose Creek Guest House Sells for $5.2 Million,” N.Y. Observer, 19 Aug. 2002, Fin. §, at 11.

*Boldface* is the preferred and most common spelling, but also common are *bold-faced*, *bold-face*, and *baldfaced*—e.g., “To add flava to his new hip-hop comedy, ‘Death of a Dynasty,’ director Damon Dash is giving cameos to a galaxy of *bald-faced* New Yorkers.” “The Wide World of Harvey W,” N.Y. Post, 31 July 2002, at 10.

The general sense of both *bald-faced* and *barefaced* is that something is shameless; the gist of *boldface* is that something is emphasized. But the distinction is not always observed. In general use, and especially in the catchphrase about shameless lying, the three are often used interchangeably. *Barefaced* lie, the most traditional term, predominates in BrE; *bald-faced* lie has predominated in AmE since the 1980s; and *boldface*(d) lie is simply an outlier (perhaps a slander against printers).

Because of the “shameful” connotation of *bald-faced*, it is occasionally used to describe a shameful truth, leading to a twist on the expression *bald-faced lie*—e.g., “It is a *bald-faced* truth that men are attached to their hair, physically and emotionally.” Dick Feagler, “Hair Today,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 4 Aug. 2002, at B1.

### LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*boldface lie or *boldfaced lie for baled face lie*: Stage 1
   - Current ratio (*bald-face lie vs. *boldfaced lie*): 21:2:1

**balding** (= becoming bald), having emerged as a neologism in the early 20th century, was once objected to because there was thought to be no corresponding verb to *bald*. In fact, though, the verb dates from the early 17th century and still occasionally appears <he’s starting to bald>. There is no sound reason for objecting to *balding* (the word, that is, though many regret the reality it denotes).

### LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*balding*: Stage 5

**bale.** See *bail*.

**baleful; baneful.** These words share the basic sense “evil,” but their connotations are different. *Baleful* = threatening evil; ominous; menacing <a baleful look>. *Baneful* = causing evil; ruinous; destructive <the baneful excesses of modern society>. To help distinguish the words, consider that *bale* denotes evil, while *bane* denotes something highly repellent (formerly something that causes death).

**balk**, vb. (= [1] to obstruct or block; [2] to refuse to act; or [3] of a baseball pitcher] to make an illegal motion before or during a pitch), is the standard
spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Baulk is a chiefly BrE variant. The word is traditionally pronounced /bawl/. Current ratio (balking vs. *baulk ing): 7:1

*ball out. See bawl out.

balm (= [1] something that comforts, or [2] ointment for the skin) has a silent -l- (/bahl/).

balmy. See barmy.

bologna; baloney. For the word meaning “nonsense,” bologna is the spelling (dating from the early 20th century)—e.g.: “Much of what the world thinks it knows about this dish (or dishes, for they are myriad) is a bunch of baloney (from Bologna, the north-central Italian town that is alleged to have invented this rather inferior meat).” Dora Jane Hamblin, “For the Gourmet and Gourmand, Bounty from Italy,” Smithsonian, May 1991, at 84.

For the sausage, bologna (pronounced like baloney) is the spelling—e.g.: “After $12,000 in plumbing repairs through Aug. 30, jail officials said they stopped giving out the 6 p.m. bologna, lunchmeat or peanut butter sandwiches wrapped in plastic.” Bartholomew Sullivan, “Beef or Baloney? Forty Fastidious Arkansas Inmates Turn Up Noses at Jail Sandwiches,” Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 26 Sept. 1996, at A1.

But this clear, widely followed differentiation is sometimes muddled. Most often this occurs when the spelling bologna is used in reference to nonsense—e.g.:

- “‘The idea that just a little pollution won’t hurt anything is a bunch of bologna [read baloney]; said Jack Stephens, a soft-spoken veteran of World War II and the Korean War,” Bob Hill, “Pipes and Map of Pipeline Diffuser/Location,” Courier-J. Mag. (Louisville), 13 May 1990, at M4.
- “There was no political motivation; that’s a bunch of baloney,” Marv Germak, “Duci Angry TV Show Failed to Include Fyvie,” Times Union (Albany), 17 Aug. 1995, at B7 (quoting Richard Howland).
- “Regina Busse, 84, also recalls the broadcast and equated it to lunch meat. ‘It was a bunch of bologna [read baloney],’ she says,” Brandon Morley, “Remembering the First Invasion,” J.-Gaz. (Pt. Wayne, Ind.), 26 June 2005, at E1 (referring to Orson Welles’s 1938 “War of the Worlds” broadcast). (The writer here has conflated the two words, mistaking baloney for a metaphor.)

Sometimes, too, the spelling baloney is pressed into service where bologna belongs—e.g.:

- “Don’t say ‘Hey, let’s have a picnic,’ then bury your nose in the Sunday sports section while Mom makes baloney [read bologna] sandwiches.” Ralph Berrier Jr., “Giving Gifts That Make Mom’s Day,” Roanoke Times, 4 May 2015, at E1.

In what appears to be an amalgam of the two words, baloney is sometimes misspelled *boloney—e.g.: “I got some bad publicity during the trial with Jackie [Onassis] in 1972. . . . All this is boloney [read baloney], I don’t jump out of bushes. I hide behind bushes to get pictures.” Patricia Sheridan, “Ron Galella,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 24 June 2002, at D2. This error was at its peak in the mid-20th century but has since tapered off.

### LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. **bologna** misused for baloney in reference to nonsense: Stage 1
   - Current ratio (bunch of baloney vs. *bunch of bologna): 14:1
2. **boloney** misused for bologna in reference to meat: Stage 3
   - Current ratio (bologna sandwich vs. *boloney sandwich): 3:1
3. **boloney** for baloney: Stage 1
   - Current ratio (baloney vs. *bologna): 40:1

baluster; balustrade; banister. A baluster /bal-ә-strә/ is a round, vertical support, as for a wineglass, a chair, or on the rail or a stairway—e.g.: “The two-story house, which has a massive open porch with vase-shaped balusters, was renovated over seven years by Ms. Sarver and her ex-husband, Bob,” Gretchen McKay, “Coming Up Roses,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 1 Oct. 2006, Business §, at G1.

A balustrade /bal-ә-strәd/ is a set of balusters along with the rail they are supporting, as for a stairway or a barrier—e.g.: “Mr. Diamond’s future penthouse has a 1,350-square-foot wrap terrace, though pesky balustrades interrupt the panorama from indoors.” Max Abelson, “Park Slope Celebrity Tour!” N.Y. Observer, 2 Oct. 2006, Finance §, at 11.

Banister /ban-ә-стрә/ is the more common term for balustrade, but it typically denotes the handrail alone—e.g.: “Izzy Stone devoured newspapers. . . . His wife Esther recalled how Stone would slide down the banister of their Washington home to get the newspapers.” John C. Ensslin, “The Stone Age,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 29 Sept. 2006, Spotlight §, at D28.

Bamar. See Burmese.

bambino (Ital. “child, baby”) forms the plural bambinos. The Italian plural, bambini, is ordinarily an affectionate—e.g.: “Cynthia Hart’s Victoriana Calendar (Workman, $9.95) gives you all kinds of commercial illustrations of fetching bambini [read bambinos] with more ringlets than are actually found in nature, and pinker cheeks and frillier dresses, too.” Jeff Simon, “Counting the Days,” Buffalo News, 13 Dec. 1995, at D1. See plurals (b).

But bambini seems less affected when it appears in a description of Italy, where bambinos might seem out
of place—e.g.: “Sounds of a street fair drew us toward the Piazza Santa Maria, where tented booths offered free tastes of organic honey and vegetables, and two mimes entertained the local bambini at the base of the fountain.” Letter of Marcia Wood, “When in Rome,” *N.Y. Times*, 17 Dec. 1995, § 5, at 15.

“The Bambino” was also a nickname for Babe Ruth.

**banal** (= pedestrian and uninteresting for lack of new ideas) is pronounced /bo-nahl/, /bo-nal/, or /bay-nal/. It’s “a word of many pronunciations, each of which has its own sparsely published dictionary entries.” *BBBM* at 55.

**bandanna** (= a large, colorful handkerchief) is an 18th-century borrowing from Hindi. In AmE, the spelling *bandanna* has always been standard. In BrE, that spelling contended with *bandana* establish itself as the predominant form in BrE.

**bandeau** (= [1] a hairband, or [2] a tube-top wrap that functions like a brassiere) has predominantly having been prevalent. Today the homegrown *bandeaus* is an infrequent variant in English-language print sources.

Current ratio (bandeaux vs. bandeaus): 7:1

**bandit** has two plural forms, *bandits* and *banditti*. The native-English form (*bandits*) is standard. (See **plurals** (B.1.) The Italian plural is usually tongue-in-cheek: “It can be a tough call if your dad takes a European vacation and gets kidnapped. Refuse to ransom the old geezer and he is entitled, under Louisiana’s forced-heirship law, to disinherit you. You can always take a chance, though, figuring that he might have a tough time contacting his lawyer before the *banditti* slice him up.” James Gill, “The Forced-Heirship Question,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 9 Aug. 1995, at B7.

Current ratio (bandits vs. banditti): 8:1

**baneful.** See [bealeful](#).

**banister** (= the handrail on a staircase) is the standard spelling. *Bannister* is a variant. For more, see [baluster](#).

**bankrupt holiday.** See [legal holiday](#).

**bankrupt.** A. And *bankrout*. The spelling *bankrout* is obsolete. In the English Renaissance, scholars respelled French borrowings such as *bankrout* on the Latin model—hence bankrupt. Many of these respellings did not survive (e.g., *accompt for account*); bankrupt is one of the few that did. Cf. [comptroller](#).

B. **As a Noun.** Although in popular speech and writing it is common to refer to a person as a *bankrupt*—a common usage since at least the early 16th century—modern bankruptcy statutes use the term *debtor* instead. In general usage, though, almost all of us are *debtors*; only the insolvent among us are *bankrupts*.


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*bankruptcy* misspelled *bankrouts*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 44,571:1

**#bannister.** See banister.

**banns** (= the public announcement of a wedding, usu. posted in a church) is the standard spelling. *Bans* is a variant.

**banquet; banquette.** *Banquet* (/bang-kwyt/) = an elaborate feast or ceremonial meal. E.g.: “The winners will be announced at a June 24 black-tie banquet at the Omni Richmond Hotel.” Maria Osborn Howard, “Finalists Chosen for Entrepreneur Awards,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1 June 1997, at 16.

*Banquette* (/bang-ket/) = a bench or sofa placed against or attached to a wall. E.g.: “Newspapers spilled across a red leather banquette.” Bob Spits, “The Long and Winding Road,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 25 May 1997, at C3.

**bans.** See banns.

**banshee** (= in Gaelic folklore, a female spirit who, by wailing, warns a family that some family member will soon die) is the standard spelling. *Banshie* is a variant.

Current ratio: 873:1

**Baptist** is preferably pronounced /bap-tist/—not /bab-tist/, a pronunciation common especially in the Southern United States.

**bar; debar; disbar.** The first two have closely related meanings. *Bar* means “to prevent (often by legal obstacle)”—e.g.:

- “But this year, in response to Principal James D. McConnell’s concerns that students were roaming the building unsupervised, students were barred from entering the building before 7:15 a.m., five minutes after staff members arrive.” Jean Mickle, “District, Students Settle School Opening Dispute,” *Ashbury Park Press* (Neptune, N.J.), 19 Oct. 1996, at A3.

In a corresponding sense, *bar* serves as a noun as well <a bar to all claims>. *Debar*, a somewhat archaic formal word, means “to preclude from having or doing (a thing), or
entering (a realm of activity).” It is more common in BrE than in AmE—e.g.:


The corresponding noun is debarment, a rather infrequent word.

Disbar means “to expel from the legal profession”—e.g.:

- “Despite a Bel Air lawyer’s glowing references from several distinguished former and current judges, the Court of Appeals ruled Friday to disbar him from the practice of law.” Mary E. Medland, “Testimonials, Blaming the Accountant Fail to Save Tax Eader’s Law License,” Daily Record (Baltimore), 20 May 1996, at 21. (Note the vernacular redundancy in disbar from the practice of law.)

The corresponding noun is disbarment—a word not in common use until about 1900.

barbaric; barbarous. These words share the basic sense “primitive, uncivilized.” Barbaric, which is four times as common as barbarous, is the more frequent problem—e.g.: “It hangs on even in rather sophisticated styles, long after the writer has ceased to commit such barbarities [read barbarisms] as dangling modifiers, agreement errors, reference errors, and case-form errors.” Bertrand Evans, “Grammar and Writing,” in A Linguistics Reader 111, 122 (Graham Wilson ed., 1967). Both words have declined in frequency since the mid-19th century.

barbarism; barbarity. Both denote a lack of civilization. Barbarism refers either to tastelessness or to incorrect language. Barbarity refers to savagery and brutality. Although misuses can run either way, barbarity for barbarism is the more frequent problem—e.g.: “It is reserved for contexts involving savage cruelty”—e.g.:

- “Dray’s graphic descriptions of barbarous Lynchings provide the most compelling passages; his narratives are not for the squeamish.” Marilyn K. Howard, “Shameful Legacy of Hatred Exposed,” Columbus Dispatch, 28 July 2002, at E7.

barbecue; *barbeque; *bar-b-cue; *bar-b-que; *BBQ. The first form is the predominant spelling. It is also the preferred one since it most clearly resembles its Spanish parent, barbacoa, meaning “a wooden framework for supporting meat over a fire.” The other forms—as well as variants such as Bar-B-Q and B-B-Q—are common in advertising but should be avoided in carefully edited prose.

barbed wire (= strands of twisted wire with sharp projections that impede passage when the wire is used in a fence) is two words as a noun phrase <the fence is made of barbed wire> but should be hyphenated as a phrasal adjective <barbed-wire fence>. The form *barbwire (though economical) is a needless variant, and *bob wire is either an attempt at being folksy or a silly blunder—e.g.:
*barbeque. See barbecue.

barbiturate is pronounced either /bar-bi-tә-rәt/ or (less good) /bar-bi-[t]yoo-rәt/. The pronunciation /bar-bi-[t]yoo-rәt/, though increasingly common, is best avoided. Of course, if you’ve taken one before trying to say the word, your listeners will probably make allowances.

*bare. See bald-faced.

bass guitar. Since 1850 or so, the first has been standard in both AmE and BrE. Before that, BrE used the form *barytone. Current ratio: 29:1

bar mitzvah; bat mitzvah; bas mitzvah. These terms are sex-specific. Bar mitzvah = (1) the ceremony celebrating a Jewish boy’s reaching religious adulthood at the age of 13; or (2) a Jewish boy who has turned 13 and thus attained religious adulthood. Bat mitzvah (or its variant, bas mitzvah) has the same meanings for a Jewish girl, though her age can vary from 12 to 13.

While these terms were once compounded into single words, or joined by hyphens, today they are written as two-word phrases.

Current ratio (bat mitzvah vs. bas mitzvah): 42:1

barmy; balmy. In the sense “crazy, slightly mad,” barmy is the original term and the usual one in BrE, where the word most often appears <she’s gone barmy on us>. In AmE, balmy is more common—but neither term is often encountered with this sense in AmE.

Each word has additional, unrelated meanings. Barmy = foamy, frothy <barmy malt liquor>. Balmy = pleasant, mild <balmy weather>.

barrel, vb., makes barreled and barreling in AmE, barrelled and barrelling in BrE. See SPELLING (b).

barring. For barring as an acceptable dangling modifier, see DANGLERS (e).

*bar sinister. See bend sinister.

*barytone. See baritone.

basal (= forming or belonging to a bottom or normative layer) is pronounced /ba-sәl/—not /ba-zәl/.

basalt (the dark green-black rock) is pronounced /ba-sәwl/ or /ba-sawlt/.

base, misused for bass, is scandalously poor usage—e.g.:


“Made up of four sopranos, four altos, three tenors and three bases [read basses], the student singers have been sharing their voices with audiences in Algonquin.” “Neighbor,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 16 Nov. 2000, at 1.

Language-Change Index base misused for bass: Stage 1

Current ratio (bass guitar vs. *base guitar): 74:1

based on. This phrase has two good and two bad uses. First, the phrase may carry a verbal force (base being a transitive verb)—e.g.:


Second, in a passive sense, it may carry an adjectival force (based being read as a past-participial adjective)—e.g.:


“Last year, advance publicity based on laboratory results said Craig’s detector would be able to find mines as the operator walked at a normal pace.” Charles W. Petit, “Risky Ground,” U.S. News & World Rep., 24 Dec. 2001, at 54. [Based on modifies publicity.]

But traditionally speaking, based on should have neither adverbial nor prepositional force. Here it’s an adverb:

“He encourages his students to listen to the candidates and vote based on the issues, not based on their clan.” Lorren Turnbull, “Local Election Set for Somali Civic Leadership,” Columbus Dispatch, 22 Dec. 2001, at A1. [Based on improperly modifies vote. Try according to instead.]


And here it’s a preposition (a dangler, to be exact):

“Based on those conversations, Riley said he doubts Graham will play.” “Graham’s Father Killed,” Deseret News (Salt Lake City), 22 Dec. 2001, at D4. [A suggested revision: Riley said that because of those conversations, he doubts . . . .]


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**baked bread**: The plural of *basis*, as well as of *base*, is *bases*. The pronunciations differ, however: for *basis*, the plural is pronounced /bay-zeez/; for *base*, /bays-iz/.

basketful. Pl. *basketfuls*—not *basketful*. See plurals (g).

*basketvah*. See *bar mitzvah*.

*bass relief* (= a style of art in which stone or wood is cut so that it has raised shapes) is pronounced with a silent -s (. /bah ri-leef/).

*bass*. See *base*.

*bassinet* (= a hooded basket used as a baby’s cradle) is so spelled—not *bassinette*. The word probably derives from a modified form of the French word *barconnette*. But the mock-French form *bassinette* doesn’t exist in French and shouldn’t exist in English—e.g.: “You had the nursery all set up [with] matching quilts, crib bumpers, diaper bag and a lacey [read lacy] bassinette [read bassinet] or cradle just inches from the marital bed.” Margery Eagan, “There’s Double the Wisdom by the Time No. 3 Arrives,” Boston Herald, 15 Mar. 1994, at 8. See gallicisms.

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*bassinet* misspelled *bassinette*: Stage 2
Current ratio: 7:1

*bastard*. See *dastard* (A), Euphemisms & illegitimate child.

*bastille; *bastile*. Apart from historical references to the Bastille—the Paris prison stormed in 1789 during the French Revolution—the term is occasionally used as a dreary equivalent of *prison* or *jail*. Although the Middle English spelling was *bastile*, today the settled spelling is *bastille*, after the French.

Current ratio: 2:1

*bated breath* is the phrase from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. “Or shall I bend low and in a bondman’s key, with bated breath and whisp’ring humbleness, say this: . . .” (1.3.122–25). The idea is that breath is abated, or stopped. *Bated breath* is a bundle that was not an appreciable issue in the language until about 1950. Today it is more common than ever, though the correct spelling remains far more frequent in modern print sources—e.g.: “During its ‘Creature Feature’ blowout, the aquarium wants kids and adults alike to celebrate the holiday with bated breath [read bated breath].” Bob Herguth, “Six Galleries of Aquatic Horror!” Chicago Sun-Times, 27 Oct. 1995, WKP §, at 3.

“Start by replacing the outfield walls with stalks of corn. For the ghosts of the Brewers’ past to

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*baited breath for bated breath: Stage 2
Current ratio (bated breath vs. *baited breath): 9:1

bath; bathe; baths, vb. In AmE, someone who takes a bath bathes; in BrE, one baths. In BrE, bathe suggests either swimming (especially in the sea) <bathing in the North Sea> or dousing with a liquid <bathing the wound in alcohol>.

bathetic, not *bathotic, is the adjective corresponding to bathos. (See bathos.) The analogy is to pathos and pathetic. But some writers ill-advisedly write *bathotic, which isn’t recognized in modern dictionaries—e.g.:•“Puffin’s latest religious offering, The Young Puffin Book of Bible Stories, is so desperate to make these millennia-old stories ‘relevant’ that it frequently descends into bathotic [read bathetic] purple prose, often missing the point in the process.” Nicola Tyer, “The Day Noah Dropped the Olive Branch,” Daily Telegraph, 29 Mar. 1989, at 17.
• “This set of variations for cello and orchestra is not the typical overblown bathotic [read bathetic] Tchaikovsky work, but one full of grace and lightness.” Robert C. Fuller, “Young Cellist’s Symphony Performance Is Stunning,” Des Moines Register, 22 Nov. 2005, at E3.

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*bathetic for bathetic: Stage 1
Current ratio (bathetic vs. *bathotic): 24:1

bathos; pathos. These two words sometimes cause confusion. Bathos (/bæθəs/) means “a sudden descent from the exalted to the trite, or from the sublime to the ridiculous.” Pathos (/pæθəs/) means “sympathetic pity,” and is useful, for example, in reference to juries and theater audiences. Cf. ethos.

*bathotic. See bathetic.

bat mitzvah. See bar mitzvah.

*baton sinister. See bend sinister.

battery. See assault.

battle royal (= [1] a violent struggle among several contenders; or [2] a major dispute) forms the plural battles royal—not *battle royals. See plurals (g) & postpositive adjectives.

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Current ratio (battles royal vs. *battle royals): 1.5:1

*baulk. See balk.

bawl out (= to exorcitate) is the phrase, not *ball out. But because the mistake is possible, it sometimes occurs—e.g.:• “Although Hallinan issued his memo reiterating his support of Salomon, he also reportedly ‘balled out’ [read balled out] his chief deputy for letting the situation deteriorate.” Dennis J. Opatrny, “Hallinan Says Salomon Has His Backing,” Recorder (S.F.), 9 May 2000, at 1.
• “Ferris didn’t have anything against or know Cowan personally, but became incensed when people told her that some commissioners had ‘balled out’ [read bawled out] a news reporter over an article she had written about possible illegalities in his campaign report.” Stephen L. Goldstein, “The Political Soap Opera,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 12 July 2000, at A23.

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*ball out for bawl out: Stage 1
Current ratio (bawled him out vs. *balled him out): 36:1

bay. See gulf.

bayonet. Both noun and verb are preferably pronounced /baɪ-a-net/. The verb is inflected bayoneted and bayonetting.

bazaar. See bizarre.

*BBQ. See barbecue.

B.C.; A.D.; B.C.E.; C.E. The abbreviation B.C. (= before Christ) is usually so printed—in small capitals. By convention, b.c. follows the year <Julius Caesar died in 44 b.c.>. But A.D. (= Anno Domini “in the year of our Lord”) properly precedes the year <Hadrian’s wall was completed in A.D. 126>, unless the abbreviation is paired with a time frame expressed in words <the second century A.D.>.

Some scholars condemn B.C. and A.D. as undesirably sectarian. What about non-Christians? they ask. Why should non-Christians have to measure their calendar from the birth of Christ? A trend has therefore emerged to use B.C.E. (= before the common era) and C.E. (= common era)—the traditional Jewish designations—in place of the Christian labels. Unlike A.D., the abbreviation B.C.E. or C.E. never precedes the year. E.g.:• “The Greeks were much interested in language just as they were interested in any number of things, and in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. they debated many linguistic issues.” Ronald Wardhaugh, Proper English: Myths and Misunderstandings About Language 107 (1999).
• “70 C.E: The Gospel of Mark is written, scholars believe. It contains the ‘Little Apocalypse’ (Mark 13), which includes Christ’s words to his disciples, ‘This generation shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled.’” Elizabeth Trever Buchinger, “The End? Again!??” Pensacola News J., 1 Jan. 2000, at B1.
• “In the year 167 C.E (Before the Common Era), Judea was a province under the control of the Syrian-Greek Empire.” “Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights,” Orlando Sentinel, 9 Dec. 2001, at G2. (Note that the use of B.C.E. and C.E. is uncommon enough that this editor felt a need to explain it to the readers.)

Whether this trend will catch on outside academic writing is still uncertain. There has already been much
wrangling on the point, and there is sure to be more. Unless you feel strongly averse to them, the traditional tags are the better choice because they are clear to more readers.

By the way, many people mistakenly believe that A.D. means “after death.” By that erroneous measure, about 33 years of history (Jesus’ lifetime) would be lost.

**be.** See be-verbs.

bear > bore > borne. See born. See also bare.

**be out** (= to support or confirm as evidence) is sometimes wrongly made *bare out*—e.g.:

- “These are just a few of the many numbers [that] bare [read bear] out the fact that Texas and Randall County are caught up in a wave of juvenile crimes.” Bradley Harrington, “Living in Confinement,” Canyon News, 31 Mar. 1996, at 1.

For the opposite error, see bare.

The past-participial form of *be out* is *borne out*.

For borne vs. born, see born.

**beautuous**

**beautuous**

See irregular verbs.

**Beatrice and Benedick.** See Benedick.

beau forms the plurals beaus and beaux, the second of which is predominant in both AmE and BrE. See plurals (b).

beaucoup (= many or much) is pronounced /boh-koo/ or /bob-koo/—preferably not /boo-koo/ (usually a facetious illiteracy).

beau geste (= [1] a generous or magnanimous gesture, or [2] a transparently empty gesture meant to seem generous or magnanimous) suffers from an unfortunate ambiguity. Is the term laudatory or damning? In any event, its plural is beaux gestes (pronounced, like the singular, /boh zhest/)—not *beaus gestes.*

beau ideal (= [1] ideal beauty, or [2] the perfect example of a thing) has, since the early 19th century, predominantly formed the English plural beau ideals—not beaux ideals (the French plural) or *beaux ideal.* Sense 2 is attributable to a misunderstanding of the French phrase. Although beau is the noun and ideal the adjective in French, many mistakenly think that beau is the adjective and ideal the noun. Sense 1 is the strictly correct translation.

Current ratio (beau ideals vs. beaux ideals vs. *beaux ideal): 27:2:1

**beautuous.** Though H.W. Fowler labeled this word a “poeticism” equivalent to beautiful, the process of differentiation has created a distinction between the two words. Today, beautuous typically means not just “beautiful” but “beautiful and sexy,” when it refers to women (as it most commonly does)—e.g.:

- “Four beautuous Staten Islanders have reigned as Miss New York.” Carol Ann Benanti, “The Tiara Through the Years,” Staten Island Advance, 5 June 2015, Entertainment §, at 8.

One can understand why writers sometimes wish to avoid the commonplace beautiful. As one professional

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

1. beat misused for past-participial beaten: Stage 2
   Current ratio (had beaten vs. had beat): 8:1
   2. *beated* for simple-past beat: Stage 1
   Current ratio (beat me vs. *beated me): 6,176:1
   3. *beated* for past-participial beaten: Stage 1
   Current ratio (was beaten vs. *was beated): 3,352:1
editor put it, “Beautiful is an adjective so hackneyed that it has lost all force and really indicates little more than mild to moderate approval.” Lester S. King, Why Not Say It Clearly? 54 (1978).

**because. A. Senses.** The conjunction because ordinarily begins a dependent clause that expresses reason, cause, or motive for whatever idea appears in the main clause. It has a well-known sense (“for the reason that” or “by reason of”) and, in expressions that amount to casualisms, some senses that most dictionaries don’t record. The most common of the seldom-recorded meanings is “and the evidence is that” <it must be snowing in Chicago because the airport has been shut down for “weather-related reasons”>. This usage contains an ellipsis: “(I deduce) p because q.” E.g.:  

- “It must be genetic because it takes a certain amount of determination to want to take on the rigours of coaching the Canadian junior hockey team for a second year in a row.” Donna Spencer, “Junior Coach Inspired by Daughter,” *Globe & Mail* (Toronto), 20 Dec. 2001, at S5.  

Sometimes because occurs in a question in the sense “given the fact that” or “in view of the fact that” <Why are you wearing an overcoat, because it’s 85 degrees out here?>. Here the ellipsis is “(I’m asking) p because q.”

**B. Punctuation with.** The word because usually shouldn’t follow a comma: when a dependent clause (the because-clause) follows the main independent clause of the sentence, no break is needed between the two. E.g.:  

- “Throughout, I’ve allowed more of me to appear, which is good only because it lets me point up how writers are entitled to their own tastes and crotchets.” John Trimbile, *Writing with Style* viii (2d ed. 2000).

Yet a comma may be all but necessary when the sentence is long or complex—e.g.: “I begged him to try to find some way of getting me out of this frightening situation in which I was enmeshed—assuring him that I would not blame him if he failed to do so, because it seemed to me, after some days of reviewing the matter, that I was beyond human aid.” P.G. Wodehouse, *The Code of the Woosters* 56 (1938; repr. 1976). And when an adverb such as perhaps or possibly precedes because, a comma usually precedes the adverb—e.g.: “I have not taught or examined in the Faculty in thirteen years, though I gather it is now at peace with itself, possibly because most of the professors are now women, possibly because the depredations of government have forced them into alliances against an external enemy, possibly because there is now not thought to be anything worth fighting for.” Frank Kermode, *Not Entitled* 258 (1995).

**C. Causing Ambiguity.** Putting a purpose clause or phrase after a negative often causes ambiguities, attested by a priest’s unintentionally humorous statement: “I wear no clothes to distinguish myself from the congregation.” Sometimes the ambiguity is technical only—e.g.: “A proposition is not false because it is a truism darkly expressed.” W.W. Buckland, *Some Reflections on Jurisprudence* 109 (1945). Does this mean that the proposition is not false for that reason but for some other? Or does it mean that the proposition isn’t necessarily false at all? The latter, Buckland intended to say. Other examples:

- “Patricia Buthmann and Tim Tyroler on Tuesday lost their effort to block being evicted from the Casa Carranza apartments, 1803 N. Country Club Drive, Mesa, because they allowed a woman to stay with them who possessed two syringes suspected to be drug paraphernalia.” Kris Mayes, “Renters Run Afoul of Eviction Law,” *Phoenix Gaz.*, 29 Sept. 1994, at B1. (What trouble did the unwelcome person cause? Did the tenants get an eviction notice because of the syringe-bearing woman, or did they lose their attempt at blocking the eviction because of her?)
- “By most writers on Elgar the sketches have been underrated, held of small account. For two reasons. First, because they recycle some earlier material: . . . (But Bach’s Mass in B minor, Handel’s Messiah, Beethoven’s Fidelio, Verdi’s Requiem are not condemned because they use ideas from earlier compositions.)” Andrew Porter, “Classical: Elgar’s Unfinished Business,” *Observer*, 26 Mar. 1995, at 12. (To eliminate the ambiguity, change because they use to for using.)
- “Waters was not there because she had dismissed the CIA director’s visit as meaningless.” John L. Mitchell, “Undeterred, Waters Crusades for Answers Politics,” *L.A. Times*, 4 Mar. 1997, at A3. (If not for that reason, then why was she there? A possible revision: Waters was not there: she had dismissed the CIA director’s visit as meaningless.)

**D. Wordy Substitutes for.** Because is often needlessly replaced by a verbose phrase such as for the reason that, due to the fact that, or on the grounds that—e.g.:  

- “The motion for setoff could also have been denied for the reason that [read because] Patterson had failed to raise the contribution claim in a timely fashion during the original proceeding.” Theodore Postel, “Arbitration Award: Setoff,” *Chicago Daily Law Bull.*, 3 June 1994, at 1.
- “In 1991, Bridgeport, Connecticut, sought Chapter 9 protection but a judge denied it on the grounds that [read because] the city was solvent.” Tony Jackson, “Orange County Hit by Wall St. Selling,” *Fin. Times*, 8 Dec. 1994, at 6. (On the grounds that suggests—wrongly, here—that the reason isn’t really a good one.)
- “That led one local analyst, who asked not to be named due to the fact that [read because] he had not yet seen the

E. Beginning a Sentence with. There’s an odd myth that it’s poor grammar to begin a sentence with because. It seems to have resulted from grade-school teachers who were trying to prevent fragments such as this: “We came in from recess after 15 minutes. Because everyone was tired.” (See INCOMPLETE SENTENCES.) One way to prevent third-graders from committing this error is to outlaw putting because at the head of a sentence. But as with so many other third-grade rules, it sweeps too broad. It would prevent a writer’s putting the cause before the effect: “Because everyone was tired, we came in from recess after 15 minutes.”

In any event, the “rule” has never had any basis in grammar, and good writers often have occasion to put the cause before the effect (completing the subordinate clause beginning with because in a main clause that follows a comma)—e.g.:

- “Because a psychologist working in this field is characteristically concerned with people who are in difficulties or suffering from mental ill-health, he meets them (typically) as patients in a psychiatric and therefore medical context.” B.A. Farrell, “Abnormal Psychology,” in The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought 2 (Alan Bullock & Stephen Trombley eds., 2d ed. 1988).

- “Because of difficulty traversing rough terrain, Eugene was late in arriving at the battlefield.” Paul K. Davis, 100 Decisive Battles from Ancient Times to the Present (1999).

See SUPERSTITIONS (f).

F. Because-Clause as Subject. Although using a because-clause as the subject of a sentence—as if because meant “the mere fact that”—is common in speech, it is not standard written English. A typical example: “Because a golfer might not be an athlete doesn’t mean he or she won’t be a top competitor.” Harvey Penick, Harvey Penick’s Little Red Book 114 (1992). [A possible revision: A golfer’s not being an athlete doesn’t mean he or she won’t be a top competitor. Or: Even a golfer who isn’t an athlete may well be a top competitor.] The problem with making a subordinate clause into the subject, as in the original, is that a MISCUE is created: the reader expects a different syntactic outcome in the sentence and is surprised, even with a short sentence such as the Penick original, to find that the because-clause governs a finite verb.

G. Fragment Beginning with. See INCOMPLETE SENTENCES (b).

H. Coupled with reason. See *reason is because.

I. As a Causal Word Generally. See as (A).

J. And by reason of. See by reason of.

K. And since. See since & SUPERSTITIONS (g).

L. Just because. See just because . . . doesn’t mean.

beck and call is the idiom—e.g.: “We want men who would hang on every word we uttered, laugh at every joke, however lame. They would attempt to buy our love with little tokens, gifts, poetry. They would be at our beck and call.” L. Wayne Moss & Donna and Eve Shavatt, “The Daydream and Nightmare of Reality TV,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 26 Jan. 2003, at W2. A beck is a summoning gesture. The word arose in Middle English and is related to both beckon and beacon.

Sometimes the phrase beack and call comes out as a MONOGENRE: *beckon call. E.g.:

- “Eleven years ago, McMahon was king of Super Bowl XX, with his own podium and an audience at his beckon call [read beck and call].” Danny Wells, “Backup Draws a Crowd,” Charleston Gaz., 23 Jan. 1997, at C1.

- “Rather, the collars, which are actually called ‘electronic trainers,’ are intended to be used when training dogs to obey an owner’s beckon call [read beck and call].” Stephanie A. Stanley, “Electronic Dog Collars Create Clash Between Jogger, Parish,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans) (St. Tammany ed.), 12 Sept. 2000, at 1.


*Beckon call is an understandable guess at the phrase, since one would naturally call out to beckon someone. And beckon (= to summon) is a more familiar term than its shorter sibling beck. But beck and call is the historical and still the greatly predominant phrase.

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*beckon call for beck and call: Stage 1 Current ratio (beck and call vs. *beckon call): 71:1

beckon, vb., may be either transitive <she beckoned the child> or intransitive <she beckoned to the child>. The more economical usage is the transitive one. As an intransitive verb, beckon sometimes takes to, sometimes at, and sometimes for; the most traditionally correct preposition is to. But you can forestall that problem by making the verb transitive—e.g.: “A coaching lieutenant named Mike Martz . . . beckoned for [read beckoned] Green to join him and Vermeil in St. Louis in 1999.” Jerry Magee, “There’s No Separating Chiefs QB from NFL Change,” San Diego Union-Trib., 1 Oct. 2002, at D6.

beef. This word has two plurals: in reference to types of meat or to complaints, the plural is beefs; but in reference to fattened cattle, the preferred plural is beeves. See PLURALS (c). Beeves is more common by a 4-to-1 ratio.

beg. For the phrase beg the question, see beg the question.

beget. A. Sense. Beget = (1) to sire; to father (a child); or (2) to produce (a result). The metaphorical meaning (sense 2) is an understandable extension of the
beggar description

biological meaning (sense 1). But whenever the context is biological, it's worth remembering that this word isn't gender-neutral—e.g.: "She laughed. 'One does not object to the desires of one's king! Of course, if I beget [read I give birth to] a child, that will put an end to it.'" Carolyn Meyer, Doomed Queen Anne 14 (2002) (quoting the character Queen Anne).

B. Inflection: beget > begot > begotten. Because *begat* is an archaic past-tense form, it should typically be replaced by *begot* (and sometimes begotten). It appears most commonly when a writer strives for a humorous echo of all the *begats* in the King James Version of Genesis. But the humor often fails, as in the following misbegotten examples:

- "Entire generations of Cubs and Sox fans have been born, raised, beget [read begot] new generations of frustrated fans and died since our last winner." Dennis Byrne, "'Mis-take by the Lake' Moves West," Chicago Sun-Times, 10 Oct. 1995, at 27. (The sentence has a nonparallel construction that could be advantageously recast: Entire generations of Cubs and Sox fans have been born and raised, have begotten new generations of frustrated fans, and have died since our last winner. See PARALLELISM.)

See archaisms & irregular verbs.

Because the past tense *begat* is so common in allusion to the Old Testament, writers sometimes misuse it for the present tense—e.g.: "'Jesse the Body [Ventura] begats [read begets] Jerry Springer." B. Drummond Ayres Jr., "Political Briefing: A Run for the Senate or a Brawl for It," N.Y. Times, 22 July 1999, at A14 (quoting the Democratic Party chairman of Hamilton County, Ohio). The speaker has a vague memory of the *begat* passage from Genesis, but no sense of how the verb is conjugated.

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*beg description* for beggar description: Stage 1

1. *begat* for begot or begotten: Stage 1
2. *begat* for present-tense beget: Stage 1

beggar description. To beggar description is to be indescribable or beyond description. The phrase originated in Shakespeare's reference to Cleopatra: "For her own person, / It beggar'd all description" (Antony and Cleopatra, 2.2.197–98). What the phrase says, in essence, is that something is so incredible as to make a beggar of anyone's powers of description—e.g.:

- "Recently, New Yorkers have been up in arms over something so grievous, so blasphemous, that it beggars description. I'll give it a shot, though. Mayor Bill de Blasio was caught eating pizza with a knife and fork." Jim Sullivan, "'Pizzagate' in Big Apple," Boston Herald, 15 Jan. 2014, at 17.


Writers can get it wrong in many ways. And so they do. In the following example, the correct idiom wouldn't work because it wouldn't match the sense. And although the writer's *begs description* approaches the literal sense, his echo of the related idiom seems like a MALAPROPISM: "Ask Jim Adkins what is his area of specialty and he simply says he 'deals with the human figure.' It's an answer that begs description [read demands elaboration?]. See his works and no elaboration is necessary." Mike Boslet, "An Artist's Intentions Bared," Wash. Post, 4 July 1996, at M8.

**beg the question.** See beg the question.

begin. A. To begin. As an introductory phrase used to enumerate reasons, the idiomatic phrase is to begin with, not to begin. In the following sentence, the lack of the preposition with makes to begin sound narrowly chronological, as if Aaron actually began something and then, at some indeterminate point, stopped: "To begin [add with], Aaron played a substantial role in negotiating both agreements." B. And commence & start. Begin is the usual word. Commence is a formal word; ceremonies and exercises are likely to commence, as are official proceedings. Start usually refers to an activity <to start running> <I started thinking>; begin is also acceptable in this sense. Both begin and start may be followed by an infinitive (to + verb), but commence may not. See institute & commence.

C. Past Tense and Past Participle. Begin, of course, makes began in the past tense and begun in the past participle. But writers occasionally misuse began as a past participle—e.g.:

- "Rivera was competing for a spot in the back end of the Orioles' rotation, but probably would have began [read have begun] the season at Rochester." Roch Kubatko, "O's Rivera May Be Out for Season," Baltimore Sun, 24 Feb. 2001, at C1.
- "The deal, which values Carlyle at nearly $20 billion, strengthens the buyout firm's ties to the Middle East, which has began [read has begun] to use the profits from higher oil prices to go on a buying spree." Andrew Ross Sorkin, "Carlyle to Sell Stake to a Mideast Government," N.Y. Times, 21 Sept. 2007, at C1.
- "'What had began [read had begun] as an overnight hike in rugged Denali National Park had turned into a five-day drama marked by rollercoaster reports and emotions." Mary Lynn Smith, "2 Hikers Rescued After a Call from the Alaska Wilderness," Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 19 June 2008, at A1.

Thee misuses are nothing new. Vallins noted them in 1951: "'He has began' is still common in careless speech, and sometimes crops up in even more careless

In the following passages, one phrase has been switched for the other:

- “Both agents testified on Barboza’s behalf [read in Barboza’s behalf]” at the 1971 Clayton Wilson murder trial.” Jim Lawrence, “Hub Fed Judge Must Testify on Mob Hit,” Boston Herald, 5 Jan. 2002, News §, at 2. (They didn’t testify as Barboza’s representatives, but they gave testimony helpful to his case.)

Upon behalf of is considered much inferior to on behalf of. See upon.

behometh (— a huge, powerful animal) is pronounced /ba-hee-math/. The word is sometimes misspelled (and presumably mispronounced) *behometh— e.g.: “The other quarterfinals feature Lleyton Hewitt against Tommy Haas during the day today and Sweden’s Joachim Johansson against Andy Roddick in a battle of big-serving, ace-loving behomeths [read beho- m eths] at night, weather permitting.” Marc Berman, “Rain Men—Federner Leads Agassi by Set,” N.Y. Post, 9 Sept. 2004, at 84.

behest (bi-hest), a stronger word than request, means (1) “a command,” or (2) “a strong urging.” Bequest (= a gift by will) is sometimes misused for behest, perhaps because of its phonetic similarity to request—e.g.:
- “Growing up in Harlem, he was inspired by his creative uncles and his ‘religious’ mother, at whose bequest [read behest], he says with a sheepish smile, he joined a Trappist monastery in Massachusetts.” Dennis Grogan, “Elbow Room for Creativity,” Atlanta J.-Const., 20 June 1996, at K1.
- “The Guardian Angel Personal Alcohol Test strips are being handed out at the bequest [read behest or, more likely, request] of the Colorado State Patrol at two of Lower Downtown’s bustling bars this weekend.” Allison Sherry, “Test a New Party Guest,” Denver Post, 1 Sept. 2002, at B3.

This error is a malapropism. See bequest, n.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
• “Ryan implies that Eckels will be beholden to the contractors underwriting a large part of his campaign.” Alan Bernstein, “County Judge Race Pits Opposing Styles,” Houston Chron., 9 Oct. 1994, at A1.


See irregular verbs.

behoove (= to be necessary or proper) is so spelled in AmE <cit behooves you to bite your tongue in such circumstances>. In BrE, the spelling is behave. The word has an archaic flavor, and its noun form, behoof, is all but obsolete.

Historically, the verb in BrE was pronounced, as reflected in the AmE spelling, to rhyme with move and prove. In BrE today “it is generally made to rime with prove, grove, by those who know it only in books” (OED). In AmE it is pronounced /bi-hoo/. See absolute constructions.

Beijing: Peking. The traditional form, Peking, resulted from a system of transliteration called Wade–Giles Romanization, introduced by two 19th-century English scholars. (Beijing was a variant.) In 1979, the Chinese government settled on a system called Pinyin Romanization (also called the Chinese phonetic alphabet) to convert Chinese sounds into roman letters; it is thought to be a closer approximation of Chinese pronunciation in the Mandarin dialect (/bay-jing/, not /-zing/ or /-shing/). The Pinyin system resulted in Beijing, and most American media have now adopted this name for the capital of China. Despite the success of Pinyin, Taiwan still adheres to Wade–Giles spellings—and so do some Western scholars on China.

being that. A Meaning “because” or “since.” Instead of using this awkward phrase in the sense of because or since, use one of those straightforward words—e.g.:• “And working with the Big Eye network made sense, being that [read because] the show comes from David Letterman’s Worldwide Pants productions, whose other shows . . . are all on CBS.” Scott Pierce, “Ed Perseveres,” Deseret News (Salt Lake City), 17 Nov. 2000, at C8. (Delete the comma before the newly inserted because.)

• “Being that [read Since] it’s installed in the front where the driver can see, its main purpose should be for navigation.” Lynne Harrison, “Entertain the Kids on That Long Road Trip,” Winnipeg Free Press, 29 Dec. 2000, at E1.

• “Bill Duffy, a native son of Chicago and longtime resident of the city of St. Francis, deserves our accolades, being that [read since] he has done all that he could to save a part of the town’s history for probably another century.” Ken Garcia, “Gold Rush Era Anchored in Saloon,” S.F. Chron., 21 Dec. 2001, S.F. Today §, at 1.

Sometimes the best replacement is given that or in that—e.g.: “I guess they finally understand Bush has many supporters in Kentucky, being that [read given that or in that] he won the state by a sizable margin.” Letter of Greg Schuler, “The C-J Headline,” Courier-J. (Louisville), 19 Dec. 2000, at A6.

B. In an Absolute Construction. This phrase frequently appears in what grammarians call a “nomina
tive absolute”—e.g.:• “Berglund . . . said the company has learned a lot since the company entered the market four years ago, the biggest surprise being that shoppers actually like grocery shopping.” Patricia Wen, “Old Ways Run Deep,” Boston Globe, 17 Nov. 2000, at A1.

• “Harris has declared her intention to certify the statewide results after overseas absentee ballots have been counted, the expectation being that those votes will add to Bush’s current 300-vote lead.” Thomas B. Evans Jr., “Count Them All Again,” Wash. Post, 18 Nov. 2000, at A23.

• “When someone describes a film of today as a ‘70s picture,’ . . . it’s invariably meant as a backhanded compliment, the implication being that the film is so edgy, gloomy or contemplative that it has no hope of reaching a wide audience.” Patrick Goldstein, “The Dubious Anni

See absolute constructions.

But this type of absolute construction often appears ill-advisedly in a separate sentence as a fragment. (See incomplete sentences.) The best solution is to use an ordinary finite verb (is or are)—e.g.:• “Over the years I’ve adopted a policy of excluding from my annual Top 10 list any picture that has not opened in the Tacoma area by the end of the calendar year. The reason being [read is] that it seems unfair to salute movies that the vast majority of News Tribune readers wouldn’t have had the opportunity to see by the time the list is published.” Soren Andersen, “Marvels and Mistakes,” News Trib. (Tacoma), 29 Dec. 2000, at SL1. (As this example shows, the construction is sometimes nothing more than throat-clearing. The second sentence would be stronger if it started with it, omitting everything that came before that.)

• “Most duck hunts are the kind that begin somewhere in the cold and darkened hours when no one but the owls and night herons are about. The theory being [read is] that one must be waiting in ambush when the ducks wake up.” Bob Simpson, “This Wintry Hunt Produces Duck, Mistle

The next best solution would be to combine the two sentences into one.

But take care not to create an unwieldy sentence—as would happen if the two sentences here were combined: “[George] Will details the faults of Gore, but ignores those of Bush, who has made as many exaggerations as Al Gore, usually pronouncing them incorrectly in the process. One of the most egregious exaggerations being [read is] that he championed this and that legislation regarding health care and educa
tion, when in fact it was the Texas Legislature that did most, if not all, of the work.” Bill Amborn, “Will’s Diatribe,” Press Democrat (Santa Rosa), 17 Nov. 2000, at B6.

belabor; labor, v.t. Modern dictionaries suggest that the words are interchangeable. But in the early 20th century, belabor (= to attack physically) was not much used figuratively in phrases such as to belabor
an argument, the preferred expression being to labor an argument—e.g.: "I need not labor the point that the four elements of the positivist creed just outlined are interdependent." Lon L. Fuller, *The Morality of Law* 193 (rev. ed. 1969).

The popular grammarian Edwin Newman once chided a Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court for writing "to say more would belabor the obvious," stating: "To belabor the obvious is to hit it, which hardly seems judicial conduct." Edwin Newman, Foreword to Morton S. Freeman, *A Treasury for Word Lovers* viii (1983).

In fact, though, the figurative sense of belabor has vastly predominated over the literal one since about 1950. It is standard—e.g.: "The embalmed, belabored fussiness of the filmmaker's style, laden with a sentimentality at once maudlin and coy, makes one wonder if the Belfast-born wunderkind hasn't gone slightly batty." David Baron, "Tired 'Tale' Likely to Leave You Cold," *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 5 Apr. 1996, at L22.


**Language-Change Index**

**belabor an argument for labor an argument**

Stage 5

Current ratio (belabor vs. labor a point): 4:1

**Belarusan; *Belarusan.** For a citizen of Belarus, the first is the standard term. The second is a needless variant. See denizen labels.

**belie** = (1) to disguise, give a false idea of; (2) to contradict or prove the falsity of; or (3) to leave unfulfilled. Senses 1 and 2 are the most common—e.g.: "One of the newspaper articles boldly suggested that Rodman's popularity had possibly eclipsed Jordan's among the local citizenry—a wholly preposterous thought that was belied [i.e., proved false] by the cheers from the sell-out crowd of 24,394 the moment Jordan was introduced before the contest." Anthony Cotton, "Bulls Get Jump on Knicks, 91–84," *Wash. Post*, 6 May 1996, at C8.


**beloved.** This word can be spoken with two syllables /bi-ləd/ or three /bi-ləv-id/. The two-syllable form is somewhat old-fashioned and is usually reserved for the past participle <the queen was beloved by her subjects>. The three-syllable form is used for the

The word does not mean "to disclose or reveal," as is sometimes thought. That is, some writers wrongly think of it in a sense almost antithetical to sense 1—e.g.: "It was a high for the professional from Ope lika, Ala., whose soft drawl belied [read betrayed or revealed] his Southern roots." Becky Paul, "Boise Open's First Winner Hopes to Regain Glory," *Idaho Statesman*, 17 Sept. 1995, at C1.

**belligerence; belligerency.** Belligerence refers to a person's truculent attitude. Belligerency has traditionally been the preferred term in international law when referring to the status of a state that is at war—e.g.: "Other states are within their rights in declaring themselves neutral in the struggle, and since there can be no neutrals unless there are two belligerents, such a declaration is equivalent to a recognition of the belligerency of both parties." J.L. Brierly, *The Law of Nations* 134 (5th ed. 1955). Although belligerency was more common in print from 1860 to 1980, belligerence has predominated since then—in 2008 by a 2-to-1 ratio.

**bellwether (= someone who takes the lead or initiative; a trendsetter) is sometimes mistakenly written *bellweather,* perhaps because, like a weathervane, it shows which way the wind blows—e.g.: "The annual Vermont Open, a bellwether [read bellweather] of the New England Pro state championships, will be played on Monday through Wednesday, June 10–12, at Lake Morey Country Club in Fairlee, VT." John R. Hussey, "Abenaki Pro Sheerin Earns Spot at Senior PGA Event," *Union Leader* (Manchester, N.H.), 7 June 2002, at C2.

"The success of either or both of these events could be a bellweather [read bellwether] for another high-profile MMA promotion taking place July 26." Tim Lemke, "A Promotion Commotion," *Wash. Times*, 16 July 2008, at C2.

Less common but no less whimsical is the misspelling *bellwhether,—e.g.: "Intel Corp. advanced to $22.08. The semiconductor bellwhether [read bellwether] was raised to 'buy' from 'neutral' by Bank of America, which said the stock was likely to climb significantly." "Market Movers," *Chicago Trib.*, 11 Apr. 2008, at C5.

**Language-Change Index**

1. bellwether misspelled *bellweather: Stage 1

Current ratio: 43:1

2. bellwether misspelled *bellwhether: Stage 1

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
adjective <my beloved wife> or the attributive noun <dearly beloved, we are gathered here . . . >. Justice Sonia Sotomayor uses the three-syllable version in referring to her best-selling autobiography My Beloved World (2013).

bemean. See demean.

bemuse; amuse. The meanings of these two words differ significantly. Bemuse = (1) to make confused or muddled; bewildert <the jury was bemused by all the technical evidence>; or (2) to plunge into thought; preoccupy <the math student was bemused with the concept of infinity>. Amuse, of course, means "to entertain" or "to cause laughter in" <the speaker amused the audience with various anecdotes>.

Yet many writers mistakenly use bemuse as a synonym for amuse—e.g.:

- “Led by Costas’ ability to bemuse [read amuse] viewers and make them care about the athletes, NBC’s Sydney squad was at least the tops since ABC’s 1980s heyday. ‘I appreciate the kind comments,’ Costas said.” Rudy Martzke, “Ratings Don’t Dent NBC’s Stellar Effort,” USA Today, 2 Oct. 2000, Bonus §, at E4.

benchmark (= a point of reference from which to make measurements) is best spelled as one word.

bend > bent > bent. So inflected (although on bended knee is a set phrase). Occasionally the verb gets bent out of shape—e.g.:

- “Lest anyone accuse my little one of being partisan, she might well have copied Hillary Clinton’s Democratic National Convention address if we had bended [read bent] the bedtime rule to allow her to stay up to watch it.” Jennifer Wheary, “Copying the ‘Can-Do’ Sarah Palin,” Newsday (N.Y.), 8 Sept. 2008, at A29.

But in soccer, bended is the accepted past-tense and part-participial form of bend (= to kick a ball with enough spin to make it curve)—e.g.: “[Keenan] Segun- cia bended his free kick to the edge of the 6-yard box and [Leslie] Nwapa got past the defense and knocked it in.” Kyle Sakamoto, “Roosevelt 2, Aiea 1,” Honolulu Advertiser, 25 Jan. 2008, at D2. See irregular verbs.

bend sinister; *baton sinister; *bar sinister. In her- aldry, the bend sinister is a diagonal band on a shield, extending (from the viewer’s vantage point) between the upper right and the lower left corners; it denotes bastardy in the family line—e.g.: “To the 99.9% of people in Britain and beyond who feel their identity to be defined adequately without the aid of impalements and bends sinister or a family tree going back to John of Gaunt, the vocation of Garter King of Arms must seem as fantastical as that of the Lion King or King Kong.” “Anthony Wagner,” Economist, 3 June 1995, at 95. As in that quotation, the plural form is bends sinister. See postpositive adjectives.

*Baton sinister is a variant form seldom encountered.

*Bar sinister, though perhaps the most common of the three, is strictly incorrect because a bar is a horizontal stripe. Unlike a diagonal band, a bar can’t have a distinct left (sinister) aspect. And because *bar sinister is hardly less arcane for most readers than bend sinister, it might as well be corrected to that form—e.g.: “Finland thinks of itself as ‘The daughter of the Baltic,’ although she is not clear on her parentage. No bar sinister [read bend sinister], implying illegitimacy, it’s just that Finns are forever running through the birch bark and pines looking for a national identity.” Kevin Keating, “Laplander Lullabies,” Int’l Travel News, Mar. 1996, at 153.

In the 1990s, the phrase was probably best known as part of the name of a rock group, Simon and the Bar Sinisters—but most of the fans were probably unaware of the allusion, and the band wisely avoided the correct plural form: bars sinister. Before that, Simon Bar Sinister was one of the villains in the Underdog cartoon series (1964–1973).

Benedick; Benedict. Both names were once traditional for a recently married man, especially one who was previously considered a confirmed bachelor. The -ick spelling is more common in BrE, the -ict spelling in AmE. The character in Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing is Benedick, but writers occasionally get the name wrong—e.g.:

- “This provides the central story, but the ‘merry war’ of sub-plot characters Beatrice and Benedick [read Benédic] is what distinguishes ‘Much Ado,’ and long ago became its most recognizable component.” Richard Dodds, “Festival Opens with ‘Much Ado,’” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 24 June 1994, at L23.
- “Dan Snook will be Benedick [read Benédic], opposite Karen Ziembka as Beatrice.” Frank Rizzo, “Will ’Our Town’ Be New York City by Year’s End?” Hartford Courant, 8 Aug. 2002, Cal. §, at 16.

Several dictionaries list benedic as a common noun for a newly married man who was formerly considered a confirmed bachelor. Among these are AHD, W2, W11, and WNWCD. This usage appears to have resulted from a Shakespearean allusion, but the spelling was changed from -ick to the more common -ict. (The SOED, by contrast, puts the main entry under Benedick and labels -ict a variant.) The usage is fairly uncommon today.
beneficent; benevolent; *benefic; beneficial. The etymological difference between beneficent and benevolent is that between deeds and sentiments. Beneficent = doing good; charitable (*benefic now being merely a needless variant). The word is pronounced /bə-nə-fil/. Beneficent = well-wishing, supportive, (emotionally) charitable. Aside from the idiom beneficent society, the distinction should be cultivated: we should reserve beneficent for “doing good” and benevolent for “inclined or disposed to do good.” Beneficial has the general meaning “favorable, producing benefits.” Cf. malevolent.

beneficiary is pronounced /ben-ə-fi-ʃər/ or /ben-ə-fi-ʃ-a-rə/. Cf. judiciary.

benefit. A. Inflections of Verb. Benefit makes benefitted and benefitting in AmE, benefitted and benefiting in BrE. See spelling (b).

B. Improving Wordy Constructions. As a verb, benefit typically functions more economically and smoothly in the active voice than in the passive—e.g.:


• “Just as the public is benefited by [read benefits from] licensure, individual states also have a stake in establishing licensure legislation.” Ronni Chernoff, “Licensure—Perseverance in a Good Cause,” J. Am. Dietetic Ass’n, Aug. 1996, at 805.

See passive voice.

As a noun in the phrase be of benefit to or be a benefit to, the word (once again) can often perform better as an active-voice verb—e.g.:

• “Newmark said the structure would be a benefit to [read benefit] an area town planners had said needed redevelopment.” Nancy Degetis, “Morristown Approves 6-Story Condo Building,” Star-Ledger (Newark), 22 Aug. 2002, at 18.

• “In terms of [read As to] health, feng shui can not only help with issues [read problems] such as weight gain and weight loss, but it can also be of benefit to [read benefit] people with muscular sclerosis and chronic health problems.” Catherine Murrell, “Feng Shui Principles Can Improve Home Life,” Chicago Sun-Times, 20 Sept. 2002, at C16. (For more on the unparallel not only . . . but also construction in this sentence, see not only . . . but also & parallelism.

See be-verbs (b).

benefit of clergy (1) at common law (12th c.–19th c.), the right of a clergyman not to be tried for a felony in the King’s Court; or (2) by slipshod extension, religious approval as solemnized in a church ritual. By invoking the benefit of clergy—usually by reading the so-called neck verse (a biblical passage recited in Latin)—one accused of a felony could have the case transferred from the King’s Court (which imposed the death penalty for a felony) to the Ecclesiastical Court (which did not).

In sense 2, the phrase is a popularized legal technicality, appearing most often in reference to children born out of wedlock—e.g.:

• “With her, and without benefit of clergy, he had five children, and it was his boast that, as each arrived, he dispatched it promptly to a foundling home.” René A. Wormser, The Story of the Law 215 (1962).

• “Wakefield’s generation, twenty years on, didn’t just engage in sex without benefit of clergy, they talked about it.” Rhoda Koenig, “Talkin’ bout Their Generation,” New York, 1 June 1992, at 57.

• “We weren’t permitted to live together and have children in those days without benefit of clergy.” Leo Haber, “Bobby,” Midstream, Fall 2012, at 36.

benevolent. See beneficent.

benign; *benignant. The latter is a needless variant. The antonym of benign, however, is malignant.

Current ratio (benign vs. *benignant): 28:1

bequeath = (1) to give (an estate or effect) to a person by will <she bequeathed the diadem to her daughter>; or (2) to give (a person) an estate or effect by will <she bequeathed her daughter the diadem>. Using the word as a fancy equivalent of give or present is an ignorant pretension—e.g.:

• “Apparently Mayor Annette Strauss plans to bequeath [read present] the gift personally to Her Majesty—something rarely done, according to protocol experts. Usually, a gift is bequeathed [read presented] to the queen’s secretary, who then bequeaths [read gives] it to the queen.” Helen Bryant, “Names & Faces,” Dallas Times Herald, 5 Apr. 1991, at A2.


The word is pronounced /bi-kwe-θ/; with a soft th.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

bequest for present or give. Stage 1

bequest, n.; *bequeathal; *bequeathment. Bequest = (1) the act of bequeathing; or (2) personal property (usu. other than money) disposed of in a will. Bequest is sometimes confused with behest. See behest.

*Bequeathal and *bequeathment are needless variants of sense 1 of bequest—e.g.:


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. *bequeathment for bequest: Stage 1
Current ratio (bequest vs. *bequeathment): 381:1
2. *bequeathal for bequest: Stage 1
Current ratio (bequest vs. *bequeathal): 182:1

bequest, v.t., is obsolete in place of bequeath. Today it amounts to no more than a silly error that has born

berth

• not merely to lack it but to have been dispossessed of
As Bill Bryson observes, to be bereave, bereft of possessions or qualities.

Shakespeare Studies Neologisms, “15

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
bequest misused for the verb bequeath: Stage 1
Current ratio (bequeathed vs. *bequested): 411:1
beseech, v.t., yields as past-tense forms besought and bereft of

bereave, v.t., yields as past-tense forms bereft and bereaved, and the same forms as past participle. Bereaved is used in reference to loss of immaterial possessions or qualities.

As Bill Bryson observes, to be bereft of something is not merely to lack it but to have been dispossessed of it (Dictionary of Troublesome Words 26 [1984]). Hence the following uses are off target:

• “There may be more than six degrees of separation, but American Presidential candidates with ties to royalty have a distinct advantage over those bereft of [read lacking] noble connections.” Nadine Brozan, “Chronicle,” N.Y. Times, 28 Oct. 1996, at B12.

• “On the other hand, [the Third Symphony] is largely bereft of [read lacking in or barren of] engaging ideas and, in a word, boring.” Bernard Holland, “From Penderecki, a Mob That Howls or Whispers,” N.Y. Times, 28 Oct. 1996, at C15.

• “At the vegan restaurant Angelica Kitchen, in the East Village, there’s a Reuben sandwich bereft of [read without] corned beef and Swiss cheese, which sort of makes you wonder why it doesn’t just take a different name, like an Irving or a Bernard.” Frank Bruni, “Not Missing the Meat (Mostly),” N.Y. Times, 15 Oct. 2008, at D10.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
bereft of used without a sense of loss: Stage 3

berth (= a spot or position) is occasionally misspelled birth, sometimes (as in the first example below) with hilarious results—e.g.:


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
birth misused for berth: Stage 1
Current ratio (secure a berth vs. *secure a birth): 31:1

beseech > besought > besought; beseech > *beseeched > *beseeched. The traditional past tense and past participle is besought. The simple past is the more common usage—e.g.:


• “Let history treat me kindly,” California Democrat Maxine Waters, a deep-seated opponent of impeachment, besought shortly after the first article was approved.” Craig Gilbert, “Historic Votes Send House 3 Articles of Impeachment,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 12 Dec. 1998, at 1.


The form besought will surprise some readers, who might have thought the past form to be *beseeched, which the OED labels “now regarded as incorrect.” It is a fairly common solecism—e.g.:


See irregular verbs.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
besought vs. *beseeched: 5:1

beside (= [1] alongside; or [2] in comparison with) is surprisingly often misused for besides (= [1] other than, except; or [2] in addition). While the two words were once used interchangeably, beside has been reserved as the preposition and besides as the adverb since the late 18th century. But they are still confounded—e.g.:

• “When we speak of a unilateral contract, we mean a promise in exchange for which an act or something beside [read
besides] another promise has been given as consideration.”
L. Rev. 319, 319 (1903).

• “Hill is the only man beside [read besides] Trevino to
win on the Senior Tour this year.” Jaime Diaz, “At Tradition,
Duel Falls Short of Hope,” N.Y. Times, 31 Mar. 1990,
at 30.

• “Beside [read Besides] pleading guilty to the murder, . . .
Spradley also pleaded guilty to intimidating a key wit-
ness.” Kent Faulk. “Once on Death Row, Man Walks Free
After Reduced Sentence,” Birmingham News (Ala.), 11

Likewise, besides is sometimes misused for beside—
e.g.: “Whether or not the city sets an attendance record
is somewhat besides [read beside] the point, tourna-
ment organizers say.” Gargi Chakrabarty & Michael
Pointer, “Sales of Tickets Disappointing,” Indianapolis

Language-Change Index
1. beside misused for besides: Stage 1
Current ratio (Besides doing vs. *Beside doing): 24:1
2. besides misused for beside: Stage 1
Current ratio (beside the point vs. *besides the point): 36:1

bestial (= behaving like an animal, esp. a cruel one) is
pronounced /bes-/chuul/ or /best-/yuul/—not /bees-/.

bestir (= to stir [oneself] to action), in the modern
idiom, is preferably confined to reflexive uses—e.g.: “Whether or not the city sets an attendance record
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best of all [+ pl. n.] is more logical than best of any
[+ sing. n.]. Why? Because the all-encompassing plur-
ality of all isn’t as well conveyed by any—e.g.:
• “New York’s clincher grabbed a 22.2 rating and 37 share,
the best of any Series game [read the best of all Series games
or better than any other Series game] this year.” Steve
1996, Sports §, at 1.

• “But last Friday, Hopewell’s Steve Day had the best
game of any WPIAL running back [read all WPIAL running
backs] this season.” Mike White, “Graham Rethinks PSU

• “That help was rewarded this year—labor unions fared
the best of all special interest group [read the best of all
special-interest groups or better than any other special-
interest group].” Mark Martin, “Davis Signs Bills with Eye

cf. better than any (other) & illogical (b).

But when the sense is “one (no matter which),” and
the noun that follows must be singular, the word any
fills the bill—e.g.: “The best part of any Rush show isn’t
hearing the new songs done live, but experiencing the
onstage chemistry.” J.D. Considine, “It’s a Rush,” Balti-
more Sun, 7 Nov. 1996, Md. Live §, at 8. See any (A).

Language-Change Index
best of any misused to mean best of all: Stage 4
bestowal; *bestowment. The latter is a needless
variant.

Current ratio: 12:1

bet > bet > bet. Bet, not *betted, is the preferred (and
far more frequent) past tense and past participle. Still,
the form *betted occasionally appears, especially in
BrE—e.g.:
• “Afternoon race cards from minor meetings in Britain are
betted [read bet] on in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and India.”
“Galloping Globe-Trotters,” Economist, 10 June 1995, at 82.

• This could spell bad news for all those who betted [read
bet] on Ekran.” Lee Han Shih, “Ekran Chief Suffered Mild

• “Oil prices recently touched the $135-a-barrel mark for
the first time in history, as investors betted [read bet]
that the price of crude will remain high for some time.”
Edmund Conway, “Don’t Cut Fuel Tax, Urges OECD
Head,” Daily Telegraph, 4 June 2008, City §, at 5.

See irregular verbs.

Language-Change Index
*betted for past-tense bet: Stage 1
Current ratio (bet vs. *betted): 17:1

bête noir; *bête noir. The spelling bête noir /bet
nwahr/—the only one with any standing in the dic-
tionaries—is about four times as common in modern
print sources as *bête noir (in which, by the way, the
gender of the adjective does not agree with that of the
noun). The French term literally means “black beast,”
but in English it is used figuratively to mean “a per-
son or thing that is strongly disliked or that should be
avoided”—e.g.:


better. See better.

**better** . . . rather than. In this phrasing, the word *rather than* is usually unnecessary, since *than* completes the comparison begun by *better*—e.g.:

- “When will the administration learn that it is better to disclose such arrangements up front rather than waiting [read *than to wait*] until the university has been sued?” Letter of Gordon J. Johnson, “Secrecy Suggests Something’s Amiss,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 3 July 1999, at A51.

- “It’s better to remove weeds by the roots rather than chopping [read *than to chop*] them up with a tiller or cultivator, Akre says; many can re-sprout from the chopped-up bits.” Beth Botts, “Success in the Vegetable Patch,” Chicago Trib., 15 June 2008, Home & Garden §, at 2.

- “Last year, Curlin appeared better when he raced outside other horses rather than being hemmed in [read *than when he was hemmed in*], which some believe cost him the Belmont.” Jennie Rees, “It’s Churchill Down, Fun to Go for Curlin,” Courier-J. (Louisville), 15 June 2008, at C1.

The exception occurs when the phrase following *better* is rather long—e.g.: “The next two years could be better spent looking for new ways to accomplish this goal *rather than* simply trying to wring more money out of taxpayers’ pockets.” Jack Roberts, “Culprit Is Distribution Formula, Not Tax Structure,” Oregonian (Portland), 6 Aug. 1999, at E11. Cf. **more . . . than.**

**better than any (other).** Ordinarily, *better than any other* is more logical than *better than any*, because the thing being proclaimed best is also one of the things being considered—e.g.: “Hooley, 63, knows this landscape and its residents *better than any other* elected official.” Editorial, “Return Hooley to Congress,” Oregonian (Portland), 4 Oct. 2002, at C6.

Writers who omit the word *other* fall into logical lapses—e.g.:

- “If there’s been a down moment or a traumatic flashback in Monica Seles’ 1996, then she’s a better actor than any [read *better actor than any other*] athlete I’ve ever met.” Michael Gee, “Seles Still Serves Up a Smile,” Boston Herald, 7 Sept. 1996, Sports §, at 36.

- “Tommy Oravetz grew up in the FSU family and appreciated maybe *better than any player* [read *better than any other player*], even his fellow Tallahasseeans, what going to Omaha means.” Steve Ellis, “Former ‘Noles Players Play Supportive, Not Jealous, Role,” Tallahassee Democrat, 13 June 2008, at C2.


Cf. **best of all & illogic** (b).

Sometimes, though, the thing being touted is excpected, and then the *other* becomes unnecessary. For example, two different types of things are often compared, such as the two sexes in the first example or German versus British products in the second:

- “Her jump was not only tops for her division, but it was also *better than any* boy’s jump in the same division.” Joni Averill, “Capehill Is Part of New Generation,” Bangor Daily News, 18 Aug. 1994, at PDA. (On the lack of parallelism in that sentence, see **not only . . . but also.**)
among the two), the only ironclad distinction is that stated by more than two elements, in AmE and BrE alike—e.g.: “In fact, good writers commonly use divide as generally enunciated, then, is simplistic. The rule as generally enunciated, then, is simplistic. Although it is an accurate guide for the verb g.in—in all periods of English since 1500. The same is has outstripped between three Powers. . . . The OED (or as a singular form of better or as a singular form of bettor) has also been used in this sense, but it is liable to be confused with the comparative form of good or as a singular form of betters in the sense “people of higher skill or status.” E.g.: “Each week the din coming from the Coliseum is tremendous—not from the birds crowing their heads off as they go about slaughtering each other but from the betters [read bettors] yelling out wagers until another is willing to accept the odds.” Uli Schmetzer, “Philippines Erupt with Fowl Play,” Chicago Trib., 17 Sept. 1996, at 10. (The headline should have read “Philippines Erupts” or “Filipinos Erupt.”) Cf. abettor.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

**better misused for bettor:** Stage 1
Current ratio (a heavy bettor vs. *a heavy better): 3:1

between. A. And among. Between is commonly said to be proper with two things, and among with more than two. Ernest Gowers calls this a “superstition” and quotes the OED: “In all senses between has been, from its earliest appearance, extended to more than two. . . . It is still the only word available to express the relation of a thing to many surrounding things severally and individually; among expresses a relation to them collectively and vaguely: we should not say the space lying among the three points or a treaty among three Powers” (FMEU2 at 57). Another critic agrees: “A man may halt between three as well as two opinions.” G.H. Vallins, Better English 68 (4th ed. 1957).

In terms of frequency, the collocation between three has outstripped among three—by a significant margin—in all periods of English since 1500. The same is true of between four vs. among four.

The rule as generally enunciated, then, is simplistic. Although it is an accurate guide for the verb divide (between with two objects, among with more than two), the only ironclad distinction is that stated by the OED: between expresses one-to-one relations of many things, and among expresses collective and undefined relations.

In fact, good writers commonly use between with more than two elements, in AmE and BrE alike—e.g.: “Sunday morning in Denmark Hill is for the six Huxtable daughters (the difference between whom, as Granville Barker puts it in his stage directions, ‘is to the casual eye the difference between one lead pencil and another’) a time of nursery scurryings and silences under the unwavering eye of their mother.” J.K.L. Walker, “Edwardian Underwear,” TLS, 11 Sept. 1992, at 19.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

**better than any for better than any other:** Stage 3

between, better to mean “one-to-one relations of reciprocal or mutual. Without a one-to-one relation, among is the better word—e.g.:


• “In a recent interview, Mr. Weitzner explained the relationships between [read among] the various entities at 741 Alexander.” Brett Pulley, “At One Office, Intricate Links in New Jersey’s G.O.P. Funds,” N.Y. Times, 8 July 1996, at A1, A9. (Among is correct here because the multitude of interlocking political organizations is being stressed.)

See superstitions (h).

**B. Between you and me; *between you and I**

Because the pronouns following between are objects of the preposition, the correct phrase is *between you and me*. Yet the phrasing *between you and I* is appallingly common—“a grammatical error of unsurpassable grossness,” as one commentator puts it. Interestingly, this grammatical error is committed almost exclusively by educated speakers trying a little too hard to sound refined but stumbling badly. It’s almost surely an ingrained instance of hypercorrection based on childhood admonitions not to use you and me (or similar compounds) as the subject of the sentence—and, far more confusing to most people, as a predicate nominative in sentences such as *it is I*. See pronouns (b) & hypercorrection (b).

Still, descriptive linguists—linguistic liberals—are fond of quoting early writers, who worked at a time when the language was not so fully developed, in support of poor usage. Back in 1892, Henry Sweet was quite right to say that in Early Modern English, “the usage was more unsettled than now, the nominative being as freely substituted for the objective as vice-versa, as in such constructions as ‘between you and I, You and I were so frequently joined together as nominatives—you and I will go together, etc.—that the three words formed a sort of group-compound, whose last element became invariable.” I Sweet, A New English Grammar, Logical and Historical 340–41 (1892).

Here is the characteristic view of modern descriptive linguists: “The meaning is clear; ‘I’ is no less, or more, euphonious than ‘me’; if the usage offends, it does so because the hearer (occasionally) or the reader (more frequently) is in the habit of expecting ‘me’. Why is such a habit worth fighting about?”
Ellsworth Barnard, *English for Everybody* 25 (1979). This view ignores the reality and the importance of the thousands of settled views of English usage. I, as an object of a preposition or a verb, has long been stigmatized. Using it in the objective case simply creates doubts about the speaker’s ability to handle the language.

Randolph Quirk—a leading English grammarian of the late 20th century—puts all this in perspective: “I would not go along with making ‘I and me’ interchangeable. It is true that Shakespeare used both, but that did not make it any more correct. There are permanent pressures on language, and the fact that they are resisted shows that people recognise the value of correct usage.” As quoted in John O’Leary, “Language Police at Odds over Misuse of Pronouns,” *Times* (London), 2 Oct. 1995, Home News §.

Among the better-considered views on the question are these:

- “If the ditch-digger’s child said ‘between you and me’, it would probably be ridiculed into using the environmentally more favored ‘between you and I’. Thus the penalties provided for nonconformity nourish and perpetuate ungrammatical usage, and the folk speech is rooted deep in the life of the masses.” Edward N. Teall, *Putting Words to Work* 4 (1940).

- “The nation is divided in its use of ‘between you and me’ and ‘between you and I’. Let me begin by declaring that the only admissible construction of the two in standard use in the twentieth century is ‘between you and me’. . . I, he, and other pronouns were frequently used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in ways now regarded as ungrammatical. Grammatical assumptions were different then.” Robert W. Burchfield, *Points of View* 117 (1992).

- “English now recognizes only two inflections for all pronouns—the subjective (or nominative) ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’, and the objective (or accusative) ‘me’, ‘you’, ‘him’, ‘her’, ‘them’. The possessives, as in ‘his face’ or ‘her hair’ or ‘their cheek’, are adjectival. The objective form is used after transitive verbs like ‘hit’, ‘kick’, ‘love’, and also after prepositions like ‘after’, ‘for’, ‘between’. It is because ‘you’ has become an invariable form—in number as well as in case—that the solecisms ‘Between you and I’ and ‘Let you and I talk’ are committed.” Anthony Burgess, *A Mouthful of Air* 59 (1992).

In print sources, the standard English expression is in less danger today than it was in the 18th century: *between you and me* occurs with much, much greater frequency. In fact, the erroneous form represents barely a blip on the screen.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *between* [date 1] and [date 2] for *from* [date 1] to [date 2]: Stage 2
2. *between* [date 1] to [date 2] for *between* [date 1] and [date 2]: Stage 2

**D. Choose between.** This construction (with various verbs of selection) takes *and*, not or. The misuse probably results from confusion between *between... and either... or...*—e.g.:

- “Guests can choose between ‘Eve of the Eve Classic,’ a smaller, more elegant affair with dinner and open bar, or [read and] the general ‘Eve of the Eve’ party, which accommodates more than 2,000 revelers.” Audarshia Townsend, “Parties for the Celebratory Mood,” *Chicago Trib.*, 21 Dec. 2001, at 31.

- “Russia... will face, in some instances, the choice between isolation or [read and] union with the rest of Europe.” Eugene Rumer & Jeffrey Simon, “NATO: Russia Should Have a Seat at the Table,” *L.A. Times*, 23 Dec. 2001, at M2.

**E. Between; as between.** Sometimes as between (= comparing; in comparison of) is misused for the straightforward preposition. E.g.: “The contractual provisions as between [read between] the parties are as follows.” Cf. as against.

**F. *Between each* and Other Constructions with Fewer than Two Objects.** This phrasing is a peculiar brand of illogic, as in *between each house* and *between each speech* (instead of, properly, *between every two houses* and *between speeches*). Although it
is possible to think of *between each house as being an ellipsis for *between each house and the next, native
speakers of English don’t consciously think of the phrase in this way. And the resulting expression is li-
terally nonsensical—e.g.:
• “Customers can use the same dial tone to make multiple
calls by pressing the pound sign between each call [read
between calls].” Carol Smith, “Options to Keep the Costs
Down When Phoning from Abroad,” L.A. Times, 2 Oct.
• “Between each pitch [read Between pitches], the camera
will dart between batter, Angel manager, Twin manager, a
fan with her hands in front of her face, the Rally Monkey
jumping up, the pitcher’s eyes, some guy in the dugout
biting his nails, the Rally Monkey landing, a fan with a
Christmas tree on her head, a kid screaming.” T.J. Simers,
• “The bells were traditionally rung at 6 a.m., noon and
6 p.m. in three groups of three chimes with a pause in
between each group [read in between groups], followed by
nine consecutive strokes.” Marilyn Salal Brinkman, “Bells
Will Toll for St. Joseph Again,” St. Cloud Times (Minn.),
14 June 2008, at C5.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*between each period for between periods: Stage 2
Current ratio (between periods vs.
*between each period): 67:1

between Scylla and Charybdis. See Scylla and
Charybdis.

*betwixt is an archaism. On the few occasions when it
appears, it’s usually in the clichéd betwixt and between
(meaning “in a middle position; neither one nor the
other”). But sometimes it pops up on its own when the
writer tries to affect quaintness—e.g.:
• “Betwixt the owls and the frogs, the familiar sound [of
the woodcock] comes from an old field not far from the
house.” “The Woodcock Dance Is Thrilling Rite of Spring,”
While the owls and the frogs sing, the familiar sound
comes from an old field not far from the house.)
• “If you have $100 to burn, you could be living betwixt
the aspens and the firs.” Brandon Loomis, “Chances Sold
on $35,000 Lot,” Idaho Falls Post Register, 3 Sept. 1996, at
A10. (A possible revision: replace betwixt with among.)
• “So there is no contradiction, no cornering, no rock and a
hard place for Bryant to be placed betwixt, she said.” John
with between.)

bevel, vb., makes beveled and beveling in AmE, bev-
elled and bevelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

Be-Verbs. A. Wrongly Omitted in Nonfinite Uses.
Be-verbs, usually in the infinitive or participial form,
are often omitted from sentences in which they would
add clarity. One explanation is that they are intended
to be “understood.” (See understood words.) But
this explanation does not excuse the ambiguity and
awkwardness often caused by such omissions. The
bracketed verbs in the following sentences were omit-
ted in the original sources.
• “These devices can be used to intercept a wire or oral
communication; specifically designated as not [being] such
devices are telephone or telegraph equipment furnished
to a user and used in the ordinary course of business, and
hearing aids.”
• “If the Western film offer were found [to be] different from
the musical film offer, then it might be more appealing.”

B. Circumlocutions with Be-Verbs. Verb phrases
containing be-verbs are often merely roundabout ways of
saying something better said with a simple verb,
Thus be determinative of for determine is verbose. But
be determinative is all right without an object <this
factor may be determinative in a given situation>.

The following circumlocutory uses of be-verbs are
common in stuffy writing. The simple verb is usually
better:

be abusive of (abuse)
be applicable to (apply to)
be benefited by (benefit from)
be derived from (derive from)
be desirous of (desire or want)
be determinative of (determine)
be in agreement (agree)
be in attendance (attend)
be indicative of (indicate)
be in error (err)
be in existence (exist)
be influential on (influence)
be in possession of (possess)
be in receipt of (have received)
be in violation of (violate)
be operative (operate)
be productive of (produce)
be promotive of (promote)
be supportive of (support)

Many such wordy constructions are more natu-
rally phrased in the present-tense singular: is able to
(can), is authorized to (may), is binding upon (bonds),
is empowered to (may), is unable to (cannot).

C. For say. In a contraction with a personal pro-
noun, and especially when accompanied by like, be-
verbs used in the sense of “say” have become a
common verbal tic among the younger generations—
e.g.: “I’m like, ‘What do you think?’ And she’s like, ‘I
don’t know.’ And I’m all, ‘Well, I think . . . . ’” Whether
the tic seems to be determined more by emotional
development than by age alone is a question for socio-
linguists to determine. But it is poor usage. Cf. go (b)
& like (e).

D. Reduplicative Copula: is is. See is is.

beyond a reasonable doubt. See not guilty (b).
beyond the pale. See pale, beyond the.
One can remember the proper prefix in a given context by noting that bi- means “two” <bifocals>, and semi- “half” <semicircle>. Hence bimonthly = every two months (not “twice a month”) and semimonthly = every half-month, or twice a month. Biweekly and semiweekly work similarly.

Still, bi- has been used to mean “occurring twice in a (specified span of time)” so often (and legitimately, e.g., in biannual) that, for the sake of clarity, you might do well to avoid the prefix altogether when possible. See biannual.

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bimonthly as a synonym of semimonthly: Stage 2

biannual; biennial; semiannual. Biannual and semiannual both mean “occurring twice a year.” Biennial means “occurring once every two years.” The distinction becomes important, for example, when contractual language provides for “biannual increases” or “biannual meetings.” The best advice is not to rely on words like biannual and biennial if confusion might cause problems. For absolute clarity, use semiannual or once every two years. See bi- & biennial; see also numerical prefixes.

bias, vb., makes biased and biasing in AmE, biased and biasing in BrE. See spelling (b).

Bible; bible. As a proper noun referring to the holy book, Bible is capitalized <Which book of the Bible are you referring to?>. As a common noun denoting any definitive text, it should be lowercase <that cookbook is the chef’s bible>. The adjective biblical is always lowercase, even when it refers to the Bible <the biblical account of the flood>.

bicentennial; bicentenary. See centennial.

bicep; biceps. Despite its appearance, biceps is traditionally a singular noun. H.W. Fowler preferred the plural bicepses, which is rare, and mentioned also the technical form bicipites, also rare. He called biceps, as a plural, “a mere blunder” (FMEU1 at 51).

His objection was pedantic: bicepses has hardly ever been used, whereas the plural biceps has been fairly common since the late 19th century. It is now standard—e.g.: • “The heroines of ‘Aliens’ and ‘Terminator 2,’ however, developed their biceps between movies.” Caryn James, “The Woman in ‘True Lies’,” N.Y. Times, 17 July 1994, § 2, at 13.


• “He’s one of the team’s hardest workers in the weight room, and his biceps look like tree trunks.” Robert Gagliardi, “Gentry’s Play Positive from Last Week, but UW Needs to Build from There,” Laramie Boomerang, 10 Sept. 2015, at B1.

Naturally, the back-formed singular bicep has also caught on and in nontechnical contexts is the usual form—e.g.: “Lincoln Kennedy will be sidelined two weeks by a torn left bicep.” “Slaughter Gets Deal with Jets,” Chattanooga Times, 24 July 1996, at F5. But that usage isn’t uniform, even within a single publication in a single month: “Appier (8–7), sidelined since July 3 because of inflammation in his right biceps, allowed one run and three hits.” “Padres Stop Rockies’ Streak,” Chattanooga Times, 19 July 1996, at E2. See back-formations.

Today, to refer to a person’s right biceps and to both bicepses or bicipites seems pedantic. (In 1939, one commentator said that he had “never met anyone with sufficient hardihood to use [bicepses].” William Freeman, Plain English 84 [Blanche C. Williams ed., Am. ed. 1939].) Although the etymology suggests that those forms are superior, the standard terms are now bicep as the singular and biceps as the plural. The same will probably someday be true for triceps and quadriceps. Cf. pecs, quadriceps & triceps.

Current ratio (a torn biceps vs. a torn bicep): 1.3:1


When the thing offered is a greeting or a farewell, the past tense is bade, rhyming with glad (not glade)—e.g.: • “Thousands of people, many of them police officers from throughout the West, bid [read bade] farewell to slain Pierce County sheriff’s Deputy John Bananola yesterday in a funeral that had the toughest cops weeping with grief.” Larry Lange, “Thousands Honor Slain Deputy at Funeral,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 25 Oct. 1995, at A1.


See forbid (A).

So which past tense is correct in the phrase to bid fair (= to seem likely)—is it bid fair or bade fair? Although writers have used both, the OED records only bade fair, the better form—e.g.: • “This fiasco bid fair [read bade fair] to destroy the fund of goodwill among the citizens of Europe.” Patrick Minford, “Monetary Calm Threatened on Two Fronts,” Daily Telegraph, 26 June 1995, at 22.

• “And paired as it was with a second congressional sleuthing effort, into the Whitewater affair, it bade fair to generate what passed for some agreeable theater, if not actual news.” Brian Duffy, “Just Sniffing,” U.S. News & World Rep., 14 Aug. 1995, at 8.

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1. bid farewell misused for the past-tense bade farewell: Stage 2

Current ratio (he bade farewell vs. *he bid farewell): 5:1

2. bid fair misused for the past-tense bade fair: Stage 3

Current ratio (he bade fair to vs. *he bid fair to): 2:1
B. *Bidden as a Solecism. The nonstandard past form *bidden isn't nearly as scarce as it should be—e.g.:  
• “But for years, because of the way prison posts are bidden [read bid] for and filled by seniority, administrators have had little choice but to spend millions of dollars each year in overtime to fill vacant positions.” Tom Mooney, “State Bows to ACI Union, Drops Privatization Idea,” Providence J.-Bld., 21 Oct. 1998, at B1.  
• “As described by officials this week—a specific design has yet to be solicited, bidden [read bid], submitted and selected—the new bridge will feature a scaled-down, striking cable-stayed design and carry four lanes of traffic at a total project cost of $640 million.” Editorial, “Spanning a River—and a Civic Gulf,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2 Mar. 2008, at B2.  

See irregular verbs.

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*bidden for past-tense bid: Stage 1

Current ratio (bid vs. *bidded): 3,295:1

C. Past Participle. In the sense “to make a bid,” the past participial is bid—e.g.: “NTL and France Telecom are each believed to have bid more than pounds 200m.” Mathew Horseman, “France Added to BBC Bid List,” Independent, 29 Oct. 1996, at 17. Otherwise, the past-participial form is usually bidden—e.g.: ‘Good morning, Signor Mach,’ one of them said as the fugitive Italian financier ventured from an apartment on the Boulevard St.-Germain in Paris on Sunday to buy the Italian newspapers from a corner kiosk, only to find himself arrested by the Italian plainclothes policemen who had just bid [read bidden] him good day.” Alan Cowell, “Rich Italian Fugitive Finally Caught in Paris,” N.Y. Times, 1 Nov. 1994, at A4. See irregular verbs (A).

The simple past bade is sometimes misused for bidden, a mistake that should be universally forbidden—e.g.:  
• “This historic spot (where Flora MacDonald is said to have bade [read bidden] farewell to Bonnie Prince Charlie after the Jacobite rebellion) is reasonably priced and sports a lively bar.” Mary Gillespie, “If You Go,” Chicago Sun-Times, 8 Mar. 1998, at 4.  

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1. bid misused for past-participial bidden: Stage 3

Current ratio (had bidden her vs. *had bid her): 3:1

2. bade misused for past-participial bidden: Stage 1

Current ratio (was bidden vs. *was bade): 23:1

bidden. See bid (c).

bid fair. See bid (A).

biennial = occurring every two years. If we climb the numerical ladder, we have triennial (3), quadrennial (4), quinquennial (5), sexennial (6), septennial (7), octennial (8), novennial (9), decennial (10), vicennial (20), centennial (100), millennial (1,000). See numerical prefixes; see also bi- & biannual.

bigamy; polygamy; deuteroogamy; *digamy. Bigamy = the act of marrying one person while being married to another. It may be committed knowingly or unknowingly; if committed knowingly, bigamy is a criminal offense.

Polygamy is the generic term for multiple marriages and encompasses bigamy. The word is much used by anthropologists, describing both polygyny (/lə-lij-ə-nee/)—the practice of having several wives and polyandry (/pə-lə-an-də-ri/)—the practice of having several husbands.

Deuterogamy (/d[ə]-tor-ah-mee/) and *digamy (/dig-a-mee/) both mean “a legal second marriage, such as one occurring after a divorce or after the death of the first spouse.” Deuterogamy is the more common term (to the extent that either might be called common!) and is not, like *digamy, liable to confusion with bigamy. Hence *digamy should be considered a needless variant. Of course, the term second marriage is more common—and more readily understood—than either of the other words.

Big Island. See Hawaii (A).

*big of. See of (B).

Big Words. See sesquipedality.

billfold. See wallet.

billiard. See billion.

billion. In most English-speaking countries, billion denotes a thousand millions (a 1 followed by nine 0’s). In most of continental Europe and other German-, French-, and Spanish-speaking countries, it means a million millions (a 1 followed by twelve 0’s)—a thousand millions being dubbed a milliard. Today, the two large-number systems are called the short scale and the long scale.

In the not-so-distant past, the scales were referred to as the American and British systems. But in 1974, by statute, the U.K. adopted the short scale. The short system is based on thousands, so that a million is a thousand thousands, a billion is a thousand millions, a trillion is a thousand billions, and so forth. But the older long scale is based on billions, so that a billion is a million billions, the equivalent of a trillion in the short scale. Just as the long scale calls a thousand millions a milliard, it calls a thousand of its
billions a billiard. But that’s another game. Cf. trillion. See numerals.

Biloxi (the city in Mississippi) is pronounced /bi-łok-see/-not /bi-łók-see/.

bimonthly; semimonthly. See bi-.

bind > bound > bound. It was bound to happen: some writers have erroneously introduced a weak past-tense form (*binded). The word suggests what punishment might be inflicted at their wrists (though no one says *binded and gagged)—e.g.:

- “ABL players cannot play for the WNBA this season because they are binded [read bound] by their exclusive contracts until Aug. 31.” Jason Quick, “ABLs Success Has To Be Seen,” Oregonian (Portland), 17 Feb. 1997, at B1.
- “He’d sell in a minute if he could find a local buyer binded [read bound] to keeping the franchise here.” Nick Horvath Jr., “Senators Still in a Midstate Hit,” Sunday Patriot-News (Harrisburg), 12 Apr. 1998, at C1.

Occasionally, an even worse past form, bounded, appears, especially in reported speech—e.g.:

- “Members of a club are bounded [read bound] by a long-term contract only insofar as the arrangement makes it easier to attain each one’s independent goals.” Elias L. Khalili, “Two Kinds of Order: Thoughts on the Theory of the Firm,” Socio-Economics, 1 Mar. 1999, at 157.
- “When asked if he was disappointed, [Jerry] Silverstein said, ‘I don’t know about disappointed. We’re bounded by a contract.’” Dave Vance, “Miami to Play Cardinals After TCU Says No,” Dayton Daily News, 2 Dec. 2003, at C1.

Bounded is correct, of course, for the past tense of the verb bound <they bounded up the hill>.

biographee. This seeming neologism actually dates from 1841, but still it’s a relative newcomer compared to biographer (1702). Of course, many English words ending in -ography, such as biography, calligraphy, and cartography, have agent nouns ending in -er even though there is no corresponding verb. But the -ee noun biographee is anomalous. (See -ee (A).) Still, the word can be useful, especially in book reviews—e.g.:

- “There is none of that grotesque gap between style of biographer and style of biographee that can plague the form.” Nicholas Lezard, “Sifting Fact and Fiction in Updike’s Life and Work,” Evening Standard, 24 Apr. 2014, at 44.

biopic (= a film that tells the story of someone’s life), a portmanteau word from biographical picture, is pronounced /bi-oh-pik/. It doesn’t rhyme with myopic, which has its accent on the second syllable.

bipolar disorder. See manic depression.

birth was used with some frequency in the Middle Ages as a verb. It fell into disuse, however, and has only recently been revived in standard AmE <she birthed four babies>. It often appears as a participial adjective <birthing room>. Some dictionaries label it dialectal. But given its usefulness and its long standing in the language, it should be accepted as standard.

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birth as a verb: Stage 5

bishopric; diocese; see. These theological terms are closely related, even overlapping, but they can be treated as distinct. A bishopric is the position or rank of a bishop (or the district that the bishop is in charge of). A diocese is the district that a bishop is in charge of—in other words, identical with the alternative sense of bishopric. A see is a bishop’s seat of authority or jurisdictional headquarters. See diocese.

bitcoin. Lowercase.

bite > bit > bitten. While bit, the past-tense form, is recognized in most dictionaries as an alternative past participle, since 1825 or so it has been far less common than the standard bitten. Although the OED labels it archaic, the participial bit lives on in some set phrases—e.g.:

- “Even Maher’s most ardent defender would probably agree, however, that Maher should have bit his tongue on the ‘cowardly’ comment. His timing was terrible.” Tom Dorsey, “ ‘Politically Incorrect’ Skewers Its Last Tonight,” Courier-J. (Louisville), 28 June 2002, at E2.

In most contexts, though, bitten is the preferred form—e.g.:

- “Neither Jensen nor Ashenbrenner has ever been bit [read bitten], which strikes me as somewhat amazing.” Doug Clark, “Shake, Rattle and Head for the Hills,” Spokesman-Rev. (Spokane), 1 May 1997, at B1.

See irregular verbs.

**Language-Change Index**

bit misused as a past participle for bitten: Stage 2

Current ratio (had bitten vs. *had bit): 6:1
bitter cold. This is an age-old set phrase in which bitter functions adverbially. (See Adverbs.) It appears, for example, at the outset of Shakespeare’s Hamlet (1602), where Francisco says: “‘Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart” (1.1.6–7). The phrase bitterly cold is an example of hypercorrection.

bivouac. A. As a Noun. This word is primarily a noun denoting a short-term encampment, especially one with little or no shelter. E.g.: • “With their plastic hard hats and sun-burnished skin, the migrant laborers and their construction-site bivouacs did not fit with the image of a modern city that China’s leaders wanted to project.” Edward Cody, “During Games, a Forced Vacation for Beijing’s Migrant Workers,” Wash. Post, 21 Aug. 2008, at A8. • “His living room has the poised-for-departure air of a boho bivouac.” Gerri Hirshey, “Sharing a Taste of Honey, on an International Scale,” N.Y. Times, 30 Nov. 2008, CT §, at 1.

Phrases such as temporary bivouac, bivouac camp, and the like create redundancies. See redundancy.

And bivouac is misused when the context suggests a long-term settlement—e.g.: “A president who believes government is the answer to everything quite naturally looks to government for a solution to the Michigan Militia, the Montana Maniacs, the Kansas Kooks, the Idaho Idiots and whatever other nut cases might be out there on permanent fantasy bivouacs [read maneuvers].” Kevin O’Brien, “Anti-Terrorism Laws to Solve the Wrong Problems,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 30 Apr. 1995, at C1.

B. As a Verb. As a verb meaning “to temporarily make camp or take shelter” or “to provide with temporary shelter,” bivouac makes the past tense bivouacked and the present participle bivouacking.

biweekly; semiweekly. See bi-.

bizarre; bazaar. Bizarre (= startlingly odd) is occasionally misused for bazaar (= a market, esp. a collection of small shops or vendors offering a wide variety of goods). The tricky spelling of the second word, which comes from Persian by way of Hindi and Turkish, may lead some writers into this error—e.g.: • “‘The thought of yet another library bake sale or classroom Christmas bizarre [read Bazaar] makes Polly Mire cringe.” Andrea Vogt, “Obscure Tax Law Could Aid Schools,” Spokesman-Rev. (Spokane) (Idaho ed.), 24 Dec. 1997, at B1.


See word-swapping.

Language-Change Index bizarre misused for bazaar: Stage 1 black, vb.; blacken. Both verbs mean “to make or become black,” but black is confined to the narrow, physical sense of using black polish <Frank blacked his boots>, whereas blacken is used in all other physical senses <the sky blackened> as well as in figurative senses <the candidate’s mood blackened when the indictment was unsealed>.

But the most common figurative sense—in which blacken means something like “to vilify, defame”—is widely avoided because of its invidious association with race.

blackmail referred initially to rent payable in cattle, labor, or coin other than silver (i.e., white money). Originating in Scotland from Old Norse mal (meaning “lawsuit”), it came to denote a kind of protection money: payment that robbers extorted from landowners for exemption from their raids. Today the word applies to any menacing demand made without justification—i.e., extortion generally.

Since at least the late 19th century, the word has been a verb as well as a noun—e.g.: “Watertager E. Howard Hunt blackmailed the White House into paying him hush money.” “Stone’s ‘Nixon’ Film Rocks with Conspiracies,” Boston Herald, 13 Mar. 1995, at 17.

blamable. See blameworthy (b).

*blamableness. See blameworthiness.

blame, v.t. In the best usage, one blames a person; one does not, properly, blame a thing on a person—e.g.: “I blame him for the fires.” (Not: “I blame the fires on him.”) The collocation blame it on had no appreciable presence in the language till about 1900. Since then it has steadily become more common, especially in BrE. Blame it on Britons.

Language-Change Index blame [the act or outcome] on [the actor or cause]: Stage 3
for blame [the actor or cause] for [the act or outcome]: Stage 3
Current ratio (blamed him for it vs. blamed it on him): 4:1

blameful. See blameworthy (b).

blameworthiness; *blamableness. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 413:1

blameworthy. A. And culpable. Though the two words are etymologically equivalent, in 20th- and
21st-century usage the Anglo-Saxon *blameworthy* has tended to be used in noncriminal contexts, the Latinate *culpable* in criminal contexts. E.g.:


In all phases of Modern English, the Latinate *culpable* has always appeared more frequently than the Anglo-Saxon *blameworthy*.

**B. And blamable; blameful.** *Blameworthy* is the usual word meaning “deserving blame” *Blamable* (so spelled—not *blamable*) is a negligible variant.

*Blameful* = imputing blame; blaming. E.g.: “The Sacramento City Teachers Association points a *blameful* finger at the district.” Deborah Anderluh, “City District, Teachers Still at Loggerheads,” *Sacramento Bee*, 8 Mar. 1996, at B1. The word is occasionally misused for *blameworthy*—e.g.:

- “Rosenblum also finds the unions *blameful* [read *blameworthy*] . . . .” They failed to communicate with their members and the community about what was truly at stake.” Stephen Franklin, “Book Reveals Agony Behind Copper Strike,” *Phoenix Gaz.*, 7 Feb. 1995, at D1.

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*blameful* misused for *blameworthy*: Stage 1

**blanch; blench.** v.i. The French word *blanc* (= white) is the root of both verbs, which long ago underwent differentiation. To *blanch* is to make (something) white. To *blench* is to become pale or white as blood withdraws from the surface of the skin—typically as a reaction to an emotional shock or stress. Despite the different meanings, AmE speakers long ago made *blanch* do the work of both words and never wholeheartedly embraced *blench*. In BrE, *blench* is rapidly losing ground to *blanch*, which now predominates in print sources by a 4-to-1 ratio.

Because *blench* has a second, older meaning (“to flinch; to shy away”), it can be ambiguous, as in this soliloquy:

I’ll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I’ll observe his looks.
I’ll tent him to the quick. If he do *blench*,
I know my course. *(Hamlet 2.2.557–61.)* Did Hamlet expect his uncle to turn pale or to recoil? Either meaning works, but recoiling has more dramatic effect than simply blanching.

In AmE, *blanch* is pronounced /blanch/ or /blahnch/; only the latter pronunciation is used in BrE.

**blandish; brandish.** *Blandish* = to cajole; to persuade by flattery or coaxing. E.g.: “They were pounced on by the [congressional] whips and relentlessly *blandished* with promises of favors and political support.” Michael Wines, “The Budget Struggle,” *N.Y. Times*, 6 Aug. 1993, at A1.


Misusages occur most frequently with the corresponding nouns, especially *brandishment* for *blandishment*—e.g.: “Bargaining with the touts was almost as difficult as staying civil with them; but neither was as difficult as resisting their *brandishments* [read *blandishments*] toward our sweet little thing.”


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*brandishment* misused for *blandishment*: Stage 1

**blasphemous** (= seriously insulting to people’s religious beliefs) is pronounced /blas-fo-mәs/—not /blas-fee-mәs/. Yet the verb *blaspheme* is pronounced /blas-feem/.

**blatant; flagrant.** Despite a fairly well-defined distinction, each word is misused for the other. What is *blatant* stands out glaringly or repugnantly; what is *flagrant* is deplorable and shocking, connoting outrage. A perjurer might tell *blatant* lies to the grand jury to cover up his *flagrant* breach of trust. Egregious criminal acts are *flagrant* <flagrant arson>, not *blatant*—e.g.: “No self-respecting country can permit the *blatant* [read *flagrant*] murder of four of its citizens to go unpunished.” “Cuban Jets vs. Unarmed Cessnas,” *Baltimore Sun*, 27 Feb. 1996, at A12.

Likewise, *flagrant* is sometimes misused for *blatant*—e.g.: “But all the singing performances were strong—Mary Westbrook-Geha as a *flagrant* [read *blatant*] unrepentant penitent.” Richard Dyer, “A Compelling ‘Balcony,’” *Boston Globe*, 15 June 1990, at 33. For the malapropism of misusing *flagrant* for *flagrant*, see *flagrant*.

The phrase *blatantly obvious* is a redundancy—e.g.: “That brought to mind—my mind, anyhow—a past convention when network in-house bias was so *blatantly obvious* [read *blatant*] that the GOP brass lodged a formal complaint about it.” Jim Wright, “Your Humble Swami Does It Again! (Applause),” *Dallas Morning News*, 22 Sept. 1996, at J7.

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1. *blatant* for *flagrant*: Stage 2
2. *flagrant* for *blatant*: Stage 2

**bleary-eyed** (= having tired, watery, bloodshot eyes) is the standard spelling. *Blear-eyed* and *bleareyed
are variants that, once common, have been in decline since the mid-20th century.

Current ratio (bleary-eyed vs. *blear-eyed vs. *bleareyed): 41:12:1

bleed > bled > bled. So inflected, even in figurative baseball uses—e.g.:


See irregular verbs.

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*bleded for bled: Stage 1

BLENDs. See portmanteau words.

blindman's buff (= a game in which a blindfolded player tries to catch and identify any one of several other players) is the traditional term; it dates from about 1600. But blindman's buff, a 20th-century variant, is now common and almost equally acceptable.

Current ratio: 3:1

blintz; blintze. American dictionaries are about equally divided between these two spellings for the name of a rolled pancake stuffed with cottage cheese or another filling. But the predominant spelling today is blintz, which appears about ten times as often as the original Yiddish blintze in modern print sources.

bloc; block. Political groups or alignments are blocs, especially when the affiliates vote in lockstep fashion. Block serves in all other senses.

blond; blonde. A. As an Adjective. In French, the -e is a feminine tag, the spelling without the -e being the masculine. This distinction has generally carried over to BrE, so that blonde more often refers to women and blond more often refers to men. In AmE, though, there is a tendency to use blond in all senses—e.g.: "Currently there's an 'Absolut Dallas' ad that pictures a blond woman's tiara-adorned bouffant hairdo in the shape of a bottle." Melanie Wells, "Absolut's Eye-Catching Ads Command Teens' Attention," USA Today, 31 Jan. 1997, at B5.

Sometimes blonde is ill-advisedly applied to a man—e.g.: "It looks like these beautiful people are going to ride off into Madison Avenue bliss. But wait. The blonde man is kissing someone else. And that someone else is another man." Cristina Rouvalis, "Ad Fanatics Will Revel in Best-of-Fest Commercials," Pitt. Post-Gaz., 27 June 1996, at D4.

When the word describes an inanimate object, the -e is invariably dropped <blond wooden chairs> <a honey-blond microbrewed beer>.

B. As a Noun. Though we may from time to time see blond men and blond women in print, when we see a reference to a blonde (or a blond) we almost always assume it's a woman. To avoid appearing sexist, it's best to refrain altogether from using this word as a noun. In fact, some readers will find even the adjective to be sexist when it modifies woman and not hair. Cf. brunet(te). See sexism (d).

blow > blew > blown. So inflected. See irregular verbs.

bluish. So spelled—not *blueish.

boast, vb. In the sense "to have (something desirable)," this word is objectionable primarily on grounds of being a cliché <the town now boasts 300 retail merchants>. It has been standard English since the early 19th century.

boatswain (= a ship's officer in charge of the hull) is pronounced /boh-san/. *Bosun, *bo's'n, *bos'n, and *bosun are variant forms.

bobby socks. So spelled—preferably not *bobby sox.

*bob wire. See barbed wire.

bogey; *bogie; *bogy. Bogey = (1) an evil spirit, or (2) one over par on a golf hole. *Bogy and *bogie are variant spellings.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 9:3:1

*boldface lie. See bald-faced.

bologna. See baloney.

*boloney. See baloney.

bombastic is sometimes misconstrued to mean "stiffened" or "violent." Properly, bombastic (lit., "full of stuffing or padding") means "pompous, highfalutin, overblown." But the misunderstanding is all too common, perhaps because of the sound association with bomb—e.g.:

• "He is Action Man with a human outline, unlike the bombastic [read barbarous?] brutes incarnated in Sly or Arnie. As Hollywood is now committed to violent epics of compulsive crisis, unlike the old consensual social dramas the studios used to give us, Reeves is the man to have around." Alexander Walker, "Kinetic Reeves on a White-Knuckle Ride," Evening Standard, 29 Sept. 1994, at 32.
bona fide

- "Only a plane crash. As if we have pushed these bombastic [read dreadful?] disasters down our hierarchy of fear, well below a new entry: terrorist attacks." Editorial, "Again, Smoke Blackens the Sky," Chicago Trib., 13 Nov. 2001, at 18.
- "But the idea that the only legitimate response to that terrible day is to become as blind, bloodthirsty and bombastic [read strident or violent] as the terrorists themselves—the essence of Keith's song—is insulting." Julia Keller, "Toby Keith Out of Tune with Reality," Chicago Trib., 21 July 2002. Arts & Entertainment §, at 2.

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bomba misused in a violent sense: Stage 2

bona fide

A. Meaning. This Latin phrase, meaning "good-faith," has been used as a legal term for "without fraud or deceit" (Black's Law Dictionary 210 [10th ed. 2014]) since at least the 16th century. Outside legal contexts, its meaning has been subject to slipshod extension—from "guileless" to "genuine," and later to "sincere" and even "very." The steps are subtle. Most often, for example, "guileless" and "genuine" overlap: a genuine effort is one that is done in good faith. At other times, though, what is genuine (in the sense "authentic") shows anything but good faith—e.g.:

In best usage, bona fide should always denote honesty—e.g.: "Consumers can also help further stigmatize the bad guys by supporting bona fide Internet marketers." Robert Schroeder, "How Can We Halt the Spam Onslaught?" Tulsa World, 6 Oct. 2002, at G3.

As the extended uses of bona fide stray further from this classic sense and into the various meanings of "genuine," the attachment to "honesty" likewise fades. It may mean "genuine" in the sense of "qualified"—e.g.: "What can a bona fide [read qualified] cruise expert tell you?" Judi Dash, "Get Your Bearings," News & Observer (Raleigh), 6 Oct. 2002, at H1. Or it may mean "formally recognized"—e.g.: "Only in 1984 was SAD established as a bona fide [read recognized] medical condition." Lyn Cockburn, "Fighting Winter Blues," Toronto Sun, 31 Dec. 1995, Lifestyle §, at 46. Or it may just mean "real"—e.g.: "When there is a bona fide [read real] emergency, a medicav crew must respond faster than an ER doc." J.B. Orenstein, "From Thin Air," Wash Post, 8 Oct. 2002, at F1.

In the nether reaches of these extended uses, bona fide becomes an amorphous and ornamental replacement for "real," often with a jocular flavor of "true blue" or lending dignity to the mundane—e.g.:
- "As a bona fide Jersey Girl . . . I'm here to say that New Jersey has it going on, and then some." Trish Boppert, "Hey New Jerseyans, Did You Hear the One About . . . ?," Record (N.J.), 6 Oct. 2002, at O5.

B. Adjective or Adverb. Bona fide was originally adverbial, meaning "in good faith" <the suit was brought bona fide>. Today it is more commonly used as an adjective <it was a bona fide lawsuit>. The phrase is sometimes hyphenated when functioning as a PHRASAL ADJECTIVE, but it shouldn't be.

C. Misspelled *bonified. During the late 20th century, the spurious form *bonified emerged—e.g.:
- "Calvin Klein’s unisex fragrance . . . is more like refreshing citrus water than a bonified [read bona fide or, better, genuine] perfume." Michelle Trappen, "You Nose How It Is," Oregonian (Portland), 29 Nov. 1995, at D4.
- "Much of the filming was done in a hospital setting, provided by Medstar, complete with a bonified [read bona fide or, better, genuine] nurse on the set to make sure everything was safe and authentic." John Drybored, "A Meaty TV Role Has Him Passing Up the Hamburgers," Lancaster New Era, 27 Dec. 1996, at 3.

On the reason for preferring genuine in those edits, see (A).

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bona fide misspelled *bonified: Stage 1

Current ratio: 676:1

D. Pronunciation. The phrase is pronounced /boh-na fid/ or, less often, /boh-a fid/. The pronunciation /boh-na fi-dee/ is pedantic outside the law and precious even in legal contexts.

bona fides, n. A. And good faith; bonne foi. Though the adjective bona fide has been fully Anglicized, the noun phrase bona fides has lost much ground—especially in AmE—to good faith. The trend should be encouraged. Perhaps the comparative infrequency of bona fides results from its pronunciation (/boh-na fi-deez/), which sounds foreign and bombastic in comparison with good faith. The gallicism bonne foi, a variant, sounds still more so; fortunately, it is rare.

B. Meanings. The term bona fides has essentially three meanings: (1) "good faith" <he proved his bona fides through long dedication>; (2) "authenticity; the fact of actually being what one claims or seems to be" <the diploma proved her bona fides as a graduate of Princeton>; and (3) "proof of authenticity; credentials" <she could produce no bona fides showing that she was a graduate of the university>.

Sense 1, the traditional use, is now rare.

Sense 2, the product of slipshod extension, is fairly common. It can easily be improved with slight editing—e.g.:

And sense 3 follows hard upon sense 2, extending the slipshod extension still further—e.g.: "Having
finished a course of study, like a medieval apprentice he would need to produce something that estab-

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. bona fides in the sense “authenticity”: Stage 4
2. bona fides in the sense “credentials”: Stage 2

C. Number. If the variable meanings of bona fides, together with its air of affectation, weren’t enough to make it a skunked term, the grammatical dilemma it presents certainly is. Technically, of course, the noun phrase bona fides is singular: this bona fides is, not *these bona fides are. Making bona fides singular sounds pedantic; making it plural is likely to offend those who have a smattering of Latin. Interestingly, this problem seems to occur only in senses 2 and 3 mentioned in (b)—e.g.:• “Once the hero’s bona fides are [read credentials are or authenticity is] established, Clancy’s convoluted plot lumbers along like a runaway freight train.” Gene Lyons, “Jack in Action,” Entertainment Weekly, 23/30 Aug. 1996, at 115.
• “No matter how Republican the president may sound, Icke’s liberal bona fides are [read credentials are or commitment is] questioned by none.” Michael Rust, “Dick Morris Leaves a Vacuum,” Wash. Times, 30 Sept. 1996, at 14.

Unfortunately, only a few careful writers will con-
sciously avoid this usage. Most writers would never think to use the phrase at all, but the semi-educated—eager to impress—are likely to perpetuate the error.

boned; deboned; boneless. Boned describes some-
thing with bones either in <big-boned> or out <boned chicken>. In another sense, it is synonymous with deboned (which looks deceptively like an antonym) and boneless. Any one of these three terms might suffice in each of these sentences:
• “Prudhomme said he created the turducken by layering deboned chicken, duck, and turkey with stuffing between each layer [read between the layers].” Crystal Bolner, “The Stuff of Legends,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 23 Dec. 2001, Money §, at 1. See between (b).
• “Dave’s is the place to pick up boned chickens stuffed with crawfish or shrimp or eggplant or sausage.” Mary Tutwiler, “Real Food,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 28 Apr. 2002, Travel §, at 1.

Today boneless chicken is by far the most frequent col-
location, followed distantly by boned chicken and even more distantly by deboned chicken. No bones about it.

boneless. See boned.
*bonified. See bona fide (c).

bon mot /bohn moh/ = a well-turned phrase, wit-
ticism. The plural is traditionally formed in the French way—bons mots (pronounced /bohn moh/). E.g.:

But more commonly, the plural actually used is bon mots. This anglicized plural ought to be accepted on the same footing as cul-de-sacs—e.g.:

Current ratio (bon mots vs. bons mots): 1.2:1

See plurals (b).

bonne foi. See bona fides, n. (A).

bon vivant /bohn vee-vahn/). A. And *bon viveur /bohn vee-vuhr/). Both mean “a person who lives well, esp. the companionable type who enjoys good wine and fine food.” Bon vivant is standard in AmE and BrE.
*Bon viveur, a form virtually unknown in AmE, is a BrE variant—but little-known even there. The OED labels it a “pseudo-French” substitute for bon vivant—e.g.: “A bon viveur [read bon vivant] who enjoys good wine, he is widely read and has broad interests in the arts and music.” “Hail to the Chief,” Sunday Telegraph, 13 Oct. 1996, at 36. Bon vivant vastly predominates in all varieties of English.

Current ratio (bon vivant vs. *bon viveur): 6:1

B. Plural Form. The traditional view is that the plu-
ral form is preferably the French buns vivants—e.g.: “Texas’ problems against Baylor today don’t end with the conclusion of the champagne brunch investigation and the eligibility of its bons vivants.” Jonathan Feigen, “Concerns Aplenty Remain for UT vs. Baylor,” Houston Chron., 2 Nov. 1996, Sports §, at 4.

But the phrase is often considered anglicized enough to use the English plural bon vivants. Indeed, the English form is far more common—e.g.: “When ‘60 Minutes’ reported this so-called ‘French Paradox’ several years ago, vin rouge sales surged as bon vivants hoped for some undiscovered antioxidant or a ‘miracle’ nutrient in the vin ordinaire drunk so copiously
by the French with their high-fat diets.” Fran Price, “Vari-
ety Balances Fatty Diet,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 16
• “Passengers who have sailed on Marco Polo have
described themselves as feeling like born vivants aboard.”
Arline Bleecker, “Exotic Cruise Could Become Fashion-
• “There were the born vivants who remained anchored to
their bar stools, hoisting just one more brew in honor of
the Yankees.” Frank Bruni, “World Champs: The Fans,”
See plurals (b).

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born misused for borne: Stage 1
Current ratio (borne by him vs. *born by him): 31:1

bosk; *boscage; *boskage. All three mean “a thicket.”
The first is the standard term. The second and third are
needless variants. But if the choice were between
*boscage and *boskage, the former would be consid-
ereed the better spelling.

Current ratio (bosk vs. *boscage vs. *boskage): 4:3:1

both. A. Both . . . and. These CORRELATIVE CONJUN-
ctions must frame matching sentence parts—e.g.:
• “He was trying both to establish himself in his new league
and to justify the contract extension he was given through
2002.” Phil Rogers, “Indians’ Grissom Showin He’s Big-
conjunctions frame two infinitives.)
• “Gunshot residue was observed on Mr. Foster’s right hand,
consistent both with the test firings of the gun and with
the gun’s cylinder gap.” Jerry Seper, “Starr Probe Finds
(The conjunctions frame two prepositional phrases begin-
ning with with.)
• “Immunocompromise presents unique challenges both
to the pet lover and to the veterinarian involved.” Robin
Downing, “Illness Doesn’t Mean Separation,” Denver Post,
12 Oct. 1997, at D8. (The conjunctions frame two prepo-
sitional phrases beginning with to.)

See PARALLELISM.

B. *Both . . . as well as. This construction is both
unidiomatic and verbose for both . . . and. E.g.:
• “But I think it should be obvious—both to the characters
as well as [read and] to the reader.” Denise Gess, “Susan
Lucci’s Next Movie of the Week,” News & Observer
• “The bank operations there will include both branch busi-
ness as well as [read and] the bank’s commercial-vault
business.” Mark Mensehe, “First National Bank Plans to

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*bosk . . . as well as for both . . . and: Stage 2

C. Redundancies with. Several wordings with both
cause redundancies. One is *both . . . each other—e.g.:
• “Earlier, both sides had blamed each other [read each side
had blamed the other] for the error that saw tax revenues
collected when they shouldn’t have been.” Jerry Graff,
“Edinburgh Treasurer Wants Full Tax Report,” Indianapo-
• “Both men knew each other [read The men knew each
other] and lived in the same general area, authorities said.”
“Man, 19, Arrested in Fatal Shooting” San Diego Union-
• “Brown said negotiations could produce a good substitute
for Proposition L if both sides treated each other [read each
side treated the other or the two sides treated each other]
with respect, something notably absent in the campaign.”
David R. Baker & Edward Epstein, “Brown Suggests Com-
promise on S.F. Growth Policy,” S.F. Chron., 15 Nov. 2000,
at A17.
Another is *both alike—e.g.: “This makes treating both alike [read the two alike] difficult.” Daniel F. Akerson, “Let the Innovators Innovate,” Investor’s Bus. Daily, 8 Apr. 1996, at A2. Still another is *both . . . similar—e.g.: “In other words, the mission of both [read the two] state agencies is similar.” Garvey Winegar, “Money Source of Friction Between Outdoor Agencies,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 17 Jan. 2001, at E2. See REDUNDANCY.

D. Both (of) the. Though the idiom is falling into disuse, both the (or both of these) has a fine pedigree and continues in formal English—e.g.: 
- “Both these movements are thus defined by Euclid.” James Odell, An Essay on the Elements, Accents, and Prosody of the English Language 60 (1806).
- “The hazard, in both these respects, could only be avoided, if at all, by rendering that tribunal more numerous.” The Federalist, No. 65, at 398 (Alexander Hamilton) (Clinton Rossiter ed., 1961).

The alternative phrasing, both of the (or both of these), is somewhat more common in AmE.

E. *Both (of) the last; *both (of) the last two. These phrases are unidiomatic and unnecessarily wordy for the last two—e.g.: 
- “One aspect of the game the Vikings need to work on is breaking the full-court press, which plagued them in both of [delete both of] the last two losses.” Jeff Ziegler, “ECSU Hopes to Rebound After Taking Short Break,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 18 Dec. 1994, at 19.
- “The fact that so many municipalities changed hands in both of the last [read the last two] municipal contests suggests that Paraguayan politics is getting more sophisticated than old stereotypes suggest.” “Burt Wins in a Polarised Capital,” Latin Am. Weekly Rep., 28 Nov. 1996, at 549.
- “Huddersfield have conceded late goals in both of [delete both of] their last two Championship matches.” “Big Match Guide,” South Wales Echo, 11 Sept. 2015, at 54.

*boughten. See buy (a).

bouillon. See bullion.

bountiful; bounteous. Bounteous is poetic or literary for bountiful, which is generally the more frequently occurring term. Current ratio (bountiful vs. bounteous): 4:1

bouquet (= [1] a flower arrangement meant to be carried; nosegay; [2] a compliment; or [3] the aroma of a particular wine) is preferably pronounced /boo-kay/—not /boh-/.

bourgeois; *burgeois. This term, pronounced /boor-zhwa/-, means “a member of the middle class” (which is called, collectively, bourgeoisie /boor-zhwa-see/). The first spelling (with the -ou-) is standard; the second is a variant form. Often the term, which is almost always disparaging, is used attributively as an adjective <a philistine petty bourgeois existence>.

The mass noun bourgeoisie, by the way, takes a singular verb when it functions as subject <the bourgeoisie is disillusioned>. A loanword from French, bourgeoisie (= citizenry) expanded in meaning after the Industrial Revolution to refer to either (1) the middle class or (2) in Marxist theory, the economically supreme class that owns capital, property, and the means of production. The erroneous spelling *bourgeoisie is surprisingly common:
- “Her examples, drawn from mid-twentieth century Britain, include some of the very, very rich (allowed to spend excessively, have flamboyant divorces, look down on the bourgeoisie [read bourgeoisie],” Sara Meadows, The Child as Social Person (2009).
- “After the hurly-burly and the social animation of Père Lachaise, where many local families go to picnic, we found the Cimetière Montparnasse in the 14th, the burial place of Beckett and his wife, Suzanne, austere and clinical, close to where they had lived, very much the resting place of the haute bourgeoisie [read bourgeoisie].” Hugh Oram, “An Irishman’s Diary,” Irish Times, 25 Apr. 2011, Opinion §, at 15.
- “What the bourgeoisie [read bourgeoisie] engendered was a Creole industrial enterprise centred on sugar.” G. Roger Knight, Sugar, Steam and Steel: The Industrial Project in Colonial Java, 1830–1885 204 (2014).

boutique (= [1] a small shop that sells fashionable items, or [2] a firm that specializes in a narrow array of services) is preferably pronounced /boo-teek/—not /boh-/.

bowdlerize (= to remove all the passages in a book, play, etc. containing offensive and esp. sexual references) is preferably pronounced /bowd-lә-riz/—not /bohd/-.

boycott; embargo. While both terms refer to the suspension of trade with a certain person, company, state, or nation, the difference is how the suspension is imposed. Historically, a boycott is an organized popular protest (the word comes from Capt. C.C. Boycott, an English landlord who was stigmatized by his Irish tenants for raising rents in 1880), while an embargo is imposed by a government (or, in the case of a news embargo, by the originator of the story). So even if the U.S. government were to lift its trade embargo against Cuba, the exile community in Miami might still boycott Cuba as long as it remained communist.

boyish. See girlie.

Brackets. See Punctuation (p).

braggadocio (= excessively proud talk) is preferably pronounced /brag-ә-do-shee-oh/—not /brag-ә-do-see-oh/.

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Brahmin; Brahman; Brahma. For people, the spelling *Brahmin* (or *Brahman*) denotes (1) the highest caste or a member of that caste in classical Indian society; or (2) a member of upper-class New England society. *Brahmin*, the older spelling, is preferred <a Brahmin holy man> <a Boston Brahmin>. The popular breed of cattle originating in India are *Brahmin* or *Brahma* cattle. But in reference to a specific sex, the males are always *Brahma* bulls, whereas the females may be *Brahma* or *Brahman* cows.

**brake; break.** A *brake* is a device that slows something, esp. to a halt. *Break* is a multisense word, the most common meanings being (1) a sudden separation into pieces, (2) a snapping off or detachment, and (3) a penetration through the surface of (something).

Sometimes the two are erroneously interchanged, especially in reference to the brakes on a vehicle—e.g.:

- “Police said the truck, driven by LeRoy Anthony Gaul, 59, was approaching an intersection where its *breaks* [read *brakes*] failed.” "Murder Suspect Nabbed in Mason City," Des Moines Register, 14 Oct. 1998, at 3.
- “Survivors told how they shouted at the driver to slow down just before he lost control—he told police on the scene that his *breaks* [read *brakes*] failed.” “Relatives Fly Out as South Africa Crash Probe Launched,” Evening News (Scotland), 28 Sept. 1999, at 3.

The words also function, of course, as verbs: a person may *brake* a car (apply the brakes) or *break* a bowl (drop it and watch it smash into pieces). But what does one do to a fall? The traditional idiom is to *break* (i.e., interrupt) a fall. The *OED* cites two 19th-century examples, the earlier being by Thomas Babington Macaulay. Some modern writers, however, have misunderstood the idiom and replaced *break* with *brake* (= to slow down). Though perhaps understandable, the error is an error nonetheless—e.g.:

- “You had no way to *brake* [read *break*] your fall, and spent the post-apex part of the journey screaming in terror as the pavement rushed up.” James Lilley, “I Can't Warm Up to Work When It's So Nice Outside,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 2 May 1999, at B3.
- “That wasn’t enough to *brake* [read *break*] the fall from grace.” Steve Hummer, “Is This Fall Slump Becoming Nor- mal?” Atlanta J.-Const., 27 Oct. 1999, at D1.

Modern technology, here as elsewhere, has complicated this usage. Consider this sentence: “It must then pop a parachute and power on retro-rockets to *brake* [read *break*?] its fall.” Kathy Sawyer, “NASA Goes for a Martian Pole in One,” Wash. Post, 3 Dec. 1999, at A3. Since the retrorocket is indeed a kind of *brake*, the sentence straddles two idioms.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *break* misused for *brake*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (break pedal vs. *brake* pedal): 89:1
2. *brake* a fall for *break* a fall: Stage 1
   Current ratio (break their fast vs. *brake* their fast): 47:1

**brandish.** See **blandish.**

**brand-new, ad.** So spelled (and hyphenated)—preferably not *bran-new. The phrase is sometimes written *bran’-new* to show that the -d is usually dropped when the word is pronounced. Although sounding the -d in speech is more than a little pretentious, the contracted written form is unnecessary.

**brassiere (the women’s undergarment) is, oddly enough, sometimes confused with *brazier* (= [1] someone who works in brass; or [2] a pan used for holding burning coals), which is pronounced /braz-zer/. In the 1950s, an Oklahoma legislator questioned the president of the University of Oklahoma, George Lynn Cross, about why the taxpayers’ hard-earned money had been spent on women’s undergarments. Cross calmly explained that the Egyptian brazier (in sense 2), along with some burial jewelry, had been acquired for a university museum. Randy Krehbiel, “George Cross: The Inimitable OU President,” Tulsa Trib. & Tulsa World, 24 Apr. 1994, at N1.

Although the French pronunciation of *brassiere* is /brә-si-er/, the standard American pronunciation is /bra-zer/. In BrE, it’s /braz-y/. **breach, n.; broach; breech.** *Breach* (= [1] n., an opening or gap; or [2] vb., to break open) can be a troublesome word. In general usage, it is confused with two other words: *breach*, n. (= [1] buttocks; or [2] the lower or back part [of something, as a gun]), and *broach*, v.t. (= [1] to make a hole in [something] to let out liquid; or [2] to bring up for discussion). The confusion of *breach* with *breech* occurs most often when writers mistakenly use the latter where *breach* belongs—e.g.:

- “She had ordered them all to sit, a breech [read *breach*] of protocol, but she wanted them to realize only their tasks of discovery mattered now.” Karen Harper, *The Queen’s Cure* 238 (2002).

But *breech birth* (= the delivery of a baby buttocks-first or feet-first) is sometimes wrongly made *breach birth*, an error that has been on the rise since 1950—e.g.:

- “Called Danzante carvings, the panels show a woman writhing during a *breech* [read *breach*] birth.” “Christmas in Oaxaca—Tradition with a Twist,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 23 Nov. 1997, Travel §, at 1.

For *breeches* (= pants), see **breeches.**

The lapse with *brouch* occurs when someone mistakenly writes of *broaching a topic or subject—e.g.:

- “When Faldo breached [read *breached*] that subject to his wife of nine years, Gill wasn’t exactly overjoyed.” Steve Hershey, “Changes in Life Agree with Faldo,” USA Today, 16 Apr. 1996, at C2.
- “When rumors regarding Kordell Stewart first surfaced, many talk-show callers attempted to *breach* [read *broach*]

The meanings of breach and broach are similar only in reference to dikes or levees or walls (breach = to break open; broach = to make a hole in). E.g.: “Less than three months ago—in the immediate aftermath of the breaching of the Berlin Wall—the Chancellor's closest aides were predicting that five to eight years might still be needed before unity became a reality.” David Marsh, "Kohl Takes the Burden of Unity on His Shoulders,” Fin. Times, 22 Feb. 1990, at 3.

It's awkward to broach this subject, but sometimes a writer seems thoroughly befuddled. After a well-publicized tiger escape, a journalist led his account with this sentence: “The San Francisco Zoo was closed to visitors Wednesday as investigators tried to figure out how, pray tell, does one "broach a moat”? Tatiana got out, to be sure, but not by making a hole in the wall. And how, pray tell, does one "broach a moat”? Tatiana seems to have scaled the wall and crossed the moat.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *breach* for *breach*:

   Current ratio (*breach of protocol* vs. *breach of protocol*): 21:1

2. *breach* for *breach birth*:

   Current ratio (*breach birth* vs. *breach birth*): 9:1

3. *breach* for *broach*:

   Current ratio (*broached the subject* vs. *breached the subject*): 310:1

**breach**, v.t. Despite a rumor that some crotchety law professors have been spreading, one can *breach*—not just *break*—a contract, a promise, or the peace. Using *breach* in figurative senses is a very modest extension of the old literal sense “to make a breach in (a wall, boundary, etc.).” Indeed, the *OED*’s first citation for the verb is this one from Boorde in 1547: “[O]bliviousness may come to young men and women when their mind is *breached*” (spelling updated).

And the figurative meaning appears routinely in well-edited writing—e.g.:-

- “In August, a jury found the diocese had *breached* its duty to parishioners when it failed to prove claims of sexual abuse.” News from Every State: Connecticut,” USA Today, 8 Sept. 1997, at A16.

**breakdown** = (1) failure <the breakdown of the bus didn’t delay them long>; or (2) subdivision <the breakdown on the financial statement showed which subsidiaries owed the most in taxes>. Sense 1 is much older (ca. 1832) and has long been established. Sense 2 was once considered officialese, especially after it first appeared in the mid-20th century, but today is generally viewed as natural and useful.

**break-in**, n. So hyphenated...
breath; breathe. The first is the noun, the second the verb. But breath (/breth/) is often mistaken for breathe (/breathe/)—e.g.:

- “It was as if the questioner could not fathom the fact that the carrier of two X chromosomes would be able to breath [read breathe] the same rarefied air as men.” Kitty Kelley, “Washington’s New Wimp Factor,” N.Y. Times, 28 Nov. 1992, at 13.
- “Owen says his daughter’s throat was so swollen she could hardly breath [read breathe].” Camilla Mortensen, “Kids: Don’t Drink the Toxic Water,” Eugene Weekly, 26 May 2011, at N1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

breath misused for breathe: Stage 1

breathable. So spelled—not *breatheable. See MUTE E. Current ratio: 205:1

breech. See breath.

breeches; britches. The word breeches (= pants, esp. short ones) dates from before the 12th century. Britches, an altered form of breeches, dates from the early 19th century. Both are pronounced /brich-iz/, and both are used today—e.g.:


Interestingly, breeches is almost a formal word, while britches verges on DIALECT.

The expression too big for your breeches/breeches can be read literally to mean that you no longer fit into your pants or, more commonly, that you are over-confident or cocky—e.g.: “One thing we don’t cotton to in Arkansas is getting too big for your britches. I’d say ‘breeches,’ but that would be getting too big for them.” Anon., “Newly Slim Governor’s Pants Too Tight,” Arkansas Times, 15 Oct. 2005, at 18. In this set phrase, the spelling is invariably britches, not breeches.

breed > bred > breed. So inflected. Yet the ill-bred form *bred (common in the 18th century but not since then) still sometimes appears. Note that in the following examples, the first two instances are literal, the last two figurative. Either way, the past tenses should be bred—e.g.:

- “She also bred [read bred] and exhibited Afghan hounds.” Mary Thompson, Pilot, Engineer, Autism Activist,” Boston Herald, 10 May 1998, at 79.
- “As confusion about how much reimbursement the township expected breed [read bred] new misunderstandings Thursday, McKarski confirmed that township fees are about $25,000.” Matt Assad, “City Officials Fear Demands Could Doom a Landfill Deal,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 20 Feb. 1998, at B1.


See IRREGULAR VERBS.

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*bred* for past-tense bred; Stage 1

Current ratio (bred vs. *breded): 3,289:1

brethren. The plural form brethren has survived most prominently in contexts involving religious, legal, and fraternal organizations—almost always in reference to people who aren’t brothers by birth.

Sometimes, though, brethren is used literally or figuratively in the context of tribes, allies, and even colleagues—e.g.:

- “The warlord’s superior military might is the main reason the Taliban is prepared to negotiate with him, despite the supposedly intolerable support he almost certainly receives from Russia and his brethren in Uzbekistan.” Alex Spillius, “An Opponent the Taliban Would Love to Subdue,” Daily Telegraph, 25 Oct. 1996, at 20.
- “These days things have leveled out for the musical brethren of Campagna and Carter—both of whom sadly personified the concept of ‘Live fast, die young.’” Hunter Hauk, “And the Punk Band Will Play On,” Dallas Morning News, 13 Aug. 2015, at E1.

Is brethren male-specific? Although courts have considered the word generic in some contexts, most readers are unlikely to see it as gender-neutral. The word is unlikely to flourish in AmE because of its perceived sexism. Nor does brethren and sistren seem likely to catch on, sistren being the analogous archaic plural of sister. Unlike its male sibling, sistren is now chiefly dialectal.

Breton. See Briton (b).

Breve. See diacritical marks.

bribery. See extortion.

bridal; bridle. These two are sometimes the victims of WORD-SWAPPING. Bridal, adj., = of, for, or relating to a bride or wedding. Bridle, n., = part of a horse’s harness. But instances do occur in which writers misuse bridal for bridle—e.g.: “A horse bridal [read bridle] hangs around her neck like a necklace or dog leash.” Lynn Pyne, “Don’t Chicken Out: See Photos Seized by Cops,” Phoenix Gaz., 28 May 1994, at D3.

The opposite error also occurs—e.g.: “It is also supposed to be symbolic of the canopy once held over the bridle [read bridal] couple to protect them from the ‘evil eye.’” Monie Heath, “Wedding Customs Have Roots in History,” Herald-Sun (Durham, N.C.), 27 Mar. 1994, at G5. But sometimes, as one might expect, the writer isn’t erring at all but is having fun—e.g.: “It was

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
1. *bridal* misused for *bride*: Stage 1
2. *bride* misused for *bridal*: Stage 1
Current ratio (bride path vs. *bridal*): 20:1

**bride-elect**. See *bride-to-be*.

**bridegroom**. See *groom*.

**brideprice; dowry.** *Brideprice* = in marriage customs (mostly in Asia), the money or goods that pass from the prospective groom or his family to the bride or her family. *Dowry* = money or goods passing from the bride’s side to the groom’s. Neglected by many dictionaries (though not by W3 or RH2), the term *brideprice* is established among anthropologists. It is an unfortunate label because it helps perpetuate the myth that in some cultures families sell their daughters into marriage. Some scholars have suggested *bride-wealth* and *bridecost* as alternatives, but the misleading label appears, for the time being, to be entrenched. See generally Jack Goody, *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive* (1990). For more on dowry, see *dower*.

**bride-to-be; *bride-elect*.** The first form, which out-numbers the second by a 9-to-1 ratio in newspaper wedding announcements, is standard. The second is a preposterous form, no election having taken place—e.g.: “*The bride-elect* [read *bride-to-be*], a graduate of Handels Academy, Wolfsberg, Austria . . . is chief physical therapist in Kinderspital Zurich-University Children's Hospital.” “Andrew Nash to Wed in Austria,” Buffalo News, 15 Apr. 2001, at E4. Surprisingly, though, *bride-elect* emerged as long ago as the early 19th century and was even more common than *bride-to-be* until about 1915.

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*bride-elect* for *bride-to-be*: Stage 2
Current ratio (bride-to-be vs. *bride-elect*): 9:1

**bridge the gap.** This is the established idiom, dating from the 17th century. Through mistaken sound association, some writers use *breach the gap* in place of *bridge the gap*. The result is worse than a broken idiom: it’s a logical absurdity. *To breach* something is to create a gap in it, not to close the gap. As nouns, *gap* and *breach* are synonymous. Still, the error is fairly common—e.g.:

- “He says that his group has reached out to African Americans, but says more could be done to *breach [read bridge]* the gaps within the American Muslim community.” Mary Rourke, “One Faith, Two Minds,” *L.A. Times*, 30 Jan. 2002, § 5, at 1.
- “The council’s program is one of several attempts to *breach [read bridge]* the widening gap between what children are taught about personal finance and what they need to know,” Julie Tripp, “Econ 101 at Any Age,” *Sunday Oregonian* (Portland), 31 Mar. 2002, at F8.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
*breach the gap* for *bridge the gap*: Stage 1
Current ratio (bridge the gap vs. *breach the gap*): 285:1

**bride.** See *bridal*.

**brilliance; brilliancy.** *Brilliance* is now standard in describing a quality or state. *Brilliancy*, not quite a needless variant, means “something brilliant” <the brilliancies in Edmund Wilson’s writings> and is generally useful only in the plural.

**brimful, adj.** So spelled—not *brimfull*. Current ratio: 34:1

**bring.** A. *Inflected Forms: bring > brought > brought.* The form *brung*, a dialectal word that came to prominence in the 19th century, is not in good use except in variations of the jocular phrase *dance with the one that brung ya*. For example, one politician told a crowd, “‘The voters of the 25th District are the ones who *brung* me, and they are the ones I want to dance with.’” Catherine Candisky, “2 Vying for House Say They Get Things Done,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 25 Sept. 1996, at B6 (quoting Republican Jim Mason of Ohio). See irregular verbs.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
*brung* for *brought*: Stage 1
Current ratio (brought vs. *brung*): 1,642:1

**B. And take.** *Bring* suggests motion toward the writer or reader <please bring me a soda>. *Take* suggests motion in the opposite direction <just after you put the soda down, he took it from me>. Cf. *come (n)*.

The distinction might seem to be too elementary for elaboration here, but misuses do occur—e.g.: “If the gentleman wishes to *bring [read take]* you somewhere, he should say to the hosts, ‘I have been seeing a great deal of someone whom I would like you to meet,’ and then give them your name so that they can issue you a proper invitation.” Judith Martin, “‘And Guest’ Invitation Irks This Companion,” *Chicago Trib.*, 6 Apr. 1997, at 4.

The rule becomes complicated when the movement has nothing to do with the speaker—e.g.: “When my dad was courting my mom, a single mother of two, he used to *take* her a bag of groceries instead of *flowers*.” In such a situation, the choice of *bring or take* depends on motion toward or away from whatever is being discussed. So in the previous example, *bring* would work as well if the point of view was that of the mother rather than the father.

And despite the direction of the movement, *bring* is the only choice in idioms such as “*bring to the table*.”

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
*bring* misused for *take*: Stage 3
bring (an) action against

bring (an) action against is verbose for sue—e.g.: “He said Washington law also allows store and club owners to bring action against [read sue] juveniles who fake their credentials.” Richard Grimes, “Underage Proposal a Really Good Idea,” Charleston Daily Mail, 24 Oct. 1996, at B1. Similar wordiness appears in the kindred phrases bring legal proceedings against and institute legal proceedings against. Take action against is broader, encompassing physical as well as legal action.

brinkmanship (= a method of gaining a negotiating advantage by suggesting a willingness to do something very dangerous or destructive) is written with no -s- after brink, though many people mistakenly add it on the analogy of gamesmanship. In the mid-20th century, the humorist Stephen Potter invented many facetious formations with -manship, including gamesmanship, golfmanship, and one-upmanship. Although he didn’t himself originate brinkmanship, he embraced the word and used it in print in 1958.

In modern print sources, brinkmanship predominates over *brinksmanship by a 4-to-1 ratio.

briquette (= a small, compacted block, as of charcoal) is the standard spelling. *Briquet is a variant.

Current ratio: 4:1

Brit, a colloquial shortening of Briton or *Britisher, is recorded in the OED from 1901. As an adjective, it describes anything that is British. Unlike many other national and ethnic casualisms, it is not pejorative—perhaps because it was homegrown. See Briton (A).

Britain. See Great Britain.

britches. See breeches.

Briticism; Britishism. We have long needed a word to denote any custom or quality associated with British people. Although Briticism was prevalent in the 19th century, the two forms have been close contenders in print sources since about 1910. H.W. Fowler preferred Briticism on scholarly grounds (FMEU1 at 57), but it has been mostly the nonscholarly writers who have followed his preference—e.g.: • “Mr. Bryson writes in snappy, novelistic prose that’s seasoned with little-old-lady Britishisms.” Michiko Kakutani, “A Land of Civilities, Achievements and ‘Chumley,’” N.Y. Times, 16 Aug. 1996, at C30.

Most American desktop dictionaries nevertheless list Briticism as the main term. Since about 1980, the two forms have closely vied for predominance in general English-language print sources. Cf. Scoticism.

Current ratio: 1.05:1

B R I T I C I S M S . See a m e r i c a n i s m s a n d b r i t i c i s m s .

*Britisher. See Briton (A).

Briton. A. And *Britisher. The word Briton—the word that Britons themselves recognize—is about seven times as common in print sources as *Britisher, an Americanism. For that reason, and because Britons often consider *Britisher a vague insult, Briton should be preferred—e.g.: “It would not be a good idea to ask the famously crabby Britisher [read Briton] if this rush of Stateside success makes the prospect of working in Hollywood, with a decent-sized budget, attractive.” Rod Dreher, “The Secret’s Out,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 13 Oct. 1996, at F1. See Brit.

L A N G U A G E - C H A N G E I N D E X

*Britisher for Briton: Stage 2

Current ratio: 7:1

B. And Breton. A Briton /brit-on/ is a British subject—that is, a native or citizen of Great Britain. A Breton /bret-on/ is a native or citizen of the region in northwestern France called Brittany (Fr. Bretagne).

broach. See breach, n.

broadcast > broadcast > broadcast. So inflected. In his book Words and Rules (2000), Steven Pinker condemns Theodore Bernstein, the estimable author of The Careful Writer, for his 1965 preference for the past-tense broadcast over *broadcasted. Pinker says that this preference “had long been a losing battle,” and quotes H.L. Mencken in support of *broadcasted. Back in 1936, Mencken said that “broadcasted” “is what one commonly hears.” Yet with only five minutes’ work on the westlaw database, it was possible in 2000 to show that in modern print, the ratio staggering favors broadcast (19,805 sources) and not broadcasted (86) as a past form. (More recently, Google ngrams show the ratio in World English to be still quite overwhelming.) Bernstein was right in 1965, and Pinker should have known better than to rely on a 1936 quotation as his sole evidence against Bernstein—a New York Times editor with his ear firmly to the ground—whom he snidely accuses of “hectoring people into sticking with the irregular.” See -cast & irregular verbs.

L A N G U A G E - C H A N G E I N D E X

*broadcasted for broadcast: Stage 1

Current ratio (had broadcast vs. *had broadcasted): 25:1

brokerage; brokage. Brokerage = (1) the business or office of a broker <real-estate brokerage is a profession requiring knowledge and experience>; or (2) a broker’s fee <brokerage differs from an underwriting commission>.

The archaic brokage (or, alternatively, brocage) means “the corrupt jobbing of offices; the bribe unlawfully paid for any office” (OED). It’s also a needless variant of brokerage.

bronco; bronc; broncho. The standard form is bronco (=a wild, unbroken horse). Bronc is a colloquial clipping. Broncho is a variant spelling used for some sports teams; for example, the University of Central Oklahoma calls its players the Bronchos, and a few high-school teams use the same spelling. But the spelling
bronco has predominated since the 1950s. Oddly, before that time, broncho was the predominant form, but it fell mysteriously into decline in the mid-20th century.

Pl. broncos. See plurals (d).

brooch; broach, n. The first denotes a type of pinned jewelry. The second is a tool for tapping a cask (or, as a verb, to break through something, such as a barrel's bung or the surface of water). Brooch is best pronounced, like broach, to rhyme with coach. It may also be pronounced to rhyme with mooch, although this -ooch pronunciation is less common and falling more and more out of favor.

Perhaps because of its dominant pronunciation, brooch is sometimes misspelled broach—e.g.:• "Here one can find white gold bracelets for $1,250 or diamond broaches [read brooches] for $520,000." Ginia Belafante, "With Tribal Chic, Chunky Jewelry Is Back," N.Y. Times, 4 June 2002, at B11.
• "She was wearing an evening gown of pink chiffon joined at one shoulder with a big broach [read brooch] sparkling with diamonds." Charlaine Harris, All Together Dead 172 (2007).

Brooch

Current ratio (diamond brooch vs. *diamond broach): 18:1

brooch misused for brooch: Stage 1

Language-Change Index

brooch

brunette; brunet. Unlike its counterpart blond(e), this word is seldom applied to males, even though the form brunet is the masculine in French. Some have suggested that brunet appears most often as a noun, while brunette is reserved for the adjective. But in fact brunet commonly serves both functions, and in frequency it greatly outnumbers the rival form—e.g.:• Adjective: "Other Folsom friends rooting for the brunette pianist are 1st District Police Juror Bernie Willie and his wife, Sharla." Melissa Bienvenu, "Miss La. Is Familiar Face for Folsom," Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 14 Sept. 1996, at B1.
• Noun: "Miss Lamour played the exotic brunette who fell in league with the playboy with the ski-jump nose and his smooth-voiced pal who vied for her attentions." Annie Shooman, "Road Movies Actress Dorothy Lamour Dies," Chattanooga Free Press, 23 Sept. 1996, at A7.
• Noun: "Most recently, however, Basinger asked to be made into a brunette." Jeryl Brunner, "French Toast," In Style, Dec. 1996, at 84.

Cf. blond. See sexism (d).

*brung. See bring (a).

bruschetta, referring to a Tuscan appetizer of grilled bread topped with garlic, olive oil, herbs, and often tomatoes, grew to prominence in the English vocabulary only as recently as the 1980s. The term is preferably pronounced /broo-sket-/a, as in Italian. But in AmE /broo-shet-/a is disappointingly ubiquitous. Most culinary authorities agree on the recommended pronunciation. Cookbooks by all the following authors admonish their readers to use the /k/ pronunciation, not the /sh/: Jack Bishop, Al Getz, Edward Giobbi, Federico Moramarco, Peggy J. Parks, Judy Pochini, David Rosengarten, Andrew Schloss, and Clifford A. Wright. One writer plumbs for the anomalous /broosh-ket-/a. See Mary C. Baker, Fresh from Dover Canyon 8 (2003). But that pronunciation is best eschewed /es-chood/.

The pronunciation of bruschetta has made cameo appearances in more than one novel, most notably here: "I pronounced it brusketta, as I had always heard people in restaurants do. She shook her head in pain. 'Brusketta, dear, brusketta. Ch in Italian is hard,' she murmured." Barry McCrea, The First Verse 16 (2005).

brusque; *brusk. The first spelling is standard. In AmE, the term is pronounced /brask/; in BrE, its /broo$k/.

Current ratio: 60:1

Brussels sprout (= a small, edible bud akin to cabbage) is so spelled and capitalized—not brussels sprout and especially neither *Brussel sprout nor *brussel sprout.

bucketful. Pl. bucketfuls—not *bucketfuls. See plurals (g).

Current ratio: 3:1

buck naked; *butt naked. Both forms mean “completely undressed.” The original and standard expression, dating from the 1920s, is buck naked—e.g.:• “With Lucille Ball flair she torches houses and locks herself out of the house buck naked” Tom Cunneff et al., “My Favorite Housewife,” People, 24 Jan. 2005, at 38.
• “The current centerfolds, buck naked though they may be, communicate almost no suggestion of anything. In Playboy pinups, one is not looking for the note of the divine that one finds in the Venuses of ancient statuary, let alone for the pathos of Rembrandt’s nudes.” Joan Aocella, “The Girls Next Door,” New Yorker, 20 Mar. 2006, at 144.

The origin of buck naked is a matter of speculation, and many theories are just folk etymology. (See etymology (d).) The most prevalent guess is that buck derives from Old English terms for male deer, goats, and some other animals. The skin of bare buttocks, derives from Old English terms for male deer, goats, and some other animals. The skin of bare buttocks, which is sometimes misspelled buck, skin. Another theory is that refers to the racist term for a male African-American—especially in reference to slaves, who were stripped naked for potential buyers to inspect them before an auction. The real answer is probably lost to time.

The form buck naked has traditionally been much more common in edited publications than *butt

Languages-Change Index


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
budgerigar

bouillon; bullion. The first term, referring to an ingot of precious metal, is rarely misspelled. The second, referring to a broth, is often misspelled like the first—e.g.: "But some things haven’t changed: rooms with large balconies that overlook the beach, the periwinkle blue-and-white color scheme, bullshits on the beach (bullion [read bouillon] and vodka) and, upon checkout, a hand-written hill rather than a computer printout." David Swanson, "Picture Yourself . . . You Can Really Afford It," Columbus Dispatch, 27 May 2001, at F1.

Bullion is pronounced /boo-yən/. Bouillon is pronounced /buul-yən/, /buul-yən/, or sometimes /boo-yawn/.

Bulrush, denoting a type of marsh plant, is sometimes misspelled *bulrush*—e.g.: "With bulrushes [read bulrushes] springing up in the bay where pickleweed once grew, and pressure mounting to do something to help endangered saltwater species, it was only a matter of time before cities like San Jose came to view their sewage as an enticing supply of freshwater, Ritchie said." Jill Leovy, "Reclaimed Waste Water May Ease State’s Thirst," L.A. Times, 17 Aug. 1997, at A1. The word derives from the Middle English bullysche, from bol (= stem). It’s unconnected with bull.

bulrush, n., sometimes causes writers to doubt which form of a verb to use, singular or plural—e.g.: “Although nearly a third of blacks have moved into the middle class, the bulk of blacks fall [falls?] into a troubled underclass, as Andrew Hacker’s Two Nations so cogently proves.” Edward T. Chase, “The Trouble with Friendship,” Nation, 17 June 1996, at 33. Most writers—who might find support in the principle of synesis—would write fall in that sentence. And they have the better position: when the phrase bulk of the is followed by a plural count noun, the verb should be plural <the bulk of the criticisms are valid>. But when it’s followed by a singular mass noun, the verb should be singular <the bulk of the criticism is valid>. The form is attested from the early 19th century in historical dictionaries. See count nouns and mass nouns & synesis.

bulk large, an equivalent of loom large, is a set phrase (perhaps even something of a cliché). To use the unidiomatic adverb largely is an example of hypercorrection—e.g.: “The first point I would make is that certain matters which bulk largely [read bulk large] in ‘incidental’ grammar teaching are not fundamental questions of grammar at all.” Hunter Diack, “A Re-Examination of Grammar,” in A Linguistics Reader 152, 154 (Graham Wilson ed., 1967).

Bullets. See punctuation (b).

budget, vb., forms budgeted and budgeting in AmE and BrE alike. See spelling (b).

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buffet. When speaking of the serve-yourself meal, say either /bo- fay/ or /boo-fay/. When speaking of the pummeling blow, say /bof-/it. But in BrE, the pronunciation /bof-/it is common for both senses.

bouillon; bullion. The first term, referring to an ingot of precious metal, is rarely misspelled. The second, referring to a broth, is often misspelled like the first—e.g.: “But some things haven’t changed: rooms with large balconies that overlook the beach, the periwinkle blue-and-white color scheme, bullshits on the beach (bullion [read bouillon] and vodka) and, upon checkout, a hand-written hill rather than a computer printout." David Swanson, "Picture Yourself . . . You Can Really Afford It," Columbus Dispatch, 27 May 2001, at F1.

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budgerigar (= Australian parakeet) is a transliteration of an Aboriginal word common in BrE but rare in AmE, enough so that it is often accompanied by an explanation—e.g.: “[O]ver the years, I’ve seen performing pooches, Budgerigars (a small parrot) and any number of other tricked-up critters.” Chris Jones, “Feline Follies,” Chicago Trib., 8 Dec. 2006, On the Town §, at 1.

As more familiar to American ears is the shortened form, budgie—e.g.: “The English budgerigar, also known as a budgie, is a larger cousin of the common parakeet.” Greg Okuhara, “Breeders Work to Take Birds to New Heights,” Houston Chron., 2 Apr. 2006, at B3.

As a transliterated term, the word is susceptible to variants in spelling and pronunciation. W2, for example, lists it as *budgereegah* and *budergyah*—both with the primary accent on the final syllable. Today, the standard spelling is budgerigar and the preferred pronunciation stresses the first syllable: /buul-ə-ree-gahr/.

budget, vb., forms budgeted and budgeting in AmE and BrE alike. See spelling (b).

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Cf. scrumptious.

**buncombe.** See bunkum.

**bungee;** buungi; **bungie.** When the fad (later sport) of jumping from high places with elastic ropes attached to one’s body or ankles became popular in the 1980s, bungee became twice as common in every use <bungee cords> <bungee ropes> as *bungy, and it is now 20 times as common. It’s the only accepted spelling for bungee jumping. The now-rare spelling bungie was the 19th-century name for rubber from India and products made from it.

**bunkum; buncombe.** This term refers to political talk that is empty or insincere. It derives from an early-19th-century speech made by a U.S. congressman representing Buncombe County, North Carolina. He felt compelled, despite other pressing business, to ‘make a speech for Buncombe’ during a session of Congress. Buncombe long remained the standard spelling, and some writers prefer it as calling the interesting origin of the word. E.g.: “Or would we dig deeply into our stories of neighborhood and buncombe and cobble together something almost great?” Thomas Hine, “Don’t Blame Mrs. O’Leary,” *N.Y. Times*, 15 July 1990, § 7, at 13. But beginning in the early 1970s, the spelling bunkum overtook the traditional spelling in frequency of occurrence in printed books. It is now the standard form.

The shortened casualism is spelled bunk (= non-sense) “that’s all bunk!” A clipped form of bunkum, it dates from the early 20th century. Henry Ford immortalized the word when he said, “History is more or less bunk.”

Current ratio: 2:1

**buoy (= a floating object that marks an area in a sea, lake, etc.)** is preferably pronounced /boo-ee/ in AmE, or /boy/ in BrE.

**bureau.** The better plural form is bureaus, which has consistently predominated since the 16th century. The Frenchified plural, *bureaux, is pretentious. See plurals (b).

Current ratio: 21:1

**bureaucracy.** See governmental forms.

**bureaucrat (= an official of a bureaucracy), a word tinged with pejorative overtones, is sometimes misunderstood and misspelled *beaurocrat (as if it derived from beau, instead of bureau)—e.g.: “With smooth, almost dapper features and an unassuming air, one could almost dismiss Jerry Nicely as simply a pleasant run-of-the-mill beaurocrat [read bureaucrat].’’ Renée Elder, “Nothing Run of the Mill About Nicely,” *Tennessean*, 9 June 1996, at E1.

**Bureaucratese (byuu-rahk-ra-teez/), the jargon of bureaucrats, is a type of writing characterized by zombie nouns, passive voice, overlong sentences, and loose grammar. Add to that an overlay of double-speak and officialese, and you end up with bureaucratese at its finest. Here’s an example drawn from a classic work:

> Where particulars of a partnership are disclosed to the Executive Council the remuneration of the individual partner for superannuation purposes will be deemed to be such proportion of the total remuneration of such practitioners as the proportion of his share in partnership profits bears to the total proportion of the shares of such practitioner in those profits.


Cf. obscurity & officialese.

***beaurocrat.** See bureaucrata.

**burgeon** literally means “to put forth buds; sprout.” Although some usage experts have considered the word objectionable in the sense “to flourish, grow,” no good reason exists to avoid it in this figurative sense <the burgeoning middle class>. But the word preferably refers to growth at early stages, not to full-blown expansion.

**burglarize; burgle.** An American coinage from the late 19th century, burglarize is defined awkwardly and circuitously by the *OED* as “to rob burglariously.” A better definition is “to go into (a building) with the purpose of stealing something” (*Black’s Law Dictionary* 238 [10th ed. 2014]). The word is still largely confined to AmE.

Burgle, a back-formation of comparable vintage, has the same meaning. Although burgle is usually facetious or jocular in AmE, it’s standard and colorless in BrE—e.g. “‘Do NOT give your address, as burglars often read these and then burgle the house when the watch dog is all too clearly absent.’” Miles Kington, “Don’t Let That Budgie Destroy Your Life,” *Independent*, 24 Oct. 1996, at 22 (quoting J. Millington Smythe).
Burma-burn > burned > burned. So inflected—increasingly even in BrE. As a verb, burnt is chiefly a BrE form, usually the past participle but sometimes the past tense. In AmE, burnt is almost exclusively an adjective <burnt orange> <burnt rubber>. But as a CASUALISM, burnt out (= physically or emotionally exhausted) is preferable to *burnt out.

burqa; burka; *burkha. Burqa (= a loose garment that covers the whole head and body, with an open or veiled slit for vision, usu. worn by Muslim women) is the predominant spelling in all varieties of English. Burka is a less common but acceptable variant. *Burkha is a needless variant.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 9:5:1

bursar (= the person at a school or college who deals with accounts and office work) is preferably pronounced /bәr-sәr/—in AmE. In BrE, it's /bo-sә/. AmE is rhotic, so that a final -r is enunciated, whereas in BrE it's silent.

burst > burst > burst. So inflected. As a past-tense or past-participial form, *bursted is a mistake—e.g.:—


• “Teaster’s swollen, purple arm bursted [read burst], and he began to improve.” ”World Converged on Mountain Town to Witness Albert Teaster’s Act of Faith,” Ashevile Citizen-Times (N.C.), 16 Aug. 1996, at B1.

See irregular verbs.

The dialectal form bursted carries an air of jocularity. In STANDARD ENGLISH, the word is burst—e.g.:—


As a CASUALISM, bursted has many possible meanings: (1) “arrested” <the cops bursted him>; (2) “caught” (and usu. punished) <bursted for cheating on an exam>; (3) “broken” <a bursted arm>; (4) “rendered insolvent” <bursted by rising expenses>; (5) “demoted” <bursted to private>; and (6) “physically struck” <bursted in the face>. Examples of each sense follow:


but

Wanna Be an Artist?”
Wyoming Trib.-Eagle

butts during art school. "Karen Cotton, "So You
than
but
number of contexts, as countless stylebooks have said
slipshod. In fact, doing so is highly desirable in any

that beginning a sentence with

is stylistically

busted.

English: /biz-

biz

business

and

dused

busted

the better-inflected forms are

is universally two syllables in standard

English: /biz-nas/. In AmE, the pronunciation /bid-

nas/ is sometimes heard, especially in the South and

Southwest; it is dialectal.

busted. See burst.

but. A. Beginning Sentences with. It is a gross canard

that beginning a sentence with but is stylistically

slipshod. In fact, doing so is highly desirable in any

number of contexts, as countless stylebooks have said

(many correctly pointing out that but is more effective

than however at the beginning of a sentence)—e.g.:  

• Sense 3: “Callers will stay on hold as long as it takes, just
to share the latest bits of news from home: a busted water
pipe, a sick relative, a bad day at work.” Kris Axtman,
“Texas ‘Prison Show’ Links Familiar Voices Worlds Away,”

• Sense 4: “The only art class I ever took nearly busted me.
We were instructed to buy 2 cubic feet of Styrofoam, some
dowels, an electric motor, 100 square feet of variously col-
ored tissue paper and 75 feet of string. Do you have any
idea how many bowls of chili at the student center that
translates into?” Jake Vest, “Keep the Degree—I’ll Just

• Sense 5: “On Thursday morning . . . it dwindled from
an intense, 145-mph Category 4 hurricane to a more
manageable, if still dangerous, Category 2 storm. . . . By
Thursday evening, it was busted to a tropical storm, with
50-mph wind.” Andrea Elliott & Martin Merzer, “Weak-
ened Hurricane Lili Tears Through Louisiana,” Miami

• Sense 6: “Laterell Sprewell did punch someone. He busted
Don Chaney right in the chops.” Mitch Lawrence, “Star
Player & Fractured Franchise Both Blow It,” Daily News

As might be expected with a jocular casualism, busted
plays a role in some colorful idioms—e.g.: "It takes
our graduates six to eight months to land their first
real job,' she said. ‘This happens if they busted their
butts during art school.” Karen Cotton, “So You
Wanna Be an Artist?” Wyoming Trib.-Eagle, 4 Oct.

Language-Change Index
*burst ed for burst: Stage 1
Current ratio: 689:1

bus, n. & v.t. The plural form of the noun (meaning
"a large vehicle that holds many passengers") is buses.
The verb (meaning "to transport by bus") is inflected
bus > bused > bused; the present participle is busing.
When the -s- is doubled, the sense is different:
bussed means "kissed," and bussing means "kissing." Cf.
gases. See spelling (b).

The verb bus, as a back-formation from busboy,
has the additional meanings "to work as a busboy or
bussgirl" and "to clear dishes from (a table)." Here, too,
the better-inflected forms are bused and busing <he
helped pay his way through college by busing tables>.

business is universally two syllables in standard
English: /biz-nas/. In AmE, the pronunciation /bid-
nas/ is sometimes heard, especially in the South and
Southwest; it is dialectal.

busted. See burst.

but. A. Beginning Sentences with. It is a gross canard

that beginning a sentence with but is stylistically

slipshod. In fact, doing so is highly desirable in any

number of contexts, as countless stylebooks have said

(many correctly pointing out that but is more effective

than however at the beginning of a sentence)—e.g.:  

• “The group of Adversative conjunctions represented
by But (called Arrestive) very often fulfil the office of
relating consecutive sentences . . . . An entire paragraph
is not unfrequently devoted to arresting or preventing a
seeming inference from one preceding, and is therefore
appropriately opened by But, Still, Nevertheless, &c.”
Alexander Bain, English Composition and Rhetoric 110
(4th ed. 1877).

• “Objection is sometimes taken to employment of but or
and at the beginning of a sentence; but for this there is
much good usage.” Adams Sherman Hill, The Principles

• “Not long ago I had a long and labored letter from an old
proofreader who was all worked up over the ‘buts’ and
‘ands’ in a story in the Saturday Evening Post . . . . [H]e
was ready, actually, to fight for his ideas . . . . and they
were false, ill-founded ideas. They were not good ideas. They
represented old, dead styles . . . and style is an affair of
the living. Style is life. That proofreader was in a backwater;
the eddies moved about him but made no progress; he was
going about in circles—moving, but getting nowhere. He
was all out of step with the times into which he had lived.
He had linguistic arteriosclerosis.” Edward N. Teall, Put-
ting Words to Work 28–29 (1940).

• “But (not followed by a comma) always heads its turn-
ning sentence; Nevertheless usually does (followed by a
comma). I am sure, however, that however is always bet-
ter buried in the sentence between commas; But is for the
quick turn; the inlaid however for the more elegant sweep.

• “Of the many myths concerning ‘correct’ English, one
of the most persistent is the belief that it is somehow
improper to begin a sentence with [and, but, for, or, or
nor]. The construction is, of course, widely used today
and has been widely used for generations, for the very
good reason that it is an effective means of achieving coherence
between sentences and between larger units of discourse,
such as paragraphs.” R.W. Pence & D.W. Emery, A Gram-

• “A student writer will almost invariably give however
first position in a sentence . . . . In any case, however
works best if it is inside the sentence. Just exactly why
this position is best is one of those stylistic mysteries that
can’t really be explained. It simply sounds better that way.
And the importance of sound can’t be dismissed, even in
silent reading.

. . .

“Occasionally you will find yourself with a however
that simply refuses to be tucked into a sentence comforta-
ibly. In that case, change it to but and put it in first posi-
tion.” Lucile Vaughan Payne, The Lively Art of Writing
85–86 (1965).

• “If you begin a sentence with and or but (and you should
occasionally), don’t put a comma after it. You want to
speed up your prose with those words, and the comma
would simply cancel out any gain. The comma is neces-
sary only if a parenthetical clause immediately follows that
first word—e.g., ‘But, from all the evidence, that proves
to be a sound conclusion.’” John R. Trimble, Writing with
Style 81 (1975).

• “But works especially well as the opening word of a
paragraph.” Maxine Hairston, Successful Writing 97 (2d
ed. 1986).

Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)
Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
• “The widespread public belief that but should not be used at the beginning of a sentence has no foundation but is seemingly unshakeable.” Robert W. Burchfield, *Points of View* 119 (1992).

• “I can’t overstate how much easier it is for readers to process a sentence if you start with ‘but’ when you’re shifting direction.” William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* 74 (6th ed. 1998).

• “If you want to begin a sentence by contradicting the last, use but instead of however.” Christopher Lasch, *Plain Style* 101 (Stewart Weaver ed., 2002).

For examples of successive sentences starting with *and* and *but*, see and (A). See also superstitions (D).

Good writers often begin sentences with *but* and have always done so. Samples from 20th- and 21st-century writers follow:

• “But in such a story as *Lisbeth*, for example, he succeeds in giving you the tragedy for what it is worth.” Edmund Wilson, “Things I Consider Overrated” (1920), in *From the Uncollected Edmund Wilson* 127, 136 (1995).


• “But the arts of business, too, call all the while for closer application to the work in hand.” Thorstein Veblen, “The Captain of Industry” (1923), in *The Portable Veblen* 377, 384 (1948; repr. 1969).

• “But such simplicity of instinct is scarcely possible for human beings.” Bertrand Russell, *Education and the Good Life* 192 (1926).

• “But it must not be assumed that intelligent thinking can play no part in the formation of the goal and of ethical judgments.” Albert Einstein, “Science and Religion” (1939), in *Ideas and Opinions* 41, 42 (1954).


• “But it is a careful, angry, honest film, and nothing it says is less apposite now than it would have been ten years ago, or twenty,” James Agee, *Age on Film* 206 (1958).

• “But it does not follow from this that Betjeman’s work is foolish.” John Wain, “John Betjeman,” in *Essays on Literature and Ideas* 168, 171 (1963).

• “But perhaps the more valuable achievement to come out of France for the novel has been a whole body of criticism inspired by the new novelists.” Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* 104 (1966).

• “But the misdirection of effort remains uncorrected.” I.A. Richards, *So Much Nearer* 69 (1968).

• “But if I were asked something easier—to name a good book that we don’t read and that the people of the future will read—I’d be less at a loss.” Randall Jarrell, “An Unread Book,” in *The Third Book of Criticism* 3, 50 (1969).

• “But the virtues of the film are many and considerable.” John Simon, *Movies into Film* 78 (1971).

• “But the modesty is usually false.” William Safire, *What’s the Good Word?* 44 (1982).

• “But he had got used to that and it did not disquiet him.” Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Other Wind* 143 (2001).

These are not good writers on bad days. No: they were having good days. And the list could be expanded a thousandfold.

Some years ago, a researcher found that 8.75% of the sentences in the work of first-rate writers—including H.L. Mencken, Lionel Trilling, and Edmund Wilson—began with coordinating conjunctions (i.e., *And* and *But*). Francis Christensen, “Notes Toward a New Rhetoric,” *25 College English* 9 (1963). In a recent survey of *The New York Times* and *U.S. News & World Report*, the figure is about the same. To the professional rhetorician, these figures aren’t at all surprising.

All this enthusiasm for the construction, though, must be tempered to this extent: don’t start consecutive sentences with *But*. E.g.: “It is not now, and I trust it never will become, my purpose to argue that grammatical knowledge is not a good in itself. *But*, then, I believe that any knowledge is good. *But* [read *Even so*] I suggest that grammatical knowledge taught as an end in itself, taught without a calculated, relentless focus on its applicability to problems that occur in writing, will have no appreciable value to a student in his writing.” Bertrand Evans, “Grammar and Writing,” in *A Linguistics Reader* 111, 116 (Graham Wilson ed., 1967). Cf. yet (A).

**B. More Than One in a Sentence.** Putting this subordinating conjunction twice in one sentence invariably makes the sentence unwieldy and less easy to read. E.g.: “But this opening misleads because the focus dissipates as the play progresses and the scattershot climax drips with sentiment *but* is ultimately unsatisfying.” A. Levine, “*Rare* of Medusa,” *Pitt. Post-Gaz.*, 10 Oct. 1997, at 34. (A possible revision: *But this opening misleads because the focus dissipates as the play progresses. Although the scattershot climax drips with sentiment, it’s ultimately unsatisfying.*)

**C. For and.** This lapse is surprisingly common. The misuse of *but* for *and* often betrays the writer’s idiosyncratic prejudice. That is, if you write that someone is *attractive but smart*, you’re suggesting that this combination of characteristics is atypical. E.g.:

• “There was . . . a wealthy but nice-looking [read wealthy, nice-looking] family,” Helen Fielding, *Eating Out: A Posher Sort of Poppadom*, *Independent*, 3 Dec. 1995, at 66. (Are wealthy people typically not nice-looking? On the reason for the comma between the adjectives in the revision, see PUNCTUATION (D).)

• “Billy’s father, Dr. Istvan Jonas, . . . is a man of sterling rectitude, poor but honest [read poor and honest], determined to pass his upcoming naturalization exams.” Michael Wilmington, “‘Telling Lies in America’ Lets Bacon Sizzle,” *Chicago Trib.*, 24 Oct. 1997, at C1. (Is the writer really suggesting that poor people are typically dishonest?)

• “He’s gruff and sensitive, talented but hard-working [read talented and hard-working], plain-speaking but as smart as anyone.” Tom E. Curran, “Andruzzzi Has More than Paid His Dues,” *Providence J.- Bull.*, 3 Oct. 2003, at 14. (Are talented people typically lazy? The writer has also made the converse lapse in the first pairing: gruff and sensitive are more often viewed as opposites than complements, so *but* would be more appropriate than *and* between them.)

**D. Preposition or Conjunction.** The use of *but* in a negative sense after a pronoun has long caused confusion: is it No one but she or No one but her? When *but* is a preposition (meaning “except”), the objective *her* (or *him*) follows. But when *but* is a conjunction, the nominative *she* (or *he*) has traditionally been considered proper.
The correct form depends on the structure of the sentence. If the verb precedes the but-phrase, the objective case should be used—e.g.: “None of the defendants were convicted but him.” But if the but-phrase precedes the verb, the nominative case is proper: “None of the defendants but he were convicted.” That sentence is considered equivalent to “None of the defendants but he were convicted.” (Although that rewording doesn’t seem to make literal sense—given that he was one of the defendants—it serves to show the grammar of the sentence excising him from the absolute word none.) But thus acts as a conjunction when it precedes the verb in a sentence, as in this one from Thomas Jefferson: “Nobody but we of the craft can understand the diction, and find out what [the statute] means.” Here the subject of can understand is nobody, and the but heads the understood clause: nobody can understand, but we can understand.

That’s the common explanation. But Edward Teall has filed a dissenting opinion. Although it seems never to have caught on, Teall’s logic seems impeccable: “Here . . . are three examples of ‘but’ and its mischievous pranks: ‘No one but you and I know what is on these notice boards’; ‘And who but he had urged letting Devinish in’; ‘No one but he knew what this had cost him.’ The pronouns after ‘but’ should be in the objective case, being governed by ‘but.’ The defense frequently offered for these wrong nominatives is that the sentence really means ‘No one knew, but you and I don’t know’—‘Who but he’ and ‘No one but he’ are just dumb errors.” Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work 165 (1940).

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No one but me was there: Stage 5

*but nevertheless.* This redundancy has been fairly common in the language since the late 17th century. But it is a redundancy nevertheless. Usually you can drop either word. Nevertheless is typically the one to drop—e.g.: “Val Kilmer probably agrees, but nevertheless [read but] he’s committed to an attempt to regain control.” Stephen Hunter, “Stars Reveal a Normal Side,” Baltimore Sun, 4 Apr. 1997, at E1.

If special emphasis is needed, either but . . . still or a construction with though or although is the better choice—e.g.: “In Hanover, conditions are not as bad but are nevertheless [read but are still] considered taxing.” Alexander Reid, “Wanted: New Police Stations,” Boston Globe, 2 Apr. 1995, South Weekly §, at 1. Cf. *but yet.*

*but that; but what.* These peculiar idioms, used in expressions of doubt, may strike the modern reader as quaint or affected. But that, the more literary of the two, is used today most commonly in negative constructions—e.g.: “I do not doubt but that you are disappointed.” Most readers would find the but in that sentence to be superfluous and would translate the sentence to read, “I do not doubt that you are disappointed.” But what is used in the same way, but it’s rarer and more colloquial—e.g.: “I don’t know but what it might be the best thing for my own special interest, which is bicycling.” Don Harvey, “A Changing Cycle in Traffic Patterns,” L.A. Times, 18 Aug. 1996, at B6.

*but naked.* See buck naked.

*buttock. Pronounced /bat-ok/, not /bat-tahk/.* See pronunciation (b).

*but which.* See which (d).

*but yet.* This redundancy for but or yet. Common in the 16th century, this collocation has been falling in use fairly steadily since 1700. Try dropping either word—e.g.:


Sometimes but and yet fall together in a way that creates not a contrast but a misread. In the sentence that follows, yet means still, but the sentence is easily misread: “Rider, gifted but yet to decide [read but still undecided] whether he wants to play in the NBA, promptly went into his act, missing this, showing up for that, and was suspended for the season opener.” Mark Heisler, “NBA Preview,” L.A. Times, 31 Oct. 1996, at C6. Cf. as yet.

**buy. A. Inflected Forms:** buy > bought > bought. The form *boughten* (= store-bought as opposed to homemade) is an archaic past-participial adjective formed on the analogy of words such as broken, driven, and frozen. In the sense “store-bought,” *boughten* still occurs in dialectal AmE. E.g.:

- “In those days any boughten [read store-bought] cookie we would see in Maine was made by the Loose-Wiles Biscuit Company, which had a huge brick factory near the railroad tracks in Boston’s North End.” John Gould, “The Old Man Hated Waste and Preferred the Tampa Tribune,” Christian Science Monitor, 6 July 2002, at D1.


See irregular verbs.

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*bboughten:* Stage 1

Current ratio (bought vs. *boughten*): 2,510:1

B. And purchase. As a verb, buy is the ordinary word, purchase the more formal word. Generally,
buy is the better stylistic choice. As one commentator says, “Only a very pompous person indeed would say he was going to purchase an ice-cream cone or a bar of candy.” Robert Hendrickson, Business Talk 61 (1984). Traditionally, however, purchase has been the preferred word for real estate. Purchase may also act as a noun; buy is informal and colloquial as a noun.<a good buy>.

buyout, n. One word.

by-bye. The informal valediction is so spelled—not *by-by. Current ratio: 12:1

byelaw. See bylaw.

by-election is the preferred spelling. *Bye-election is a variant. Current ratio: 17:1

*bye the bye. See by the by.

bylaw; byelaw. Both the spelling and the sense differ on the two sides of the Atlantic. In AmE, bylaws are most commonly a corporation’s administrative provisions that are either attached to the articles of incorporation or kept privately. In BrE, byelaws are regulations made by a local authority or corporation, such as a town or a railway.

The spelling without the -e- is standard in AmE. Though etymologically inferior, byelaw (sometimes hyphenated) is common in BrE. Increasingly, though, the spelling bylaw is appearing in BrE just as commonly as the longer form.

Current ratio (World English): 10:1

by means of is usually verbose for by or with—e.g.:

• “Vasectomy is surgical sterilization of a man by means of [read by] cutting or removing a section of the vas deferens, the tube that carries sperm from the testicle to the urethra.” “Living with Cancer,” Daily News (L.A.), 13 Feb. 1994, at L16.


byproduct usually appears as a single word in modern print sources, many of which follow the Associated Press and New York Times styles. But it also frequently appears in its hyphenated form (by-product), sometimes even in the same publication—e.g.:


by reason of is usually an artificial way of saying because of. Although not guilty by reason of insanity is a set phrase, in other phrases the words by reason of can usually be improved—e.g.: “Joudrie was sent there after being found not criminally responsible by reason of [read because of] a mental disorder.” Kevin Martin, “Dorothy Joudrie Punched in Face,” Toronto Sun, 16 July 1996, at 23.

Sometimes the unidiomatic *by reason that appears—e.g.: “Respondent’s contention is untenable by reason that [read because] FCA § 1118 does not make the application of the CPLR automatic.” “FCA Not CPLR Applies Precluding Appeal,” N.Y.L.J., 18 July 1996, at 21 (reporting a judicial opinion).

by the by (= incidentally) has been the standard spelling since the 17th century. *By the bye (archaic) and *bye the bye are variants. The phrase in any form is appearing nowadays with less and less frequency.

Current ratio (by the by vs. *by the bye vs. *bye the bye): 96:65:1

by virtue of. See virtue of.

byword (= [1] a proverb or saying; or [2] someone or something representing a specific quality) is best spelled as one word and not hyphenated.


• Sense 2: “One of the major internal tasks facing the pope has been the reform of the Vatican Bank, which had become a byword for scandal and dysfunction.” Paul Vallely, “The Bipartisan Pontiff,” N.Y. Mag., 9 Sept. 2015, at 1.

-c-. -ck-. When adding a suffix to a word ending in -c, how do you keep the hard sound (/k/) from becoming soft (/s/)? With native suffixes (-ed, -er, -ing, -y), you generally do it by inserting a -k-. Hence mimic becomes mimicked, traffic becomes trafficker, frolic becomes frolicking, and panic becomes panicky. An exception exists in both AmE and BrE for the verb to talk, which anomalously makes talked and talking—still pronounced with a hard -c-.

But classical suffixes (-ian, -ism, -ist, -ity, -ize) don’t take the -k- and therefore become soft: politician, cynicism, publicist, and criticize.

cabala; cabbala; *cabalalah; *cabbalah; *kabala; *kaballah; *kaballa; *kabbalah. Meaning “an esoteric or secret doctrine”—and pronounced /ka-bah-lah/ or /kab-a-la/—this word is preferably spelled cabala in AmE, cabbala in BrE. The others are variant forms.
**cablecast > cablecast > cablecast.** Dating from the mid-1960s, this verb is so inflected. The weak past form *cablecasted* is poor usage—e.g.:  
- “The release of ‘Flaming Pie’ was delayed a week to allow the publicity to rev up on VH-1 (which cablecasted [read cablecast] a week of McCartney promotions) and the Internet (which featured an online McCartney chat and live audio and video).” “Entertainment Briefs,” Chicago Sun-Times, 21 May 1997, at 51.
- “Opening night highlights and an artist’s talk were featured last month on ‘Spotlight on Northbrook Arts,’ a program cablecasted [read cablecast] on Northbrook’s government channel, NCTV Channel 17.” Karie Angell, “Artist Creates Ketubah for Second Generation of Patrons,” Northbrook Star (Ill.), 8 Nov. 2010, News §.

See -cast & irregular verbs.

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*cablecasted* for past-tense *cablecast: Stage 1

*ctobab.** See *kebab.

cacao. pl. cacao. See *cocoa.

cache, n.; cachet, n. Cache /kash/ = (1) a hiding place for money, goods, etc.; (2) a hidden stash of money, goods, etc.; or (3) a type of high-speed computer memory (also, in this sense, termed *cache memory*). Although sense 3 is quite common in computing contexts, sense 2 is the most frequent nonspecialist sense—e.g.: “Schechter was brought to New York from Cambridge, England, where he had established his credentials by rediscovering a cache of invaluable literary fragments that had lain for centuries in a Cairo genizah, or storage closet.” Clifford E. Librach, “Does Conservative Judaism Have a Future?” Commentary, 1 Sept. 1998, at 28.

Cachet /ka-shay/, borrowed from French in the 18th century and now thoroughly anglicized (except in its pronunciation), originally meant "stamping" or "distinguishing mark." Today it generally means "popular prestige" or "high commercial or political status"—e.g.: “With their cachet and cash, tech executives are in high demand on Capitol Hill.” Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, “Getting to Know the Hill,” Time, 14 Aug. 2000, at B12. It also has three other meanings: (1) an official seal, esp. one denoting approval; (2) a commemorative postal design; and (3) a waferlike capsule used to dispense bad-tasting medicine.

As might be expected—given the prevalence of word-swapping—*cache* is sometimes misused for *cachet*, presumably by writers who mistakenly think that the French word is *caché*. The error has become fairly common and betrays an utter lack of understanding of what the word is intended to denote—e.g.:  
- “He maintained his home in the Elderwoods. This alone was enough to give him a certain cachet [read cachet], for the Elderwoods was considered a sorcerous place, where creatures of myth were known to gallivant about.” Peter David, *Sir Apropos of Nothing* 88 (2001).
- “Once upon a time, there was a certain cache [read cachet] that went along with being the heavyweight champion of the world, an intrigue, a certain fighting prestige.” Steve Simmons, “Round Peg in Squared Circle,” Toronto Sun, 6 June 2002, at S4.

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cache misused for cachet: Stage 1

Current ratio (a certain cachet vs. *a certain cache): 12:1

**cacophony.** So spelled. See spelling (A).

cactus. pl. cacti or cactuses. Although cactuses is more common in ordinary usage, cacti predominates in modern print sources, especially in botanical contexts. See plurals (b).

Current ratio: 7:1

caddie; caddy. Caddie = someone who carries a golf bag for a player, esp. for hire. Caddy = a box or other container. Occasionally caddy is mistakenly rendered caddie—e.g.: “In addition to such touches as a bookshelf with travel books and a globe, and a wheeled tea *caddy* [read caddy], there must have been upward of 100 pieces of silver plate.” Stephen Harriman, “A Day at the Races,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 20 May 1996, at E1. (For more on *upward* in that example, see upward(s).)

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caddy misused for caddie: Stage 1

Current ratio (tea caddy vs. *tea caddie): 24:1

cadre (/kad-ree/ or /kah-dray/), meaning “a tightly knit group,” usually takes a plural verb despite being grammatically singular. E.g.: “He intimidates many who work for him, yet a cadre of loyal executives has [have read? ] followed him from company to company.” Betsy Morris, “Big Blue,” Fortune, 14 Apr. 1997, at 68, 70. (See synesthesia.) This sentence presents a close call because the writer might have used the singular verb to emphasize the oneness of the group.

In China, a *cadre* (singular noun) is a low-level Communist Party official in charge of a local community or military organization. In the former Soviet Union, a *cadre* was a local cell actively promoting the party line, or a member of such a cell (a sense now moribund).

**Caesarean; *Caesarian.** See cesarean section.

cafe; café. Originally a loanword from French, cafe without the diacritical mark is thrice as common as café. Pronounced /ka-fay/, it’s sometimes jocularly pronounced in BrE as /kaaf/.

cafan (= a usu. lightweight, loose robe or tunic of Arabic origin) has predominated over kaftan in AmE

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
and World English since the 1920s. But in the last few years, kaftan and caftan have been used almost equally in BrE, kaftan being slightly more common.

Current ratio (World English): 2:1
cagey (= sly, cunning) is the standard spelling. *Cagy is a variant.

Current ratio: 26:1
cake, having and eating. See you can’t eat your cake and have it too.

calculable. So formed—not *calculatable. See -ABLE (d) & -ATABLE.

Current ratio: 419:1
calculated = (1) deliberately taken or made <a calculated risk>; or (2) likely <the weather is calculated to slow play in the Masters today>. Sense 2 represents a debasement in meaning that damages the utility of the word in sense 1.

calculate out, a popular phrasing from about 1880 to 1940, is typically verbose for calculate—e.g.:


• “Once we have identified the relevant coalitions, we then have to calculate out [read calculate] the power index formula for each one.” Steffen Eckmann & Adrian Widdowson, “Calculating Shareholder Influence,” Accountancy, Feb. 1996, at 108.

See phrasal verbs.

Sometimes, though, the phrase means “to amount to a total figure,” as a business-jargon equivalent of the intransitive use of work out (which is better). In that use of the phrase, the word out is necessary—e.g.: “That calculates out [read works out] to about the price of a margarita a day.” Scott Burns, “Have You Been Missing Those Margaritas?” Dallas Morning News, 21 July 1996, at H1.

*cauldron. See cauldron.

calendar; calender. These are separate words. Calendar, of course, is the common term, meaning “a register of the days of the year” or “a schedule.” Calender means either “a rolling machine used in glazing paper or smoothing cloth” or “a mendicant dervish,” most often the former—e.g.: “Shurtape is one of the nation’s top three manufacturers of duct tape, which is produced through a heat and presurization process on a machine called a calender.” J. Thomas Grady, “A Sticky Story: The Uses of Duct Tape Just Seem to Keep Growing,” Sunday Star-News (Wilmington, N.C.), 16 Mar. 2003, at E5.

But the ordinary term calendar is often misspelled calender—e.g.:


• “A newcomer to the festival scene has stormed its way into the North East calender [read calendar] announcing that it has completely sold out in only its third year.” Hugh MacKnight, “Hardwick Live Hits Right Note with Sell-Out,” Newcastle J. (U.K.), 22 Aug. 2015, News §, at 28.

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calendar misspelled calender: Stage 1

Current ratio (calendar year vs. *calendar year): 333:1
calf has a silent -l-: /kal/. Pl. calves /kavz/. See plurals (c).
caliber; caliper. Caliber = (1) the diameter of a cylinder, esp. the bore of a gun <a .44-caliber pistol>; or (2) degree of worth or competence; quality <the Wharton School of Business turns out CEOs of the highest caliber>. (The BrE spelling is calibre. See -er (b.).) Caliper = (1) (usu. pl.) a tool used for measuring thickness or diameter; (2) thickness, as of paper or cardboard; (3) a part of a disc-brake system; or (4) a metal leg brace. *Calliper is a variant BrE spelling.

Current ratio (caliper vs. *calliper): 15:1
caliphate (= [1] an Islamic theocracy, or [2] a period of Islamic theocratic rule) is pronounced /kal-i-fat/ or /kal-i-fayt/. Through metathesis, the term is sometimes mispronounced by bungling news announcers as if it were /kal-i-layt/.
calistenics; callistenics. In all forms of English, the one -l- spelling predominates by a 16-to-1 ratio.
calk. See caulk.
callous; callus. The first is the adjective (“hardened, unfeeling”), the second the noun (“hardened skin”). Unfortunately, during the early 1990s Dr. Scholl’s—the company specializing in foot products—mistakenly advertised *callous removers instead of callus removers, encouraging further confusion.

The plural of callus is calluses, preferably not *calli—which, surprisingly enough, predominated until the mid-20th century. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (calluses vs. *calli): 3:1
calvary; cavalry. Despite having wholly unrelated meanings, these words are often confused. Calvary = (1) (cap.) the place near Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified; (2) (sometimes cap.) a depiction or representation of Jesus’ crucifixion; or (3) (l.c.) an experience of intense suffering; an ordeal. Cavalry = (1) a military unit mounted on horseback; or (2) a motorized military unit.

The reason for the confusion, of course, is the similarity in sound and spelling—the two words contain the same seven letters. When spoken, the sounds in the word cavalry (/ka-val-ree/) are sometimes transposed (a process known as metathesis), resulting in a mispronunciation of the word as /kal-vo-ree/. And because it is misspoken, it is also misused in print—e.g.:


• “After the second mile into the race, the Franklin Park environ resembled a calvary [read cavalry] charge with 40 runners near the front.” John Connolly, “In the Long Run, Villanova Too Tough,” Boston Herald, 17 Nov. 1996, at B17.

Civilians seem to have to relearn this every time a new war breaks out—e.g.: • “Oh yeah, he’s ready to deploy,’ shouted a hoarse Pfc. Tim Rose, 26, who works on an anti-aircraft battery for the 3rd Armored Calvary [read Cavalry] Regiment.” Jim Hughes, “Fort Carson Soldiers Enthusiastic as They Watch War Begin,” Denver Post, 20 Mar. 2003, at A4.

• “While U.S. Marines and British forces seized the southern port city of Umm Qasr, the Army’s 3rd Infantry Division, 7th Calvary [read Cavalry] Division and elements of the 101st Airborne Division moved northwest along the Euphrates River.” Thomas Caywood, “Air Attacks Upped as Ground Forces Advance,” Boston Herald, 22 Mar. 2003, News §, at 10.

 Cf. irrelevant & regiment.

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calvary misused for cavalry: Stage 1
calyx /kay-likz/ (= the green whorl on a flower that protects it before it opens) predominantly makes the plural calyces in all varieties of English. Although the anglicized plural calyces enjoyed predominance in English-language print sources from about 1790 to 1820, it has seriously receded since then.

Current ratio (calyces vs. calyces): 4:1
calzone (= a baked or fried turnover made of pizza dough filled with meat, cheese, and sauce) is preferably pronounced /kal-zohn/, as in Italian. But the most common pronunciation in AmE is /kal-zohn-eel/. Cf. abalone.

*camarade. See comrade.

*camaraderie is routinely misspelled *camaraderie, *comraderie, and even *comrader because of a mistaken association with comrade—e.g.: • “Ah, yes, the camaraderie [read camaraderie].” Anthony Flint, “A Return to the Sweatshops,” Boston Globe, 21 Feb. 1995, Metro §, at 1.


Although the words camaraderie and comrade etymologically related—both derive from the French camarade—the English spellings are well enough established that each of the variant spellings is an error. Of course, careful speakers probably won’t misspell camaraderie—it has five syllables: /kah-ma-rah-da-ree/.

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camaraderie misspelled *comraderie, *camaraderie, or *comraderie: Stage 1
Current ratio (camaraderie vs. *camraderie vs. *comraderie): 1,167:26:7:1
camelopard (= giraffe) is an old-fashioned word still used in Europe. In English-speaking contexts, it is sometimes misspelled through association with leopard—e.g.: • “Some, like Mark Twain’s travelling actor who painted himself with rings and stripes to look like a camelopard [read camelopard], have all of a sudden themselves like the Russian tricolor flag.” Yevgeny Yevtushenko, “Please, Don’t Panic: Capitalism in Russia,” New Perspectives Q., 22 Mar. 1996, at 8.


The word is pronounced /ko-mel-oh-pahrd/.

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camelopard misspelled *cameleopard: Stage 1
Current ratio: 2:1
came near [+ present participle], in the sense “almost,” is a casualism that can usually be replaced by almost [+ past-tense verb]—e.g.: “Armed with might and mystique, the Cowboys came near losing [read almost lost] to the NFL’s Tinker Toy team Sunday in Cincinnati.” Frank Luksa, “Looking into the Whys of Cowboys 23, Bengals 20,” Dallas Morning News, 1 Nov. 1994, at B2. The phrasing was especially common from about 1850 to about 1950.
campanile (= a high bell tower that is usu. separate from any other building) is preferably pronounced /kahm-pa-nee-lee/—not /kahm-pa-neel/.
can. A. And may. The distinction between these words has been much discussed over the years, beginning with Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language (1755). Generally, can expresses physical or mental ability <He can lift 500 pounds>; may expresses permission or authorization <The guests may now enter>, and sometimes possibility <The trial may end on Friday>. Although only an insufferable precisian would insist on observing the distinction

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in informal speech or writing (especially in questions such as “Can I wait until August?”), it’s often advisable to distinguish between these words.

But three caveats are necessary. First, educated people typically say can’t I as opposed to the stilted forms mayn’t I and may I not. The same is true of other pronouns: Why can’t she go? Can’t you wait until Saturday? Second, you can’t and you cannot are much more common denials of permission than you may not. No, you can’t play with any more than 14 clubs in your bag. Third, because may is a more polite way of asking for permission, a fussy insistence on using it can give the writing a prissy tone.

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*can for may: Stage 4*

### B. And could
d.

These words express essentially the same idea, but there is a slight difference. In the phrase We can supply you with 5 tons of caliche, the meaning is simply that we are able to. But in the phrase We could supply you with 5 tons of caliche if you’d send us a $5,000 deposit, the could is right because of the condition tacked onto the end; that is, there is some stronger sense of doubt with could. See **subjunctives**.

And in interrogatives, could indicates willingness: Could you meet me at 7:00 pm? This asks not just whether you’re able, but also whether you’re willing.

In still another circumstance—in the subordinate clause of a complex sentence—the choice between can and could depends on the sequence of tenses, as does the choice between any other present- and past-tense verb. If the verb in the main clause expresses a past event, could appears in the subordinate clause <she asked me to go so that I could meet my great-aunt>. But if the verb in the main clause expresses a present or future event, can appears in the main clause <she is asking me to go so that I can meet my great-aunt> <she will ask me to go so that I can meet my great-aunt>. See **tenses** (b).

**cancel**

vb. (= to build a canal), is pronounced /kә-nәl/ and makes *canalled* and *canalling*—not *canaled* and *canaling*. See spelling (b).

**cancel**

vb., makes canceled and canceling in AmE, cancelled and cancelling in BrE. Note, however, that in *cancellation* the -l- is doubled (-ll-) because the accent falls on the third syllable. See spelling (b).

**cancel (out).** See **phrasal verbs**.

 canceled (a branched candlestick with several candles, or a branched lamp with several lights) forms the plural *candelabra*, which appears far more often. Even so, the singular form remains quite common—e.g.:


Three problems arise with this word.

First, some writers use *candelabra* as a singular—e.g. “The holiday centered on lighting the eight-branch *candelabrum* [read *candelabrum*] called the menorah.” Jan M. Brahms, “Alas, Hanukkah Is ‘Jewish Christmas,’” *Capital Times* (Madison), 7 Dec. 1996, at A9.

Second, as a result of the false singular just mentioned, writers are tempted to use the double plural *candelabras* (an error dating from the late 19th century)—e.g. “The dignity is leavened by some whimsical touches, such as chandeliers and *candelabra* [read *candelabrum*] entwined with iron flowers and a giant piggy bank behind the small bar.” B. Samantha Stenzel, “neighborhood Restaurant Offers Innovative Cuisine,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 21 Nov. 1997, at 36.

Third, and least seriously, some writers stick to the native-English plural even though the foreign plural has been thoroughly established—e.g. “But this Hanukkah season, which runs through Dec. 13, Mickey is appearing on menorahs—seven-branch *candelabrum* [read *candelabrum*]—and dreidels—spinning toy tops.” Carl Schoettler, “Pan-Cultural Mickey Mouse Makes a Plug for Hanukkah,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 8 Dec. 1996, at 35. See **plurals** (b).

The word may be pronounced /kan-da-lә-brәm/ or /kan-da-lәy-brәm/.

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1. *candelabra* for *candelabrum* as a singular: Stage 4
   Current ratio (*candelabrum* vs. *candelabra*): 177:1
2. *candelabras* for *candelabrum* as a plural: Stage 3
   Current ratio (*candelabra* vs. *two candelabras*): 3:1
3. *candelabrum* for *candelabra*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (*candelabra* vs. *candelabrum*): 177:1

**candidacy; candidature.** The first is the standard term in AmE, the second traditionally in BrE. But since the late 1970s, *candidacy* has become the predominant form in British print sources.

Current ratio: 5:1

**can hardly; *can’t hardly*.

The first is **standard English**; the second is dialect. E.g. “We *can’t hardly* [read *can hardly*] blame all those fine doctors for leaving.” Rob Ross, “If We Were Handing Out Awards,” *Pitt. Post-Gaz.*, 4 Mar. 2002, at C2.

There is some debate about *can’t hardly*, only half of which need be taken seriously. Traditionalists call it a double negative—not and *hardly* both being negatives—and condemn the phrase on that ground. Descriptive linguists counter (unpersuasively) that *hardly* is not really a negative at all and say that *can’t hardly* is perfectly acceptable.

But regardless of whether it’s a double negative, *can’t hardly* is not standard English. And the
phrase can always be replaced by a more logical and more direct phrase in one of two ways. If a strong negative is intended, use can't (or cannot). If a soft negative is intended, use can hardly (or, more typically, could hardly).

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*can't hardly for can hardly: Stage 1  
Current ratio (can hardly vs. *cannot hardly): 98:1

canister (= a small container) is the standard spelling. *Cannister is a variant. Inconsistently enough, though, cannikin (= a small can) is the established form in preference to the variant forms *canikin and *canakin.

Current ratio (canister vs. *cannister): 39:1

*can might. See Double Modals.

**Cannibalism.** This is H.W. Fowler's term for constructions in which certain words 'devour their own kind' (FMEU I at 64). Words that commonly fall prey are as, to, and that. E.g.: • "But the playwright's the thing, and he comes across as fascinating, mercurial and doomed as any of his fictional creations." Matt Roush, "Hepburn's Holiday Gift," USA Today, 19 Dec. 1994, at D3. (The as in the phrase comes across as has swallowed the first as in the phrase as fascinating, mercurial, and doomed as. A possible revision: But the playwright's the thing, and he comes across as being as fascinating, mercurial, and doomed as any of his fictional creations.) • "Most impressively, however, he power cleans a whopping 485 pounds—more than 100 pounds than [read more than] the 367-pound Davis." Olin Buchanan, "The Numbers Game," Austin Am.-Statesman, 21 Oct. 2000, at F5. (If either more than is changed to over [= more than], then the incompleteness of the phrasing becomes apparent—two more than having been called for in the original sentence. Because that phrasing would be gawky, the sentence needs editing. A possible revision: Most impressively, however, he power-cleans a whopping 485 pounds—over 100 pounds more than the 367-pound Davis.)

There are two similar blunders. The first results from omitting as after regard, treat, accept, acknowledge, and other verbs that are unidiomatic without it (such as the phrasal verb come across). E.g.: "We regard him as holy as a saint." Although the strictly correct phrase would be regard him as [being] as holy as a saint, the better course is to use another word: "We consider him as holy as a saint." Or: "We believe [or To us] he is as holy as a saint." The second blunder occurs with incomplete comparisons—e.g.: *as bad or worse than, as much or more than*. These phrases should be as bad as or worse than and as much as or more than. E.g.: • "They compromised at 8 feet, but in many spots the competition among walkers, dog walkers and runners has worn paths as wide or wider than [read wide as wide or wider] planners sought." Steve Brandt, "Which Path Will Lake Harriet Take?" Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 24 Jan. 1996, at B1. • "Your caladiums should have produced tubers that are as as big or bigger than [read as big as or bigger than] the ones you planted." Dan Gill, "Caladium Comroundr," Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 26 Sept. 1997, at E1.

See as ... as (b) and illogic (b).

Problems of this kind are most readily spotted by reading aloud. The ear tends to hear them even if the eye doesn't see them. See Sound of Prose.

cannikin. See canister.

cannon. Pl. cannons or (especially in military jargon) cannon. See canon.

cannot should not appear as two words, except in the rare instances when the not is part of another construction (such as not only . . . but also)—e.g.: "His is among very few voices that can not only get away with numbers like 'You Are So Beautiful to Me' and a reggae/salsa remake of 'Summer in the City,' but actually make them moving." Jamie Kastner, "Joe Cocker Proves He Can Still Rock 'n' Roll," Toronto Sun, 8 Mar. 1995, at 64. Cannot is preferable to can't in formal writing. See Constructions.

cannot help but; cannot help ——ing; cannot but. In formal contexts, the last two phrases have traditionally been preferred—e.g.: • "Engaged in these activities, the critic cannot but formulate value judgments." John Simon, The Sheep from the Goats xix (1989). • "When I put this on the list, I can't help feeling a littleuffed up." V. Diane Woodbrown, "Why Women Need to Speak Up Against Gender Imbalance," S.F. Examiner, 8 Jan. 1997, at A15.

Still, because cannot help being and (especially) cannot but be are increasingly rare in AmE and BrE alike, they strike many readers as stilted. Cannot help but, which took root during the 20th century, is becoming an accepted idiom <I cannot help but think you did that on purpose>. A less awkward construction is cannot help ——ing <I cannot help thinking you did that on purpose>. But the first construction should no longer be stigmatized on either side of the Atlantic—e.g.: • "Experts say Thomas' court performance cannot help but be affected by the traumatic Senate confirmation hearings." Aaron Epstein, "Thomas Survives Controversy, Wins Senate Confirmation, 52–48," Phil. Inquirer, 16 Oct. 1991, at A11. • "Texas cannot help but consider what its victory over Tech will mean." Jonathan Feigen, "UT Regains Control of Its Fate," Houston Chron., 11 Nov. 1996, Sports §, at 13. • "One cannot help but wonder what producer, geared up to supply supermarkets, got dumped to make way for all those North American berries." Emily Green, "A Load of Coq," Independent, 14 Nov. 1996, Features §, at 2.

Occasionally writers twist the phrase not just unidiomatically, but illogically—e.g.: "I cannot help from

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
refraining myself to comment [read cannot refrain from commenting] on Ms. Gabor's flagrant disrespect of the law: Letter of Joel Rosen, “Zsa Zsa's Encounter with Police,” L.A. Times, 24 June 1989, § 2, at 9. If the writer couldn't help refraining, then the letter wouldn't have been written! On the misuse of refrain as a reflexive verb, see restrain.

**Language-Change Index**
1. cannot help but for cannot but: Stage 5
2. cannot help from for cannot but: Stage 1

canon; cannon. *Canon* = (1) a corpus of writings <the Western canon>; (2) an accepted notion or principle <canons of ethics>; (3) a rule of ecclesiastical law (either of the Roman Catholic canon law or of the Anglican Church); or (4) a cathedral dignitary.

*Cannon* = (1) a big gun; or (2) the ear of a bell, by which the bell hangs. *Cannon* incorrectly displaces *canon* surprisingly often—e.g.:

- “The state Criminal Justice Commission said yesterday in Wallingford that there was no evidence that Litchfield County State's Attorney Frank Maco violated the *cannon* [read *canon*] of ethics for lawyers by his remarks.” *Allen Filing Rejected,* Newsday (N.Y.), 4 Nov. 1993, at 18.
- “White’s friends say her fledgling campaign for retention is hampered by the judicial *cannon* [read *canon* or, more likely, *canons*] of ethics, which restricts [or, with *canons*, restrict] her ability to defend herself.” Andy Sher, “Grime Fears, Death Penalty Debate Stirring Furor over Judge Election,” Nashville Banner, 22 July 1996, at A1.

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canon misused for *cannon*: Stage 1

cantaloupe; cantaloup. The first is AmE /kan-tə-loop/; the second is BrE /kan-tə-loop/.

*can’t hardly.* See *can hardly.*

can’t have your cake and eat it too. See you can’t have your cake and eat it too.

can’t help but. See cannot help but.

can’t seem. Although this phrase is technically illogical (e.g., “I can’t seem to find my coat” is more logically rendered “I seem to be unable to find my coat”), it is also undoubtedly idiomatic. Idiom tends to prefer succinctness over logic, and here the logical construction is verbose. Linguists use the term “raising” to describe the process of moving a negative from a subordinate clause to a main clause. So “I think I will not go” becomes “I don’t think I will go.” (See *don’t think.*) The phrase *can’t seem* isn’t one of the more popular instances of raising. It became established in the late 19th century and grew rapidly in popularity during the 20th.

Regardless of its label, this process is quite common, especially in speech. But it also occurs in writing—e.g.:

- “Shaq’s mother can’t seem to remember to give him the pill each morning, so Clifton got a doctor’s permission to do it himself.” Mary Jane Fine, “When Hugs Aren’t Enough,” Palm Beach Post, 7 Nov. 1994, at A1.
- “The notional premise of this foray into meta-comedy is that the outwardly earnest duo can’t seem to write a skit they like.” Mark Monahan, “Comedy,” Daily Telegraph, 22 Aug. 2015, at 19.

**Language-Change Index**
can’t seem: Stage 5

canvas; canvass. *Canvas*, almost always a noun, is the heavy cloth. In its rare verbal sense, it means “to cover with such a cloth.”

*Canvass,* v.t., = (1) to examine (as votes) in detail; (2) to take stock of opinions, esp. those of individuals; (3) to solicit orders or political support; or (4) to discuss or debate. The term is fairly common in all four senses—e.g.:

- Sense 1: “Town cops got a complaint about swastikas and phrases painted on a stately home on Carriage House Lane, and when they canvassed the neighborhood, they found anti-Semitic graffiti on three other houses and on a wooden shelter on the golf course, 50 feet away.” Patrice O’Shaughnessy, “Marred by Hate,” Daily News (N.Y.), 17 Nov. 1996, News §, at 6.
- Sense 3: “Solicitations to the volunteers bring in nearly $700,000 a year, while the volunteers’ door-to-door canvassing takes in close to $300,000 a year.” Larry Riggs, “Big Names, Big Changes,” Direct, 1 Sept. 1996, at 1.
- Sense 4: “Mr. Bolger’s soothing New Year comments also canvassed the potentially divisive issue of republicanism.” “Calm Before Political Storm,” Evening Post (Wellingtton), 9 Jan. 1995, at 4.

As a noun, the word *canvass* means “the act of canvassing.”

capable. The phrase is *capable of* [verb + -ing] can be (not is capable of being) put more simply—typically by writing either *can* [+ verb] or is able to [+ verb]. This bit of verbosity is especially common in sportswriting—e.g.:

- “Talk to him for a while and you come to the conclusion that either he is capable of being [read can be] very calm in difficult circumstances or he’s a very good actor.” Kent Youngblood, “Two Men, One Opportunity,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 27 Sept. 2001, at C10.
- “Quarterback Quincy Carter needs to continue to improve and prove he is capable of being [read can be] a starter in the NFL.” Richard Justice, “Restoring Glory,” Houston Chron., 16 Dec. 2001, Sports §, at 1.

capacity; capability. These words overlap, but each has its nuances. Capacity = the power or ability to receive, hold, or contain <the jar was filled to
capital, n.; capitol. The first is a city, the seat of government; the second is a building in which the state or national legislature meets (fr. L. capitoleum, the Roman temple of Jupiter). Until October 1698, when the Virginia governor specified that Capitol would be the name of the planned statehouse in a village then known as Middle Plantation, the word capitol had been used only as the name of the great Roman temple at Rome. See Mitford M. Mathews, American Words 62–63 (1959; repr. 1976).

Capital, whether as noun or as adjective, is called on far more frequently than capitol.

Capitol Hill is where the U.S. Capitol (the building) is located in Washington, D.C., the nation's capitol.
capitalist; capitalistic. Capitalist is the general adjective <capitalist enterprises>; the -istic form, a favorite of Marxists, is typically pejorative <for much of the 20th century, Hong Kong was the world's most capitalistic city>.

CAPITALIZATION. A. Generally. The decision whether to capitalize a word seems simple at first. There are really just three rules: capitalize the first word of a sentence, the pronoun I, and proper names. What could be easier?

Then the “yeah-but” bug bites. You’re writing a business letter and you notice that everyone capitalizes Company when it refers to your company, even when it’s not used with the company’s name. Isn’t that a common noun that should be lowercase? You read the newspaper and notice that President is capitalized when referring to the U.S. president, but not when referring to a foreign president or the president of a corporation. You notice that the newspaper’s headline is capitalized just as in a regular sentence, but a newsletter you receive capitalizes the first letter of every word in its headlines—and the supermarket tabloids you sneak a peek at while waiting in line capitalize every bigger-than-life letter in their screaming headlines.

So what are the standards? For writing that goes into print, the standards—in capitalization more than in most other aspects of written English—lie in house styles. That means that how you capitalize will usually be decided by someone else, not you (unless you’re a publisher, or maybe a poet). Yet some general conventions offer helpful guidance. The most important is the modern trend away from capitalization, resulting in a minimalist rule: unless there’s a good reason to capitalize, don’t.

But don’t think that this simple rule can answer all your questions. Despite the three simple rules above, there are many other arcane capitalization rules, and you’ll never learn every one any more than you will ever learn how to spell every word in the English language. You’ll always need a dictionary to look up spellings you’re not sure about, and you’ll find a comprehensive resource such as The Chicago Manual of Style indispensable for explaining the minutiae and conventions of capitalizing. Other excellent manuals are The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law and the venerable but aging Words into Type.

There is simply no way to reason out why Stone Age is capitalized but space age is usually not, why October is capitalized but autumn is not, why in scientific names the genus is capitalized but the species is not—even when the species name is derived from a proper name <Rhinolophus philippinensis>.

Despite all those paradoxes, and many others, the following conventions may prove useful when deciding whether to capitalize:

- Capitalize the first word of a sentence even if the word standing alone would be an exception to the rule to capitalize proper nouns, such as eBay <Ebay reported higher earnings Tuesday>.
- Capitalize the first word of a complete sentence within a sentence, such as a direct quotation <I said, “Do you want to dance?”>.
- When a common noun is part of a proper name, capitalize it when the entire name appears <Mississippi River>, but not when it is separated from the proper name <the Mississippi and Missouri rivers>. See NAMES (A).
- Capitalize the adjectival form of a noun that is always proper <Keynesian economics> but not one from a noun that can also be common <congressional investigation> or that has lost any connection with the thing described by the combined term <french fries>.
- Usually capitalize all letters of an acronym or initialism (and avoid periods) <NCDA> and any style established by long usage <U.S.> <mpg> <AM> <A.D.>. (See abbreviations (A).) This is another area in which a style manual is essential.
- Capitalize compass directions when they refer to identifiable places <the American West>, but not when they are just general directions <go west, young man>.
- Capitalize days of the week <Monday>, months of the year <June>, and holidays <Fourth of July> but not seasons <fall>, even if used attributively <spring 2004 semester>.
- Capitalize historic eras <the Roaring Twenties>, but not general labels that could apply to many eras <the golden age of radio>.
- Capitalize sparingly to show personification <it’s not nice to fool Mother Nature> or that something is being elevated from the commonplace for some rhetorical purpose <still waiting for that One Big Deal>.
B. Overcapitalizing. Inexperienced writers—and overzealous house stylists—often tend to capitalize common nouns inappropriately. As mentioned above, a house style may insist that certain common nouns (e.g., Company, University, City) be capitalized when referring to its own institution. But even this holdout against the modern trend is weakening—the University of Colorado at Boulder recently declared that its internal style is to always make university lowercase when it stands alone. A few nouns that are arguably common in form are always capitalized, such as House (for House of Representatives) and Crown for the British monarchy. But that’s not an excuse to capitalize federal or government. Again, a style manual is invaluable for handling the exceptions to the rule.

It isn’t always inexperience that leads to overcapitalizing. Sometimes it’s propaganda. As one modern grammarian notes, propagandists “invariably capitalize the name of their philosophy, the title of their leader, the term for the group’s adherents, and so on.” Barbara Wallraff, Word Court 80 (2000).

C. Titles. Titles also give writers some trouble. In general, an actual title is capitalized when it comes before a name <Chairman Mao>, but not when it follows a name <Colin Powell, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff>. Labels that are not titles are never capitalized <physicist Niels Bohr> (but see titular tomfoolery). A well-known nickname may rise to the level of a proper noun and require capitalization <Old Blue Eyes>. A trademark is a proper name akin to a title and should always be capitalized <Dr Pepper> unless the trademark is designated as lowercase <iPod>. Titles of works of art and publications are capitalized like up-style headings (see (d)) <Gone with the Wind> <Journal of the American Medical Association>.

Styles differ over whether to capitalize an article at the beginning of a name or title. In general, always capitalize an article when it is part of the title of a book, play, or other literary or artistic work <A Clockwork Orange> <The Color Purple>, but leave it lowercase if it is not part of the title <the Bible>. Do not capitalize the at the beginning of a company’s or university’s name <the Chubb Group> <the Heritage Foundation> <the University of Washington>. Rules for articles at the beginning of newspaper and magazine names are not as well settled. Associated Press style is to capitalize the when it is a formal part of the name <The Nation> <The New York Times>, and to leave it lowercase when it is not <the National Review> <the Los Angeles Times>. While that advice is sensible, it can be burdensome as well. How do you know the formal name of a publication? The World Wide Web makes that task easier and less expensive than the AP’s instruction to buy Editor & Publisher’s International Year Book. Finally, the is lowercase when referring to many countries and geographic entities <the Marshall Islands> <the Philippines>, but capitalized in the names of some cities <The Pas, Manitoba> <The Dalles, Oregon>. And as The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage points out, the capital of the Netherlands is The Hague.

D. Up-Style Headings. Avoid them. An up-style heading is one in which most words are capitalized. As far as readability is concerned, a block of text set up-style is just slightly easier to read than a block of all-caps text (see (e)).

But the up-style has its place, as in the taglines in this and most other manuals. It also has advantages in marking the hierarchy of headings. This is especially so if the output is straight from a word processor, as most writing in business and academia is. Typesetting for publications gives a lot more flexibility for signaling the structure of a document by layout devices. In a business or academic report, the writer is likely to use just one or two typefaces and sizes. So a bold, centered, up-style heading might signal, for example, that this division in the document is at a lower level than the bold, centered, all-caps heading above, but at a higher level than the down-style, flush-left headings that follow.

When using up-style headings, capitalize the first and last words and all other words except for articles, conjunctions, and short prepositions (usually fewer than five letters). Consider the to in an infinitive a preposition or particle and leave it lowercase, too. But don’t fail to capitalize a noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, or adverb just because it is short <I Is Too Easy to Forget>. And remember: many words that are common as prepositions can also serve as adverbs <Stand Out in a Crowd> <Walk out the Door>. In these examples, out is an adverb in the first, a preposition in the second.

Two final things. First, always capitalize that in up-style headings, whether it is serving as a relative pronoun, demonstrative adjective, or conjunction. This carves out an exception to the usual rules, but it’s simple, handy, and consistent. Second, consider using another exception to the rule by capitalizing the short preposition with if it appears close to or parallel with the longer preposition without. Otherwise, the result is awkward and confusing, perhaps even misleading by implying significance where none is intended.

E. All Capitals. Avoid them. A block of all caps is hard to read, and the longer the block, the harder it is to read. We learn to recognize words by the shape of the letters, even if we’re not conscious of it. The ascenders and descenders give words their distinctive shapes. Words set in all caps lose those signals.

That said, the all-caps style does have its place, especially in major headings, set in boldface type and never running over one line. Even in this use, however, the style is best confined to simple tags such as CONCLUSION. The combination of caps and boldface can help when setting up a hierarchy of heading styles (see (d)).

F. Small Caps. The use of small caps is uncommon in general writing, but for some uses the style is appropriate, and more writers ought to consider adopting it. Specifically, small caps are helpful where large caps
would be unnecessarily obtrusive. For example, 56 B.C. just looks tidier than 56 B.C. Similarly, if the style you must follow requires caps rather than lowercase letters for a.m. and p.m., 5:37 PM looks a bit more restrained than 5:37 PM. When you’re listing academic degrees, small caps can help prevent the string of abbreviations from overpowering the person’s name <Don Hill, b.s., M.B.A., E.D.D., J.D., L.L.M.>. And in other places where tags and abbreviations are standard, small caps can help lower the volume somewhat <DATE:>. Small caps are also used in citations for specialized writing in certain fields, such as law. For more guidance on using small caps, see The Chicago Manual of Style.

G. After Colon. See punctuation (c).

H. Names. See names (a).

capitol. See capital.

Capital Hill. See capital.

capitulatory; *capitulative. The standard adjective corresponding to capitulation is capitulatory /ka-pich-a-la-tor-ee/. The form *capitulative, which is much less common, is a NEEDLESS VARIATION—e.g.: “Solidarity activists and many independent economists maintain that authorities save their most effective weapon of the price campaign for last: capitulatory [read capitulatory] wage hikes above the level of prices for any factory considered a potential trouble spot,” Jackson Diehl, “Poles Await Yearly Rise in Prices,” Wash. Post, 25 Jan. 1988, at A15.

Current ratio: 30:1

cappuccino (= Italian-style coffee with steamed milk) has always been so spelled with two doubled consonants. *Capuccino and *cappucino are NEEDLESS VARIANTS.

Current ratio (cappuccino vs. *cappucino vs. *capuccino): 185:2:1

capricious (= [1] changing quickly and suddenly, or [2] likely to change one’s mind suddenly and to behave unexpectedly) is preferably pronounced /ka-prish-as/-not /ka-preesh-as/. Yet the corresponding noun is caprice /ka-prees/.

capsize has always been so spelled. Yet the misspelling *capsise occasionally appears in BrE and World English. E.g.: “Ships at sea are cracked like straws, curraghs and rafts in the lough capsise [read capsise].” Carolyn White, A History of Irish Fairies 92 (2005).

Current ratio: 797:1

captor; *capturer. The latter is a NEEDLESS VARIATION.

caramel (= [1] burnt sugar used to color or sweeten food; or [2] a smooth, chewy, caramel-flavored candy) is the standard spelling. The word is pronounced /kar-a-mal/ (best), /kar-a-mel/ (second best), or /kahr-mal/ (worst). *Carmel is a misspelling that results from the third pronunciation—e.g.: “Another offering is the Cow Pie, which is made of chocolate, pecans and carmel [read caramel].” Anna Driver, “Kids Sweet on Slimy Gum, Candy Rats,” Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 14 June 1997, at B7.


Another slight influence leading to this error might be a place name: Carmel, California (which is pronounced /kahr-mel/).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
caramel misspelled *carmel: Stage 1
carat; karat; caret. These homophones have distinct meanings. Carat = a unit of weight for gemstones, equal to 200 milligrams <a 2-carat diamond>. Karat = a unit of fineness for gold <a 24-karat gold bracelet>. Caret = a typographic mark (^) used to indicate an insertion <a heavily edited page filled with cross-outs and caret>s.

Not surprisingly, the first two words are the most frequently confused—so much so that dictionaries list carat as a variant spelling of karat (in addition to defining karat’s ordinary sense). But the differentiation ought to be encouraged.

The less common error is to misuse caret for the unrelated word carat or karat—e.g.: “Boaters often liked to have the names of their yachts painted in 24-carat [read 24-karat] gold leaf, as well.” Shannon Oboye, “James Tribbett, Expert at Gold-Leaf Lettering,” Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale), 15 Mar. 2001, at B15.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
caret misused for karat: Stage 1

caravanserai (= in eastern countries, an inn with a large open central area where groups of travelers with animals can stay) has been predominantly so spelled since the 18th century. The most common variants are *caravansary (predominant in AmE in the late 19th century) and *caravansery. Caravanserai is pronounced /kar-o-van[ti]-sa-ri/.

Current ratio (caravanserai vs. *caravansary vs. *caravansery): 56:22:1

carburetor; carburettor. The first is AmE (pronounced /kahr-bo-ra-ray-tar/ [formally /kahr-by-a-ray-tar/]); the second is BrE (pronounced kah-by-a-ray-to/ [OED] or /kah-by-a-re-t-ar/ [Jones]).

carcass (= the dead body of an animal or, less often, a human) is the standard spelling. *Carcase is a variant (still occasionally seen in BrE, but not recommended in AmE or any other form of standard English).

Current ratio: 6:1

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

Stage 1: Rejected. Stage 2: Widely shunned. Stage 3: Widespread but not fully accepted. Stage 4: Ubiquitous but not fully accepted. Stage 5: Fully accepted. Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
cardinal numbers; ordinal numbers. Cardinal numbers signify quantity (one, two, three, etc.); ordinal numbers signify position (first, second, third, etc.). To keep the terms straight, associate ordinal with order. See numerals (f).

**card shark; cardsharp.** The traditional distinction is that a card shark is a skillful player, while a cardsharp (usually a closed compound) is a cheat. Here, the terms are used in these senses:


But occasionally a writer will use card shark where the sense is that the player cheats. A useful distinction gets obliterated in the shuffle—e.g.:


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careen; career, vb. *Careen* = (1) v.i., to tip or tilt <the sailboat careened and then sank>; or (2) v.t., to cause to tip or tilt <they careened the ship on the beach to scrape the barnacles and caulk the seams>. *Career* = to move wildly at high speed. E.g.: “His car overturned yesterday after careering out of control across three lanes of the motorway.” “M4 Driver Drowns,” *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 Feb. 1990, at 2.

Since the early 20th century, AmE has made careen do the job of career, as by saying that a car careened down the street. On September 7, 1992, in a campaign speech in Wisconsin, President George H.W. Bush said that “product liability has careened out of control.” Likewise: “Imagine yourself as Ridge Racer, careening in a rocket-powered car through an ever-changing, three-dimensional landscape.” “Fight to the Finish,” *Newsweek*, 12 Dec. 1994, at 56. In frequency of use in AmE, phrases such as careened off the road and careened out of control have no close rivals with careening counterparts. Careening off course is now standard.

Concededly, though, a few writers reserve career for such uses—e.g.:

- “Monday night, while he [Silvio Berlusconi] reaffirmed his promise to deliver a 'new Italian miracle,' supporters careered through the streets of Rome blasting their car horns and crying ‘Silvio! Silvio!’” Kevin Fedarko, “Knight of the New Right,” *Time*, 11 Apr. 1994, at 59.

It’s understandable why most people aren’t comfortable with this verbal usage of career. The word derived from a Latin term for road or path, and later denoted a racetrack, but today people think of it only as a noun: the path of a life’s work.

The new use of careen may also have been influenced by the word carom (= to rebound after colliding)—e.g.: “Among those comforted were seven students, ages 10 to 15, who were riding their bicycles Sunday with Dale Tutchowski when two cars collided and one car careomed into the teacher.” Joe Williams & Lisa Sink, “Pupils Who Saw Teacher Hurt Seek Comfort,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 18 Oct. 1994, at A1.

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careen in the sense “to move swervingly or lurchingly”: Stage 5
caret. See carat.
cargo. Pl. cargoes. See plurals (d).
Caribbean is sometimes misspelled *Caribean* or *Carribbean*. The pronunciation /kar-i-bee-an/ is preferred because of its derivation from *Carib* /kar-ib/, the name of the native inhabitants of the islands that Christopher Columbus landed on and explored in 1493 (the Lesser Antilles) and of the northern coast of South America. The pronunciation /ka-rib-ee-an/ is common, however, especially in BrE.

*caricature assassination. See character assassination.*
carmel. See caramel.
carnal knowledge. This is an old legal euphemism for sexual intercourse—dating back at least to the 17th century. The phrase is often paired, in references to rape, with ravish, a word that will strike some readers as romanticizing a horrible criminal act. (See ravish.) Except in quotations and historical references, the phrase carnal knowledge can be advantageously replaced by sexual intercourse.
carnivore, n. Pl. carnivores or (less commonly) carnivora. Believe it or not, the latter was predominant in print sources up to 1925. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (carnivores vs. carnivora): 13:1
carom. See career.
carousel; carousel. A carousel (/ka-ra-sel/) is a carnivaria merry-go-round or, by extension, another machine that turns in a circle, such as a baggage carousel at an airport or the film-holder on a slide projector.
The two spellings are occasionally confounded, almost always in the direction of -ef's being erroneously changed to -al—e.g.:


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carousel misused for carousal: Stage 1
carte blanche; *carta blanca. The French form, carte blanche (= free permission), is usual—not the Italian *carta blanca, which is a needless variant. The phrase, meaning literally "a white card," does not take an article—e.g.: "The team's owner gave the coach carte blanche to trade or waive players." It is pronounced /kahrt(blahnsh)/ or /blahnch/. The plural is cartes blanches (/kahrt(s) blahnsh/ or /blahnch/).

*carven, adj., is inferior to carved because it is a non-traditional revival of a Renaissance form and because it remains rare. E.g.: "Each feature was fine, attenuated, carven [read carved], the eyelids solemn and the mouth curved and cut like a fruit." Helen Simpson, "The Bed," Cosmopolitan, Jan. 1993, at 210.

caryatid (= a pillar in the shape of a female figure) is preferably pronounced /kar-ee-at-id/, or /kar-ee-tid/—not /kar-ee-id/.

case. A. Generally. H.W. Fowler wrote of case: "There is perhaps no single word so freely resorted to as a trouble-saver, and consequently responsible for so much flabby writing" (FMEU1 at 65). Arthur Quiller-Couch condemned it as "jargon's dearest child." On the Art of Writing 106 (1916).

The offending phrases include in case (better made if), in cases in which (usually verbose for if, when, or whenever), in the case of (usually best deleted or reduced to in), and in every case (better made always, if possible). The word case especially leads to flabbiness when given different senses in the same passage—e.g.: "The popular image of a divorce case has long been that of a private detective skulking through the bushes outside a window with a telephoto lens, seeking a candid snapshot of the wife in flagrante delicto with a lover. Such is not exactly the case." Joseph C. Goulden, The Million Dollar Lawyers 41 (1978).

**B. Meaning “argument.”** This meaning is commonplace and is no more objectionable than any other use of the word—e.g.:


This is the meaning of case in the title of the book (Making Your Case: The Art of Persuading Judges [2008]) by Justice Antonin Scalia together with me.

**C. Grammatical Case.** See pronouns (b) & possessives.

**D. Meaning “lawsuit.”** In legal contexts, the word case can be especially slippery. When the word is simply equivalent to lawsuit, legal stylists tend to replace the word to avoid potential ambiguity. For example, in the sentence "In this case, the argument in favor of comparative negligence is at its strongest," does the writer mean (strictly) "in this lawsuit" or (more broadly) "in this type of circumstance"? Context may supply the answer, but if the first meaning is intended, it's best to eliminate the ambiguity by using lawsuit instead.

*Cash money* is a 19th-century redundancy that peaked in frequency of use during World War II and has persisted despite a sharp post-War decline—e.g.:

- "The deal also makes Wirtz cough up a pile of valuable cash money [read cash] (more valuable than oxygen) this year AND next year, making it nearly impossible to trade Roenick." Steve Rosenblom, "Views from Out of Bounds," Chicago Trib., 9 Aug. 1996, Sports §, at 2.
- "He has decided to let Sotheby's turn [the bones] into cash money [read cash]." Don Singleton, "T-Rex New Kid on the Block," Daily News (N.Y.), 17 Nov. 1996, at 18.
- "If Jim McElwain is any example, should Mike Bobo bolt for greener (cash money [read cash]) pastures as soon as he has a 10-win season at CSU?" Benjamin Hochman & Mark Kisza, "Who Has the Better Head Coaching Job?" Denver Post, 9 Aug. 2015, at C2.

-CAST. On the analogy of broadcast, many 20th-century neologisms arose, such as cablecast (1975), podcast (2004), radiocast (1931), simulcast (1948), and telecast (1937). They are irregular verbs (like cast itself) that don't change in the past tense. Adding -ed, though fairly common, is incorrect. For individual treatments, see broadcast, cablecast, radiocast & telecast.

cast > cast > cast. So inflected. *Casted* is incorrect as a past-tense or past-participial form—e.g.:

- "For a week, the three men swapped fish tales, told ghost stories, baited hooks, casted [read cast] both fishing and song lines." John Harper, "Top Talent Creates Songs and
See -cast & irregular verbs.

There does seem to be a tendency to use *casted when cast means “to supply with a lineup of actors,” but this should be resisted—e.g.:

• “Hollywood honcho Frederick Golchan, the executive producer of the Richard Gere–Sharon Stone flick ‘Intersection,’ was in town the other day scouting locations for ‘Kimberly.’ Golchan’s latest not-yet-casted [read -cast] project is about a woman coxswain who joins a men’s rowing team.” Gayle Fee & Laura Raposa, “Kerry’s Lovelife a People-Pleaser,” Boston Herald, 4 June 1996, at 19.


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*casted for cast as a past-tense form: Stage 1 Current ratio (had cast vs. *had casted): 1,484:1

caster; castor. Several terms are represented by these spellings. What follows are the senses recommended for each spelling. Caster = (1) someone who casts something; (2) a small wheel fixed on the leg of a piece of furniture so that it may be pushed or pulled in any direction; or (3) a shaker for sprinkling sugar, salt, pepper, etc. Castor = (1) an oil made from castor beans (an Old World herb); (2) the herbivorous rodent normally termed beaver; (3) a beaver hat; or (4) the perfume ingredient gathered from dried beaver glands.

casual. See causal (n).

**Casualisms. A. Generally.** Some expressions characteristic of speech (but appearing also in writing) declare either freedom from inhibition or an utter lack of solemnity. They may add a relaxed freshness, or they may seem inappropriately unbuttoned. Although they overlap to some degree with slang, they can’t always be so labeled. They make up the least formal type of standard English, and they’re standard only in informal contexts. All the expressions that make up this peculiar subset of English are here termed casualisms.

Some of these are on the high side of informality because of their durability. Examples are using if to mean whether <getting the Boxster depends on if Daddy can afford the insurance> and using terms such as junkie (= a drug addict), poppycock (= nonsense), Saturday night special (= a small pistol), and washout (= a fiasco). One might find any of these expressions in informal contexts.

Expressions on the low side of informality often blend into slang, perhaps because the references tend to be uncivil or unpleasant, or to sound adolescent. Examples are referring to a person as a wuss, dork (or dorkus maximus), or poohhead, and referring to the act of vomiting as hurling, blowing chunks, snapping your cookies, tossing your lunch, or talking on the great white telephone.

Still other expressions are in the middle, such as cave for cave in <the child pleaded for 30 minutes for the doll, and finally her parents caved>, futz around (= to waste time), gabfest (= an event where people talk garrulously), iffy (= uncertain), like as a conjunction <like I said>, put-up job (= a deception), way used as a synonym for totally <way cool!>, you guys (a plural for you), and zit (= pimple).

**B. Changes over Time.** Like any other expressions, casualisms can undergo appreciation and deprecation. Because casualisms start at the low end of the linguistic spectrum, they typically appreciate in meaning if they move at all. Two words—flu and butt—illustrate this phenomenon. Flu began as an informal shortening of influenza, but gradually it took over as the main word to denote the disease. Influenza is now considered a hyperformal word; flu has become the ordinary word (no longer a true casualism).

Butt presents a different story. In reference to a person’s posterior, it was considered rude, even slightly profane, in the mid-20th century. By the 1990s, when the baby boomers had come of age and had children of their own, many were shocked to find that PE teachers were having their children do “butt-lifts” (so called). A dictionary published in 2000 has a label that reads (quite accurately): “potentially offensive, although heard almost everywhere.” Richard A. Spears, NTC’s Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions 61 (2000). So butt no longer gives offense? What a bummer.

This shifting of register is a recurrent phenomenon, as a linguist noted in the 1960s: “We know that colloquial usage is customarily twenty or thirty years ahead of formal usage and that the border marauders of today may well be the solid grammatical citizens of tomorrow.” Dora Jean Ashe, “One Can Use an Indefinite ‘You’ Occasionally, Can’t You?” in A Linguistics Reader 63, 65 (Graham Wilson ed., 1967).

**C. Shortened Forms.** Butt, of course, is a shortened form of buttocks (bat-aks). In fact, many casualisms are truncated words. Among the established terms in this category are auto (automobile), bike (bicycle), bra (brassiere), deli (delicatessen), phone (telephone), plane (airplane), pub (public house), temp (temporary employee), tux (tuxedo), and zoo (zoological gardens). All of these are high casualisms, being old and established.

Newer truncated forms tend to fall in the middle to low range. Examples abound:

- bro (brother)
- burbs (suburbs)
- carb (carbohydrate)
- carb (carburator)
- combo (combination)
- cred (credibility)
- cuke (cucumber)
fridge (refrigerator)
hood (neighborhood)
natch (naturally)
nuke (nuclear)
perp (perpetrator)
phenom (phenomenon)
rents (parents)
TV (television)
Vegas (Las Vegas)
veggies (vegetables)

More than ever before, shortenings take the form of acronyms and initialisms. They’re also properly classifiable as casualisms, even when formally introduced the first time, as in “chief executive officer (CEO).” Once again, examples abound:

CFO (chief financial officer)
CIO (chief information officer)
COO (chief operating officer)
ER (emergency room)
HMO (health-maintenance organization)
HOV (high-occupancy vehicle)
ICU (intensive-care unit)
IME (independent medical examination)
IV (intravenous [tube])
OR (operating room)
PC (personal computer or political correctness)
SUV (sport-utility vehicle)
VIP (very important person)
VP (vice president)

See abbreviations (A).

D. Proliferation. What accounts for the proliferation of casualisms in modern prose? There seem to be two main causes. First, casualisms reflect the ever-greater sense of speed in modern society. Clipped speech is faster speech. Second, manners have long been moving away from stiff formality, as the Evanses noted:

Forty years ago it was considered courteous to use formal English in speaking to strangers, implying that they were solemn and important people. Today it is considered more flattering to address strangers as if they were one’s intimate friends. This is a polite lie, of course; but it is today’s good manners. Modern usage encourages informality wherever possible and reserves formality for very few occasions. [DCAU at vii]

Each generation seems a little less formal than the previous one. The Evanses themselves might have been shocked at the habit that today’s receptionists and telephone solicitors have of immediately calling people by their first names. When the baby boomers are gone, people might marvel that this was ever considered unduly familiar.

The originator of the term casualism, by the way, was the estimable Theodore M. Bernstein, author of The Careful Writer (1965). Here’s how he summed up his entry on the subject: “The designation casualism does not imply that the expression is necessarily unsuitable for serious writing. It is not a red light; it is an orange light” (p. 95).

casualty; *casuality. *Casuality is an obsolete needless variant of casualty (= [1] a person killed or hurt in a war or an accident; [2] a chance occurrence, esp. an unfortunate one; [3] the state of being casual; or [4] an incidental charge or source of income). Sometimes the British press seems to use both forms for inelegant variation—e.g.: “Observers warned that casualty reports were unreliable because both sides tend to exaggerate the other’s casualties [read casualties] while understating their own losses.” “Turkish Troops Kill 72 Rebels,” Fin. Times, 13 June 1996, at 2. In modern prose, casualty is either a peculiarly common typographical error or else an affectation by those who erroneously believe Briticisms to be their “speciality.” (See Americanisms and Briticisms.)


• “One casualty [read casualty] is longtime Council Member Michael M. McGuire. Not only did he lose his seat on the Amherst Democratic Committee, but he also lost his place as a delegate to the state committee.” Lisa Haarlander, “Infighting Leaves Democrats Scrambling to Regroup,” Buffalo News, 14 Sept. 2000, at B3.


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*casuality for casualty: Stage 1

cataclysm; cataclasm. The meanings of these words are fairly close, especially in figurative senses. A cataclysm is a tremendous flood or violent disaster. A cataclasm is a tearing down or disruption.

catalogue; catalog. Though librarians have come to use catalog with regularity, catalogue is still the better and the more frequent form in World English. Cataloging makes about as much sense as plaguing. “If the professionals decline to restore the -u- to the inflected forms,” wrote Wilson Follett in 1966, “let them simply double the -g.” (MAU at 97). But Follett’s advice has largely fallen on deaf ears, and in AmE catalog and cataloging are now prevalent and seemingly unstoppable—e.g.: “There are eighty million boxes down there, all crammed full of paper and uncataloged [read uncatalogued or, in Follett’s view, uncatalogged] gifts.” Julie Kenner, Carpe Demon 241 (2005). Cf. analog, apologue & epilogue. For a comment on the decline of the -u- form, see -AGOG(UE).

catastrophe forms the plural catastrophes—not *catastrophes.

Current ratio: 71:1

catch fire; *catch on fire. The phrase catch fire, dating back to the 17th century, is about six times as common in print sources as *catch on fire, a late-19th-century
innovation that has hardly spread like wildfire. The word on is a needless particle—e.g.:

See phrasal verbs.

**catch-22**

Not the same in good usage. Catch-22 = an insoluble problem in which one must do something to do a second thing, which must be done before one can do the first thing. Hobson's choice = (1) a situation in which one is presented with only one “choice,” and hence no choice at all; or (2) a situation in which either of one's two choices is bad. See Hobson's choice.

Catch-22 derives from the title of Joseph Heller’s 1961 novel, in which by rule, you can't fly missions if you're crazy, but if you don't want to fly missions you're not crazy. Today the phrase is not treated as a proper noun, so the standard form is lowercase.

catchup. See ketchup.


For a malapropism involving this word, see *uncategorically*.

category. So spelled. See spelling (A).

cater-corner(ed). See catty-corner(ed).

catholicly; *catholicly. Both may mean either “with wide sympathies” or (when capitalized) “in a manner inclined toward Catholicism.” No differentiation has emerged, but catholicly (pronounced /kә-thәl-ik-leә/) is about ten times as common as *catholicly, which can now be branded a needless variant. That form, however, was predominant through the mid-19th century.

catsup. See ketchup.

catty-corner(ed); kitty-corner(ed); cater-corner(ed). These terms all mean “located at a diagonal.” The original phrase, in Middle English, was catre-cornered (lit., “four-cornered”)—catre deriving from the Latin quattuor. Today the forms arrived at through folk etymology, catty-corner and kitty-corner, are by far the most common. (See etymology (D)). The form cater-corner, the preferred form in most dictionaries, is less common but not at all rare. Its past-participial forms are infrequent enough not to be recommended.

Current ratio (kitty-corner vs. catty-corner vs. cater-corner): 29:27:1

Current ratio (catty-corner vs. catty-cornered): 5:1

caucus, vb., makes caucused and caucusing in AmE and BrE alike. (See spelling (B).) The term is an Americanism.

cauldron; *caldron. The first is the preferred spelling in AmE and BrE alike—and has been so since about 1900. Cauldron outnumbers caldron by a 5-to-1 ratio in AmE print sources—e.g.:

• “Lebanon, under the rule of a despotic regime . . . , will continue to be a cauldron of unrest, criminality, terrorism and war.” Daniel Nassif, “Syria’s Control of Lebanon Is a Danger to All,” Wash. Times, 15 Aug. 1996, at A19.

• “Chefs have been working for days, preparing cauldrons of a new dish called ‘Boliche Suey’ to mark the occasion.” Steve Otto, “Big Guava Taken by China!” Tampa Trib., 1 July 1997, Metro §, at 1.


caulk; calc. Caulk = (1) vb., to fill (cracks or seams) in order to make airtight or watertight; or (2) n., the pastelike material used for this purpose (also known as caulking). Calk = (1) n., a piece fitted to a shoe (esp. a horseshoe) to prevent slipping; (2) vb., to fit with calks; or (3) vb., to injure with a calk. Both words are pronounced /kәwk/ or /kok/.

Though calc is sometimes used for caulk, the words have undergone differentiation, so that the spellings should be distinguished according to the definitions above.

causal. A. And causative. These words, though unfortunately muddled by some writers, should be kept distinct. Causal = (1) of, relating to, or involving causes; entailing causation <they could find no causal connection between a missile and the crash>; or (2) arising from a cause <three causal conditions>. So in sense 1, the phrases causal connection, causal link, and causal relationship are set phrases—e.g.:

• “The actual research now shows that the percentage of women with immune system-related diseases (such as lupus and scleroderma) is the same within the general population as within the breast implant population. In other words, there’s no causal connection.” Sandy Finestone, “Breast Implant Scare Has Lessons for Juries, Journalists,” Sacramento Bee, 2 Sept. 1996, at B7.

• “The standard argument was that no scientifically accepted causal link between smoking and disease had been demonstrated.” Ron Haybron, “Checking Studies to Make Sure They Are Needed,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 30 Nov. 1997, at J10.
Causative = (1) operating as a cause; effective as a cause <various causative agents can result in the disease>; or (2) expressing a cause <causative phrase>. Hence one speaks of causative agents, causative factors, and causative roles—e.g.: "Wertheimer drove the streets of greater Denver searching for possible causative agents of childhood cancer." Gary Taubes, "Fields of Fear," Atlantic Monthly, Nov. 1994, at 94.

Causal is occasionally misused for causative—e.g.: "While apathy and fear of change allow the system to continue, two causal [read causative] agents are money and power." David Lassie, "Public School System Is A Liability," Times (Shreveport), 13 Aug. 2002, at A7.

The opposite mistake likewise appears—e.g.:


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causative misused for causal: Stage 1
Current ratio (causal link vs. *causative link): 35:1

B. And casual. What is casual is informal or relaxed <casual dress>, occasional <casual work>, or unstructured <a casual meeting>. The word has nothing to do with causation. It is a common typographical error to transpose the two middle letters in causal and casual, whichever one is being used—e.g.:

- "If your supervisor can show he gave other employees scheduling flexibility because they earned it with tenure and quality work, you need to prove a causal [read causal] relationship between voicing your concerns and his denial." Lynne Curry, "Workers Reporting Fraud Are Protected," Anchorage Daily News, 5 Aug. 2002, at E1.
- "Make sure employees know the difference between an appropriate causal [read casual] look and one that is inappropriate." Sarah Hale, "Groom Yourself for Success," Orlando Sentinel, 9 Sept. 2002, C.B. §, at 20.

Since the late 1970s, many books have mistakenly referred to *causal sex. Was that a typographical error, or did it cause something (in which event it should be causative)? See metathesis.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
causal misused for causal: Stage 1

causal determinism. See fatalism.

causality; causation. These words have a fine distinction. Causality = the principle of causal relationship; the relation of cause and effect <causality is a very large subject in philosophy>. Causation = (1) the causing or producing of an effect <multiple causation complicates the analysis>; or (2) the relation of cause and effect <the principles of causation weren't even considered>. True, sense 2 of causation overlaps with the meaning of causality. But generally that sense is best left to causality.

Causation should not be used for cause—e.g.: "Similarly, if affirmative action was the causation [read cause] of White male labor displacement, the unemployment statistics would reflect such displacement." Byron A. Ellis, "The Displacement Myth," Baltimore Afro-Am., 5 Aug. 1995, at A5.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
causation misused for cause: Stage 1
Current ratio (was the cause of vs. *was the causation of): 7,800:1

causative. See causal.

cause célèbre (/kawz sa-leb/ or /kohz say-leb-ra/)
does not mean "a famous cause or ideal," as it sometimes used—e.g.:
- "This brief overview just scratches the surface of a tangle of rules and regulations that have accumulated since education reform became the cause célèbre [read principal cause] in politics 10 years ago." Ann Melvin, "School Reform Will Focus on Local Control," Dallas Morning News, 26 Nov. 1994, at A33.
- "To some fervent left-wingers, if you're not with them and their cause célèbre [read cause], you're against them." Richard A. Fisher, "We Must 'Reinvent Citizenship' by Using Non-Partisan Values," Palm Beach Post, 1 Dec. 1994, at A19.
- "While the drive to allow women members at Augusta National has become a national cause célèbre [read cause] in some quarters, there are more fundamental issues facing women golfers in Rhode Island." Paul Kenyon, "2 R.I. Women's Golf Groups Should Link Up," Providence J.-Bull., 11 Sept. 2002, at D1.

The primary meaning has long been "a trial or decision in which the subject matter or the characters are unusual or sensational" (Black's Law Dictionary 266 [10th ed. 2014]). The term has been legitimately extended from the strict legal sense to mean "a famous or notorious person, thing, or event"—e.g.:

- "A few years ago, it would have been unimaginable that a shaken-baby case involving a British teenager, a family none of us had heard of before, and murky medical evidence would have become an international cause célèbre." Eric Black, "The Gigastory and Its Lack of Greater Meaning," Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 13 Nov. 1997, at A24.

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cause célèbre misused to mean "famous cause": Stage 1

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
*cause . . . is due to

*cause . . . is due to. This phrasing is redundant—e.g.: “The cause of crime is largely due to [read Crime results largely from or Crime is largely due to] the loss of individual character.” Cal Thomas, “Morals, Not Money, Cure Crime,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 9 Aug. 1994, at A6. See due to & Redundancy.

cautitory; cautious. Cautionary = encouraging or advising caution <cautionary signs>. Cautious = exercising caution <cautious drivers>.

cavalry. See calvary.


The word derives from the Latin phrase caveat emptor (= let the buyer beware), which is widely used—e.g.: “The old home-buying legal rule used to be ‘caveat emptor!’ (let the buyer beware). But in 1984 a California Court of Appeal was the first to hold a home seller and real estate broker liable for damages to the buyer for failure to disclose unstable soils [that] caused severe home damage.” Robert Bruss, “Disclosure, Insurance Help Sellers Avoid ‘Bad-House’ Lawsuits,” Chicago Trib., 7 Dec. 1996, New Homes §, at 2.

The traditional pronunciation of the word (/kəvɛɪvɪə-ʔ/) is far less common today than /kav-ee-aht/.

caviar (= the preserved roe of large fish, served as a delicacy) had become the standard spelling in AmE. See denizen labels.

caveat
caviar

cede; secede; concede. Cede = to give up, grant, admit, or surrender <by treaty, the tribe ceded about 20 million acres of aboriginal land>. Secede = to withdraw formally from membership or participation in <South Carolina was the first to secede from the United States>. Concede = (1) to admit to be true <I concede your point>; (2) to grant (as a right or a privilege) <in settlement, the landowner conceded a right-of-way to his neighbor>; or (3) to admit defeat (as in an election) <Dole conceded to Clinton in a gracious, moving way>.

ceasefire, n. One word in both AmE and BrE.

cede, secede, concede. Cede = to give up, grant, admit, or surrender <by treaty, the tribe ceded about 20 million acres of aboriginal land>. Secede = to withdraw formally from membership or participation in <South Carolina was the first to secede from the United States>. Concede = (1) to admit to be true <I concede your point>; (2) to grant (as a right or a privilege) <in settlement, the landowner conceded a right-of-way to his neighbor>; or (3) to admit defeat (as in an election) <Dole conceded to Clinton in a gracious, moving way>.

Cedilla. See diacritical marks.

celling, used in the sense of “maximum,” is in itself unobjectionable but can sometimes lead to unfortunate mangled metaphors. E.g.: “The task force recommended increasing the ceilings.” One raises a ceiling rather than increases it.

An English writer on usage quotes a preposterous example about “a ceiling price on carpets.” In using words figuratively, of course, one must keep in mind their literal meanings. See metaphors.

celebrant. A. And celebrator. Celebrant best refers to a participant in a religious rite <the celebrant at the baptism>. Celebrator is the better word for someone who celebrates—e.g.: “Never let it be said that we last-minute celebrators have to be satisfied with the leftovers, the discs, the old and the ugly.” Warren Berry, “Our Favorite Things,” Newsday (N.Y.), 16 Dec. 2001, at H5.

Often, however, celebrant appears where celebrator would be the better word—e.g.: “Enzo & Lucia’s Restaurant . . . will be open Wednesday just in time for New Year’s Eve celebrants [read celebrators].” “The Briefs,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 21 Dec. 2001, at 1. Cf. confirmand.

Language-Change Index celebrant for “a participant in a celebration”: Stage 3

B. Funeral celebrants. Although celebrant simply means “someone who performs a religious rite” and doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with jubilation, its sound association makes it unfit for funeral contexts. Why invite tasteless jokes? That’s the effect of saying that this or that religious figure will be the chief celebrant at a funeral—e.g.:

So when a rite is for a sad occasion, it’s better to avoid the word, even though one might say that the mourners are celebrating a life. Some reasonable people will consider celebrant in such a context offensive.

celebrator. See celebrant (a).

celibate. See chaste (b).

cello. This word is an 18th-century clipping of violoncello; until the late 20th century, it was often printed ‘cello. Today the form cello, without the apostrophe, is standard. See violoncello.

Since 1880, the standard English plural has been cellos, not *celli.

Current ratio (cello vs. ‘cello): 11:1
Current ratio (cellos vs. *celli): 13:1

cellphone, a shortened and telescoped form of cellular telephone, is increasingly so spelled. There is no good reason to retain the two-word version (cell phone), which necessitates hyphenating as a phrasal adjective (e.g., cell-phone use as opposed to cellphone use). See casualisms (c).

Celt; Celtic; *Kelt; *Keltic. The Boston Celtics will always be /sel-tiks/, but increasingly the early Britons (Celts) are called /kelts/, and the things relating to them are Celtic /kel-tik/. Historians generally prefer the /k/ sound. *Kelt and *Keltic are variant spellings.

Current ratio (Celts vs. *Kelts): 20:1
Current ratio (Celtic vs. *Keltic): 68:1

cement; concrete. These terms are not technically interchangeable because cement is a bonding agent that may be used to join discrete components such as bricks or the aggregate of water, sand, and other elements comprised in concrete. Cement is pronounced /so-ment/—not /see-ment/. See pronunciation (b).

censor, n.; censer; sensor. The first of these homophones is someone who suppresses; the second is either the vessel in which incense is burned or the person who carries that vessel; the third is something that detects. To compare the nouns censor and censure, see censor; censure (b).

censor; censure. A. As Verbs. To censor (/sen-sar/) is to scrutinize and revise, to suppress or edit selectively. E.g.: “The news is severely censored by the Pentagon and the Arab information agency.” Lucille Povero, “Local Newspaper Is the Best Hope of Getting the Truth,” St. Petersburg Times, 11 Jan. 1991, City Times §, at 2.

To censure (/sen-shar/) is to criticize severely, to castigate. E.g.:
• “Hyde was censured by the council two months ago after he admitted to violating the city ethics code.” Wayne Snow, “Council to Consider Removing Planning Panel Member,” Atlanta J.-Const., 21 Nov. 1996, Extra §, at M6.
• “Among the tenured professor’s supporters is the American Association of University Professors, a Washington-based academic group that has threatened to censure the university if Al-Adrian is dismissed.” Courtenay Edelhart, “Prof Defends Expression of His Beliefs,” Indianapolis Star, 12 Sept. 2002, at A34.

The word censure was widely mispronounced like censor in Congress during the impeachment proceedings against President Clinton (Dec. 1998–Jan. 1999), when censure was much discussed as a lesser measure against the President. The resulting misuse in print, common especially in the verb form, merits censure—e.g.:

Sometimes the writer’s intent becomes unclear—e.g. “A production about her Bavarian adventure was so scandalous that the Lord Chamberlain, who censured [read censored, probably] plays, banned it.” Michael Alpert, London 1849: A Victorian Murder Story 36 (2004). The reader can’t be certain whether the lord routinely banned or panned plays.

B. As Nouns. Censor, n., = someone who inspects publications, films, and the like before they are released to ensure that they contain nothing heretical, libelous, or offensive to the government. Although it would be nice to pronounce this use of the term obsolete, censors remain prominent in some places. E.g.:
• “A movie made to finesse Chinese censors can easily slip through the grasp of Western audiences.” Georgia Brown, “A Time to Live and a Time to Die,” Village Voice, 22 Nov. 1994, at 64.
• “A recent American film, Dangerous Game, which stars Madonna and Harvey Keitel, has been banned by the film censor, Mr. Sheamus Smith.” Michael Dwyer, “Madonna Film Is Banned by the Censor,” Irish Times, 23 Nov. 1994, at 1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-li.)
Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

Censure, n., = (1) a judgment of condemnation; or (2) a serious reprimand. Sense 1: “There have long been calls to deny new livers to alcoholics as a form of moral censure.” Froma Harrop, “Organ Transplants Raise the Issue of Medical Rationing,” Sacramento Bee, 21 Nov. 1996, at B9. Sense 2: “Mack and O’Dell voted against censure, which Tobolski said applies to the one incident and can be repeated if legislators do not like Mack’s comments.” Donna Snyder, “Legislator Censured for Calling Leadership Corrupt,” Buffalo News, 9 Jan. 1997, at C5.

censorious; censorial. Censorious (= severely critical) is the adjective corresponding to the verb censure, not censor. E.g.: "Ah well, it was no business of Cadfael's, nor had he any intention of getting involved. He did not feel particularly censorious." Ellis Peters, “The Price of Light,” in A Rare Benedictine 45, 59 (1988). Censorial describes the work or attitude of a censor. The two words are occasionally confused—e.g.: ’I suspect,' William added, ’that this was Shakespeare's [expurgated] copy for the Master of the Revels. He wished to be free of the Master's censorious [read censorial] pen.' ” Peter Ackroyd, The Lambs of London 100 (2006).

*censorious misused for censorial: Stage 1

Censorship (= the practice or institution of suppressing the expression of ideas thought to be uncongenial to those in power) is a word whose mention in AmE immediately brings up the First Amendment. It is one of those politically charged vogue words that people use irresponsibly. It shouldn’t mean simply the denial of governmental largesse; that is, an artist who is denied federal subsidies is not the object of censorship. The word should refer to active suppression, not merely lack of support.

censure. See censor.

centennial; centenary. In all the anniversary designations (bi-, sesqui-, etc.), whether used as adjectives or as nouns, the -al forms are preferred in AmE, the -ary forms in BrE.

center; centre. The first is the AmE spelling, the second the BrE. See -er (n).

*center around. Something can center on (avoid upon) or revolve around something else, but it cannot *center around because the center is technically a single point. The soleism, which began spreading in the early 19th century, is now common—e.g.: • “They said the debate now centers around [read centers on or revolves around] what price Sandoval should pay for her mistake.” Annie Hill, “Young Mother Sobs as Trial Begins in Tot’s Suffocation,” Denver Post, 5 Nov. 1996, at B3.

*center around for center on or revolve around: Stage 3

Current ratio (centering on vs. *centering around): 4:1

centi-. See hecto-.

centimeter (/sen-ti-mee-tar/) is sometimes, in medical jargon, given a precious pronunciation: /son-ti-mee-tar/. Avoid this.

centre. See center.

centripetal; centrifugal. The key to sorting out these science-related adjectives can be found in the Latin roots added to centri- (= center). Petere (= to go toward; to seek) survives in words such as impetus and compete. Fugere (= to go away from; to flee) survives in words such as fugitive and refuge. Hence, centripetal force attracts something toward the center (think of a falling object pulled by gravity), while centrifugal force repels something away from the center (think of riders on a merry-go-round).

Here, the words are used in their traditional, literal senses:
• "There is nothing you can shoot on a satellite that will ‘cut the string’ and it will fall out of the sky. The ‘string’ is centripetal force, that balances the gravity pulling down with the satellite’s own speed of motion.” Patrick J. O’Connor, “China Missile Adds to Space Junk, Risks,” Chicago Sun-Times, 29 Jan. 2007, Editorial §, at 34.
• "When uranium, in the form of uranium hexafluoride gas, is fed into the cylinder, centrifugal forces push it outward against the spinning wall.” Dan Charles, “U.S. Centrifuge Work Revived in Updated Form,” Wash. Post, 23 Apr. 2007, at A6.

The words can also bear figurative senses, to mean “tending to unite” (centripetal) and “tending to pull apart” (centrifugal)—e.g.: • “[Wal-Mart] is centripetal in the lives of millions who shop there, work there, manufacture goods sold there or who formerly worked for—or owned—the competition.” Donna Marchetti, “What Made Us a Nation of Wall-to-Wall Wal-Marts?” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 31 Jan. 2007, at E2.
• “Over the long term, governments usually find it in their interest to bridge the centrifugal forces of diversity rather than to exploit them, if only to promote stability.” Eduardo Porter, “The Divisions That Tighten the Purse Strings,” N.Y. Times, 29 Apr. 2007, § 3, at 4.

Yet because centripetal is a more obscure term than centrifugal, using a replacement word would clarify the meaning. The Wal-Mart example above might have benefited from substituting central for the high-falutin centripetal.
Writers sometimes misuse *centripetal* for *centrifugal*—e.g.:

- “[Niall] Ferguson observes that many nation-states that emerged out of the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire, from Yugoslavia to Iraq, were able to contain those conflicts by ruthless repression. *Centripetal* [read *Centrifugal* or, better, *Factious*] energies often exploded once the dictator died or was toppled.” James Traub, “The Way We Live Now,” *N.Y. Times*, 10 Dec. 2006, Mag. §, at 19.


See word-swapping.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

- *Centripetal* misused for *centrifugal*: Stage 1

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**CENTURY DESCRIPTIONS.** Some of us, apparently, forget from time to time that 19th century describes the 1800s, that 18th century describes the 1700s, and so on. Take, for example, R.B. Collins’s article titled “Can an Indian Tribe Recover Land Illegally Taken in the Seventeenth Century?” 1984–1985 *Preview of United States Supreme Court Cases* no. 8, p. 179 (18 Jan. 1985), which discusses land acquired by New York from the Oneida Indians in 1795. The title should refer to the 18th century, not the 17th.

What particular years make up the course of a century has also caused confusion. Strictly speaking, since the first century ran from a.d. 1 through 100, every century begins with a year ending in the digits 01. The last year of a century ends in 00. But the popular mind has moved everything back a year, in the belief that 2000 marked the beginning of the 21st century. This confusion is unfortunate but seemingly ineradicable.

One other point merits our attention. As compound adjectives, the phrases denoting centuries are hyphenated; but they are not hyphenated as nouns. Hence, “The 12th-century records were discovered in the 19th century.” See PHRASAL ADJECTIVES (A) & (G).

**cerebral.** In AmE this word is pronounced /sә-ree-brәl/ in all contexts except one—the phrase *cerebral palsy*, which is most often pronounced /ser-ә-brәl pahl-zee/. This exception derives from an old pronunciation of *cerebral*: in the early 1900s, the preference was for the first syllable to be accented.

**ceremonial; ceremonious.** The differentiation between these words lies more in application than in meaning; both suggest a punctilio in following the customs and trappings of ceremony. *Ceremonial* is the general word relating to all manner of ceremonies, but is used only in reference to things—e.g.:

- “A Catholic priest’s *ceremonial* robe apparently protected him from harm Friday when a woman shot him three times in the chest with a pellet gun.” *Priest Shot with Pellet Gun as He Gives Communion*, *Orlando Sentinel*, 23 Nov. 1996, at A20.

*Ceremonious*, a less common and mildly disparaging word, suggests an undue formality. It is used in reference both to people and to things—e.g.:

- “Walking the plank would have been too *ceremonious* for the real pirates, who much preferred slicing their victims up in redblooded swordplay.” Donna Marchetti, “Real Pirates Were Not Swashbuckling,” *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 27 Oct. 1996, at 111.

The word is more often seen in its negative adverbial form, *unceremoniously*, where it means “without fanfare”—e.g.: “He has always been a fan favorite and has *unceremoniously* given plenty back to the community.” David Dupree, “‘Glove’ Fits Better Now than Ever,” *USA Today*, 5 Apr. 2002, at C3. It typically connotes abruptness and disrespect—e.g.: “That’s how he learned he’d been *unceremoniously* cut from the preseason roster of a team with one of the strangest nicknames he’d ever heard—the Piranhas.” Carlton Stowers, “Desperate Measures,” *Dallas Observer*, 4 Apr. 2002, at 21.

**certainty; certitude.** *Certainty* = (1) an undoubted fact; or (2) absolute conviction. Sense 2 is very close to that reserved for *certitude*, which means “the quality of feeling certain or convinced.” E.g.:

- “The decision that thrust the world into the nuclear age and cast doubt on the moral *certitude* of the United States still has the power to incite bitter and contentious debate.” Andrea Ston, “Dissecting a Decision That Shook the World,” *USA Today*, 27 July 1995, at A4.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes stated, rather memorably, “*Certitude* is not the test of *certainty*. We have been cock-sure of many things that were not so.” “Natural Law,” in *Collected Legal Papers* 311 (1920). Other writers sometimes echo this aphorism—e.g.: “He was the sort of thinker for whom (to borrow a phrase of Oliver Wendell Holmes) *certitude* was the only proof that *certainty* required.” Louis Menand, “James Family Values,” *New Republic*, 18 Dec. 1995, at 29.

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

- **Stage 1**: Rejected. **Stage 2**: Widely shunned. **Stage 3**: Widespread but ... **Stage 4**: Ubiquitous but ... **Stage 5**: Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
cesarean section; caesarean section. The first is the standard spelling in AmE for the term denoting the surgical procedure for delivering a baby—with a lowercase c—. In BrE, the spelling caesarean section has predominated since the early 1990s. Apart from surgical birthing, Caesarean is the adjective meaning “of, relating to, or involving Caesar”, *Caesarian, *Cesarean, and *Cesarian are variant spellings of Caesarean.

cession. See session.

ceteris paribus (= other things being equal or the same) is, for the most part, an unnecessary Latinism. Other things being equal, the common English phrase is better—e.g.:

- “The revenues from the charges can be used either to reduce other taxes or to increase government expenditures on desirable activities without, ceteris paribus [read assuming no other changes], any further increase in taxes.” Wilfred Beckerman, "Beware Rules and Regulations," New Statesman & Soc'y, 22 Mar. 1996, at 29.
- “Moreover, even if current growth rates are maintained, Argentina is simply not going to develop its way out of the problem, ceteris paribus [delete the phrase, which comes as a weasel word at the end].” Roger Fontaine, "Argentina's Winter of Discontentment," Wash. Times, 28 Aug. 1996, at A19.
- “These forecasts are ceteris paribus—other things held constant.” Michael R. King, "The BoC’s Oil Price Strategy," Globe & Mail (Toronto), 25 May 2015, at B4. (A possible revision: These forecasts assume that other factors will remain constant.)

In English the phrase is pronounced /set-ə-ris par-ə-bəs/. Cf. mutatis mutandis. See sesquipedality.

Ceylonese. See Sri Lankan.

chad. As the world came to know in the protracted aftermath of the 2000 U.S. presidential election, chad is the debris left behind when computer data cards are punched. After emerging in the 1950s, the word was always a mass noun: a pile of thousands of them was called the chad (similar to chaff)—e.g.: “The problem with punch cards is hanging chad, or little bits of paper that cling to the ballot after being punched out, Clem said.” Michael Kaiser, "Canvassing Board to Consider Recount Request," Press J. (Vero Beach, Fla.), 7 Oct. 2000, at A5. See count nouns and mass nouns.

Until the Florida re-count controversy that followed the 2000 election, there was no need to address the tiny remnants individually. But when the little pieces of paper were individually examined, sometimes with magnifying glasses, chad suddenly became a singular count noun with a plural form (chads)—e.g.: “Dade elections supervisor David Leahy said a likely reason for the newly found votes were 'hanging chads'—the little paper squares that voters punch through to cast a vote.” Steve Bousquet, Phil Long & Lesley Clark, "As Florida Recounts, Bush Lead Shrinks to Less than 1,000 Votes," Miami Herald, 9 Nov. 2000, at A1. (Note the subject–verb agreement problem in reason . . . were. A suggested revision: David Leahy said the newly found votes probably resulted from “hanging chads” (etc.). See subject–verb agreement (b.).

chagrin, vb. See spelling (b).

chairman; chairwoman; *chairperson; chair. Sensitivity to sexism impels many writers to use chair rather than chairman, on the theory that doing so avoids gender bias. E.g.: “Jeanie Austin [is the] former national co-chair of the RNC.” Dan Balz, "Race for Top GOP Post Has Real Campaign Feel," Wash. Post, 16 Jan. 1997, at A4. Certainly chair is better than *chairperson, which is widely considered an ugly and trendy word.

Many readers and writers continue to believe, however, that there is nothing incongruous in having a female chairman, since man has historically been sexually colorless. Hence in 1967, chairman was paired with he or she: “The Lord Chancellor, following up his proposals about the retiring age for justices, has announced that no one may be elected chairman after he or she has reached the age of 70, though existing chairmen may continue.” R.M. Jackson, The Machinery of Justice in England 187 (5th ed. 1967).

In journalistic sources in the 1990s, chairman outnumbered *chairperson by a 100-to-1 margin. Even so, the consciously nonsexist forms are gaining ground and may well prevail within the next couple of decades. If we’re to have a substitute wording, we ought to ensure that chair and not *chairperson becomes the standard term—e.g.: “Mrs. Berman was instrumental in founding the Rhode Island State Nurses Association, District One, and served as chairperson [read chair] for the Tucks Scholarship Fund.” “Sara Ruth Berman” (obit.), Providence J.-Bull., 15 Jan. 1997, at C6. Some criticize this usage of chair as both ugly and absurd, arguing that a chair is a piece of furniture. In fact, though, chair is not a recent coinage, but a parliamentary term that dates to the mid-17th century.

One caveat: if we adopt a term such as chair, it must be used in reference to males and females alike. In recent years, there has been a lamentable tendency to have female chairs (or *chairpersons) and male chairmen. That is no better than having chairwomen and chairmen. After all, in most circumstances in which people lead committees, the sex of the leader is irrelevant. See sexism (c).

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1. *chairperson as a gender-neutral term: Stage 2
   Current ratio (chairman vs. *chairperson): 13:1
2. chair as a gender-neutral term: Stage 5
   Current ratio (chair of the committee vs. *chairperson of the committee): 4:1

chaise longue (/ʃeɪz ǀɒŋ/ or /ˈlɔːnw/), meaning “a couchlike chair,” forms the anglicized plural chaise longues—no longer *chaises longues. That has been true since the 1930s. See plurals (b).

Many people commit the embarrassing error of saying or writing *chaise lounge—e.g.: “Resin manufacturers are now trying to shatter their low-rent
stereotype with ambitious new designs like folding
dock chairs and chaise longues [read chaise longue] in
designer colors like hunter green.” Andrew Page,
"More than just Monoblock, Resin Furniture Moves
at LG32. The problem is that lounge, when put after
chaise, looks distinctly low-rent. See metathesis.

**Language-Change Index**

*chaise lounge for chaise longue: Stage 3
Current ratio (chaise longue vs. *chaise lounge): 1:4:1

**challenged.** On the use of this adjective to mean “dis-
abled” or “handicapped” <physically challenged>,
see euphemisms.

**chamois.** When referring to the leather, this word is
pronounced /sham-ee/. (It has the variant spellings
*chammy, *shammy, *shamois, and *shamoy.) But
when referring to the goatlike antelope, the word may
be pronounced either that way or /sham-wah/.

**chamomile** (= an odoriferous plant whose flowers are
used for making tea) is the standard spelling. *Cam-
omile* is a variant. Whatever the spelling, the word is
pronounced either /kam-ə-mil/ or /kam-ə-mel/.
Current ratio (chamomile vs. *camomile): 4:1

**champ; chomp.** The original term for what horses do
to their bits is champ. Chomp is an American variant.
The idiom *champing at the bit* evokes the image of
an impatient horse, especially one eager for a race to
start. In contemporary print sources, *champing at the
bit* predominates only in BrE; since the mid-1990s,
*chomping at the bit* has become preemptive in AmE.
Either phrase, though, must suggest a kind of friski-
ness that is absent in the following example: “Visitors
tie their horses and the animals peacefully
chomping at the bit.” “Forging a Career Around

Otherwise, the two verbs have undergone some
degree of differentiation. What one *champs* is not
actually eaten, but just bitten or gnawed, nervously. But
to *chomp* something is to take a bite out of it and usually
to consume it: in dialect, *chomp* is colloquially accom-
panied by the adverb down <chompin’ down catfish>.

**Language-Change Index**

*chomping at the bit for champing at the bit: Stage 5
Current ratio (chomping vs. champing at the bit): 15:1

**channel, vb.; *channelize.** Because no real differen-
tiation has developed between these terms, *chan-
nelize* ought to be branded a needless variant.
*Channel,* the usual term, means (1) “to form channels
in, to groove”; (2) “to guide”; or (3) “to act as a medium
through whom the dead (or absent) supposedly speak.”
It makes *channeled* and *channeling* in AmE, *channelled*
and *channelling* in BrE. See spelling (b).
Current ratio (channeled vs. *channelized): 15:1

**character assassination** (= defamation, esp. to create
public distrust), a phrase that gained prominence in
the mid-20th century, is sometimes rendered *caricu-
late assassination*, usually for comic effect—e.g.:
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At other times, though, the phrase is mangled
into a mondegree—e.g.: “[Tom] DeLay spokes-
man Jonathan Grella released a statement that
accused Democrats of ‘character assassination’ [read

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*character assassination* Chankah. See Hanukkah.

**chaotic.** See inchoate.

**chaperon** (= a person, esp. an elder, who accompanies
others, esp. youngsters, to ensure good conduct) was the
standard spelling from the 18th century to about 1950—
after the French etymon of the same spelling. *Chaper-
one* began as a variant form apparently misspelled as a
result of the (correct) long -o- in the final syllable. That
is, because the word is pronounced /shap-ə-rohn/ or
/shap-a-rohn/, some writers mistakenly added the
final vowel, and by 1970 that form was predominant
in both AmE and BrE print sources. Although most
dictionaries still list *chaperone* as only a secondary
variant, it is unquestionably now standard—e.g.:

- “When the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn., . . .
  announced a curfew and *chaperone* [read chaperon]
  policy for adolescents in September, teenagers seemed well
  on their way to becoming pariahs.” Ann Hulbert, “Politici-
  cians, Like, Really on Teens’ Case,” USA Today, 21 Nov.

- “A *chaperone* [read chaperon] (the word baby sitter was
discretely avoided) was hired to look after the children
on tour.” Ted Lambert, “Back to Experimental Theater and

In 2003, the lexicographers at Merriam-Webster
reversed the positions of *chaperon* and *chaperone*,
for the first time giving the variant form primacy in
their W11. The editors of NOAD soon followed suit.
And so what had once been a misspelling became
the established norm, aided and abetted by the not
entirely sonnifacient Broadway musical The Drowsy
Chaperone (2001).

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*chaperone* spelled as *chaperon*: Stage 5
Current ratio (chaperon vs. *chaperon): 3:1

**chaplaincy; *chaplainship.** Though common in the
18th century, the latter is now a needless variant.
Current ratio: 72:1

**character; reputation.** Very simply, the semantic distinc-
tion is that *character* is what one is, whereas *reputa-
tion* is what one is thought by others to be.

**character assassination** (= defamation, esp. to create
public distrust), a phrase that gained prominence in
the mid-20th century, is sometimes rendered *caricu-
late assassination*, usually for comic effect—e.g.:

- “I limited my comments to what I objected to the
most—the line drawing, which I referred to as ‘caricu-
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(For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

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*chartered plane for chartered plane: Stage 4

charge, n. & v.t. A. In the Sense "accusation." To write that someone has been accused of a charge is a redundancy. E.g.: "On May 1, Jackson, the former captain of the women's track team, and the other women went to the Navy Yard in Washington to testify at an Article 32 hearing, the military's version of a grand jury. That night, she was accused of a charge of her own [read she herself was accused or she herself was charged with an offense]." JoAnna Daemmrich, "Mid Charged with Lying," Baltimore Sun, 3 June 1996, at B1. See accuse.

B. Active and Passive Use. In charge of can have either an active or a passive sense—e.g.: • "The farmhand was in charge of the livestock." • "The livestock were in charge of the farmhand."

But the usual passive wording is in the charge of, which prevents any possible ambiguities. E.g.: "The truck was in charge of [read in the charge of] Mack Free, who was instructed not to permit any person to ride upon or drive it." To one not accustomed to in charge of in the passive construction, the subject and object appear to have been confused—the sentence seems to say that the truck had authority over Mack Free. One more example: "It had been the practice in Texas to assign a Pullman conductor to trains with two or more sleeping cars, while in trains with only one sleeping car that car was in charge of [read in the charge of] a porter."

chargeable. So spelled—not *chargable. See MUTE E.

charged d'affaires. Pl. chargés d'affaires. See PLURALS (b).

charivari; *shivaree; *chivaree; *charivaree. It's not customary now for friends and family to serenade a wedding couple with a boisterous clanging of kettles and blowing of horns. But when it does happen, the standard term for it is charivari (from French, deriving from medieval Latin caribaria "headache"). The others are variant forms. In English, the term is conventionally pronounced /shiv-ә-re/. Current ratio (for first three headwords): 21:3:1

charted. For the mistake of writing *uncharted territory instead of uncharted territory, see uncharted.

chartered plane, not *charter plane, is the traditional form. One specially hires an airplane, ship, bus, or the like by a contract known as a charter. Once the contract is in place, the means of conveyance has been chartered. During the 20th century, speakers and writers increasingly dropped the -ed, but this is neither the best nor the most frequent usage—e.g.: "Scott McInnis, a Colorado representative whose home district is larger than Florida, rides tiny charter [read chartered] planes between several far-flung stops." "Sallying Fourth," N.Y. Times, 29 June 1997, § 6, at 13.

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*charter plane for chartered plane: Stage 4

Current ratio (a chartered plane vs. *a charter plane): 2:1

chary (= cautious) is a formal word close in meaning to wary (and rhyming with it)—e.g.: "Indonesia, once chary of foreign investment, is now worried about losing out to China, Vietnam and other countries." Andrew Pollack, "Companies Rediscovering Indonesia," N.Y. Times, 6 Dec. 1994, at D1. The word sometimes implies "sparring, ungenerous" <chary of praise>.

chasm is pronounced /kaz-әm/.

chassis. Pl. chassis—preferably not *chassises.

chaste. A. And Gender. Chaste (= untainted by unlawful sexual intercourse; virtuous; sexually continent) is a word that applies to males and females alike. E.g.: "As a young and chaste boy, Yava said, he would often be called on to help construct the sand painting, lending the power of his purity." Barbara Yost, "Navajos Seek Answer with Help of Old Ways," Phoenix Gaz., 4 June 1993, at A2.

Unfortunately, however, a bias pervades the word's usual applications so that it typically refers to women and girls. E.g.: • "One view is that a fallen woman who has fully reformed is chaste, while another is that chastity before marriage means physical virginity—a woman can be seduced only once. There is nothing unchaste about marital intercourse and hence, under either view, a widow or divorcée may be an unmarried female of previously chaste character." Rollin M. Perkins & Ronald N. Boyce, Criminal Law 463–64 (3d ed. 1982).

• "President Jackson told the Cabinet that Peggy was 'chaste as a virgin,' to which Mr. Clay replied, 'Age cannot wither nor time stale her infinite virginity!'" "Speakers and Spleen," Courier-J. (Louisville), 7 Dec. 1994, at A10.

B. And celibate. There is also some confusion about the sense of chaste, as opposed to celibate. A person who is chaste is innocent of unlawful sex—that is, does not engage in sex with anyone other than the person's spouse. So in both secular law and church law, a person who frequently has sex, but only with his or her spouse, is chaste. By contrast, a person who is celibate (in the word's original sense and still the only definition in the OED) abstains from marrying—and sex, too, but only as a consequence of the choice not to marry. The times have passed that meaning by, and today this traditional sense is obsolescent at best. It may remain current with the vow of celibacy that Catholic priests make (i.e., a promise not to marry). But it is almost universally understood, even in that context, to mean "abstaining from sex"—e.g.: "His case underscores the growing debate within the church over whether there is a place in the priesthood for gay men, even celibate ones." Sacha Pfeiffer, "Crisis in the Church," Boston Globe, 25 Nov. 2002, at A1.
And while many word extensions result in the loss of a useful and unique term, here the shift in meaning of celibate has resulted in the creation of a term that has no good substitute—especially since chaste sounds archaic, carries outdated connotations about sex, and has drifted toward becoming gender-specific. It would be difficult, for example, to replace celibate in the example above gracefully.

chasten; chastise. These words are close in meaning, but distinct. Chasten = to discipline, restrain, punish, subdue. Chastise = (1) to punish, thrash; or (2) to castigate, criticize.

Chastise is so spelled; *chastize is incorrect but not uncommon. See -ize.

Current ratio (chastise vs. *chastize): 66:1

chauvinism. A. Generally. Traditionally, chauvinism (/ʃəʊ-vo-niz-əm/) refers to fanatical patriotism. The word’s eponym is Nicolas Chauvin, a French soldier who was ridiculed for being excessively devoted to Napoleon.

By metaphorical extension, the word has been broadened to denote exaggerated belief in the superiority of any group, class, or cause. Today male chauvinism, which (as a phrase, not a phenomenon) dates back to the late 1960s, is something of a cliché, being the word’s most frequent application—e.g.: “In 1999, the socialist-feminist magazine Mother Jones, hardly a bastion of male chauvinism, reported that ‘women report using violence in their relationships more often than men’ and ‘wives hit their husbands at least as often as husbands hit their wives.’” Stephen Baskerville, “A Tool Kit to Destroy Families,” Wash. Times, 9 Dec. 2001, at B5.

Indeed, some writers have come to use chauvinism as if it were synonymous with male chauvinism—e.g.:

- “Madonna says that her husband doesn’t like her wearing see-through tops and tells her not to look like a slapper. Instead of being affronted, she’s clearly delighted by his chauvinism.” Lynda Lee-Potter, “Brash, Brave and a Boost for the Feisty Over-Forties,” Daily Mail, 28 Nov. 2001, at 13.
- “Chauvinism remains in abundant supply in racing, but those who feel in their bones that a man will always outdrive a woman had a blow struck against their beliefs at the Shergar Cup here on Saturday when female riders beat three other teams composed of male stars from around the world.” Chris Cook, “Sammy Jo Bell Wins Two Shergar Cup Races and Lifts Ascot’s Silver Saddle,” Observer, 8 Aug. 2015, Sport §.

To the linguistic traditionalist, these uses (or misuses) are arrant nonsense. But others view the term as a handy, more pejorative alternative to sexism.

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chauvinism for male chauvinism: Stage 3

B. And jingoism. The void left by the shift in the meaning of chauvinism from national pride to supposed sexual superiority has been filled by jingoism. Essentially synonymous with chauvinism in its traditional sense, jingoism has added the layer of xenophobic and aggressive attitudes toward foreign policy—e.g.: “Gilmour goes overboard in trying to rationalize and justify Kipling’s racism and jingoism. He argues, for example, that ‘white’ in The White Man’s Burden does not refer to skin color but rather to ‘civilization and character’ and that Kipling’s imperialistic beliefs were essentially humane and benevolent rather than based on greed, paternalism and self-interest.” Earl L. Dachslager, “The Kipling Paradox,” Houston Chron., 23 June 2002, Zest §, at 19.

Sometimes the word takes on an even softer sense, suggesting a provincialism or regionalism that is broader than national sovereignty—e.g.: “The prime minister’s evident glee that the BA order had gone to a ‘European’ company is mere jingoism at bottom.” “New Labour, Old Corporatism,” Wall Street J. Europe, 27 Aug. 1998, at 6.

check. A. And cheque. Both denote a written order directing a bank to pay money to a specified person. The first, much older spelling is standard AmE. The second has been used by the British since the early 19th century. Still, the second spelling turns up occasionally in AmE.

B. Check in the amount of. Instead of this wordy phrasing <enclosed is a check for $75>, use check for <enclosed is a check for $75>.

ceroot /ʃə-root/ (= a cigar with square ends) is the standard spelling. *Sheroot is a little-used AmE variant.

cerub /cher-əb/. This word has two plurals—cherubs and cherubim—that have undergone differentiation. Cherubs, which is six times as common in modern print sources, applies when the reference is either to winged child-angels or to children with chubby red faces. Cherubim (a Hebrew plural) applies when the reference is to an entire order of angels. Cf. seraph. See Plurals (8).

The double plural *cherubims is erroneous—e.g.: “Among the items inside the tabernacle are reproductions of the golden lampstand . . . and the Ark of the Covenant topped by cherubims [read cherubim or cherubs].” Lori Van Ingen, “Mennonite Center’s Tabernacle Hasn’t Moved Since 1975,” Intelligencer-J. (Lancaster, Pa.), 13 July 2002, at B4.

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*cherubims for the plural cherubim or cherubs: Stage 1

chest of drawers, an old-fashioned equivalent of dresser or bureau, is sometimes mistakenly morphed...
into *chester drawers—e.g.: “[The following items were stolen:] snow blower, lawn mower, weed eater, table, chester [read chest of] drawers, three racks, love seat, couch, bike, value over $3,800, reported Monday.” “The Record,” Omaha World-Herald, 28 May 1993, at 12. This error has been characterized as “orthographically representing] a common pronunciation of chest of drawers.” Allison Burkette, “The Story of Chester Drawers,” 76 Am. Speech 139, 141 (2001).

In a similar vein, *Chip and Dale furniture can sometimes be found in classified ads.

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*chester drawers for chest of drawers: Stage 1
Current ratio (chest of drawers vs. *chester drawers): 595:1

**chicanery; chicane, n.** In contexts other than those involving horse racing, auto racing, and card games, the noun chicane is a Needless Variant of chicanery (= trickery). In modern publications, chicanery outnumbers chicane by a 3-to-1 margin—e.g.: “[T]he fake fireworks, fake singing, allegations of child labor in gymnastics, tape delays and whatever other chicanery, artificial ingredients and editing that have shaped impressions of the first week of the Made in China Games did not dent the ratings.” Phil Rosenthal, “Conventions Need Olympic-Style Splash,” Chicago Trib., 17 Aug. 2008, Bus. §, at 2.

As a verb, chicane can be useful (though it’s comparatively rare)—e.g.: “Ironically, this is also the age when children desire to belong to organizations whose primary function is to solicit, wheedle and chicane.” Tom Miller, “Don’t Kid Yourself—It’s the Attack of the Fund-Raising Urchins,” Seattle Times, 4 Dec. 1994, Sunday Punch §, at 6.

Chicanery is pronounced with a /sh/: (/shi-kay-nar-ee/)—not a /ch/.

**Chicano; Chicana.** See Hispanic.

**chide > chided > chided.** These are the preferred inflections today in AmE and BrE alike. *Chid is a variant past tense and past participle that was standard until the early 20th century. Like the variant past participle *chidden, it should be avoided. The gerund chiding acts as the noun <perhaps this chiding will have some effect>. With *chidance, Fred Rodell was surely punning on guidance: “But the thirty-year story of the Court under Holmesc’s chidance can best be told neither in strict chronological sequence nor in the specific records of specific Justices (other than Holmes).” Nine Men 191 (1955). See Irregular Verbs (b).

Current ratio (chided vs. *chid): 7:1
Current ratio (had chided vs. *had chidden): 21:1

**chief.** In AmE, the comparative chiefer and the superlative chiefest are archaic—the word chief being considered a noncomparable adjective. See Adjectives (b).

But the superlative form still occasionally appears in BrE—e.g.:

- “Chiefest of the blue-nose pubs is the Rosevale, partly owned by Rangers manager Walter Smith and run by Paul Burns.” Tom Shields, “Musical Walkers Take Refuge with Old Firm Rivals,” Herald (Glasgow), 7 July 1995, at 17.
- “It is doggedness, unglamorous persevering doggedness, which is the chiefest quality in winning county championships.” “Cricket: Kent Take Positive Option,” Sunday Telegraph, 18 Aug. 1996, at 8.
- “His principal targets are the clergy, and he is not afraid of the chiefest among them.” Anthony Cronin, “The Sunday Poem,” Sunday Independent, 22 Mar. 2015, at 22 (referring to the 16th-century poet John Skelton).

**Chief Justice of the United States.** Though usage has varied over time, this is now the generally preferred title—not *Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court or *Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

**chiffonnier (= a tall chest of drawers) is the standard spelling. *Chiffonnier is a variant. The word is pronounced /shif-ә-neer/.

Current ratio: 4:1

**childlike; childish.** Childlike connotes simplicity, innocence, and truthfulness <childlike faith>. Childish connotes puerility, peevishness, and silliness <childish sulking>.

Sometimes childish (the negative term) wrongly displaces childlike (the positive term)—e.g.:


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childish misused for childlike: Stage 2
Current ratio (childlike innocence vs. *childish innocence): 3:1

**children, the plural of child, makes the possessive form children’s.** The form *childrens* is erroneous—e.g.: “Clad in water-repellent gear, carrying umbrellas and pulling their childrens’ [read children’s] wagons, they streamed into the park.” Rob Kasper, “Spit Out Those Seeds of Doubt and Plant Watermelon Again,” Baltimore Sun, 2 June 2001, at D1. See Possessives (b).

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*childrens* for childrens: Stage 1
Current ratio (childrens vs. *childrens): 334:1

**child-slaying.** For the 19th-century adverb, see infanticide.

**chili** (= [1] a hot pepper; or [2] a spicy beef stew that, when prepared north of Texas’s Red River, often contains beans) is so spelled in AmE—chilli in BrE. Avoid chile, which is Spanish, not English.
The word is pronounced /ki-\nmeer-\n/. Current ratio: 7:1

B. Plural. The better plural is *chimeras*. The form *chimerae* is an affectation—e.g.: “Similarly grotesque creatures can be found in French furniture of the Francis I period (1483–1547), when *chimerae* [read *chimeras*], draped human figures, and stylized scrolls were popular motifs.” Page Talbott, “Allen and Brother, Philadelphia Furniture Makers,” *Mag. Antiques*, May 1996, at 716. See PLURALS (B).

Current ratio (*chimeras* vs. *chimerae*): 38:1

**chimpanzee** may be pronounced /chim-paanz-e/ or /chim-paanz-\neez/. The first of those pronunciations now predominates.

*chinchy.* See chintzy.

**Chinese**, n. Although everyone feels comfortable using *Chinese* as an adjective *<Chinese restaurants>* and as a COLLECTIVE NOUN *<the Chinese have rich cultural traditions>*, a sense of awkwardness arises when using it as a singular noun *<he's a Chinese>*. There is a tendency to prefer it as an adjective *<he is Chinese>*. The same tendency may be seen in other nationalities denoted with the -ese suffix (e.g., Burmese, Sudanese, Vietnamese).

Most dictionaries, however, define *Chinese* as a singular noun meaning “a native of China” or “a citizen of China.” And certainly the need occasionally arises to use *Chinese* as a singular noun *<he's a Chinese>*. But sensitivities understandably run high. On 30 August 2015, *The Wall Street Journal* tweeted a headline: “A Chink in His Armor? Xi Jinping Looks Vulnerable for the First Time.” Within moments it had been untweeted, yet indignant readers had preserved and retweeted it—furfuriously questioning the WSJ’s judgment. People wanted to know whether it was clueless or purposeful. Either conclusion is damning.

**chintzy** (= cheap, gaudy) is the standard spelling.

*Chinny* is a variant.

Current ratio: 72:1

**chipotle** (= a smoked jalape\-\no pepper used in cooking various dishes, esp. Mexican food) dates in English from the 1950s. Today it is often, through METATHESIS, misspelled *chiptole* and mispronounced that way as well—e.g.: “The smoky three sisters soup ($7.50) was chocked full of cannellini beans, squash and fresh corn and spiked with *chipotle* [read *chiptole*] and ginger.” Kathleen Allen, “A More Elegant Presidio,” *Ariz. Daily Star*, 11 May 2001, at F9. The word is also occasionally spelled *chiline*, which is the etymological spelling of the Nahuatl word (meaning “smoked chili”). But the established spelling in English is *chipotle*. The word is pronounced /chee-\nchip-o-tlay/ or /che/-.

**chikny** (= chink)*, the word set phrase is *chink in the armor*—often elaborated to *chink in [someone’s] armor*. But because the word *Chink* is also a racial slur against the Chinese (dating from the late 19th century), some have begun erroneously writing *kink in the armor*, the word *kink* suggesting an irregularity or imperfection. This unetymological shift in usage may gain acceptance in the end because of racial sensitivities, but it is not yet even close to being standard. E.g.:


**chinchy** (= a fissure or slit, as in armor) derives from the Middle English word *chine*, meaning “crack.” The
*chirodogy; *chiropodist. The first syllable of these words is preferably pronounced /kɪ/, not /chɪ/. But /shɪ/ is common and (barely) acceptable. The words are labeled “factitious” by the OED; are less common than their synonyms, *podiatry and *podiatrist; and ought to be avoided in most contexts.

chisel, vb., makes *chiseld and *chiseling in AmE, *chiselled and *chiselling in BrE. See spelling (b).

chitterlings (== cooked pig intestines) is the standard term. Despite its spelling, it’s pronounced /chit-linz/. As an almost inevitable result, the variant forms *chittingls and *chittlins have emerged. Cf. *victuals.

Current ratio (chitterlings vs. *chittlins vs. *chittingls): 32:20:1

chivalrous; chivalric. Chivalrous, always the more popular term, best applies to a person, chivalric to a quality or thing.

Chivalrous is the older term, dating from the 14th century. It describes a valiant knight or, later, a gracious man—e.g.: “At least Kutcher is a chivalrous hik ing partner. He carries the tape recorder. He offers to carry my bag.” Rachel Abramowitz, “A Career Buff…ing partner. He carries the tape recorder. He offers to carry my bag.”

Chivalric dates from shortly before 1800. It best means “of, relating to, or involving chivalry”—e.g.: “[H]e can discourse knowledgeably about rare editions and Old Master prints, work with a fine sensibility at his photographic studies, succor those less fortunate and comport himself with an almost chivalric courtesy.” Michael Dirda, “Trust No One in This Accomplished Victorian Suspense Novel,” Wash. Post, 1 Oct. 2006, Book §, at T15.

*chivaree; *charivaree. See charivari.

chlorophyll (the green pigment in plants) has been the standard spelling since the word became widespread in the early 20th century. *Chlorophyl is a variant.

Current ratio: 97:1

choate. See inchoate.

chocoholic (== someone who craves chocolate), a slang term dating from the late 1960s, is predominantly so spelled in all varieties of World English—not *chocalolic.

Current ratio: 19:1

chocolate (the sweet brown delicacy) is preferably pronounced /chawk-lit/ or /chawk-a-lit/. The two-syllable pronunciation (somewhat preferred) is the result of syncope, by which an internal syllable is collapsed.

chocolaty. So spelled in AmE, but chocolatey in BrE.

chomp. See champ.

choose between. See between (d).

choosy. So spelled—not *choosy.

chord; cord. Cord (== 1) string, rope; (2) a measure of wood equaling 128 cubic feet; (3) an electrical cable; or (4) a ribbed fabric) is different from chord, which is reserved for musical and geometric senses. When the reference is to the voice-producing organs—in which the anatomical part resembles a string or rope—*cord is the correct word. But writers frequently err—e.g.:

- “I’m crusading for alternatives to the current-traditional paradigm and will continue to do so until either my vocal chords [read cords], or my pen, or both, give out.” Donald C. Stewart, “Composition Textbooks and the Assault on Tradition,” in The Writing Teacher’s Sourcebook 180, 186 (Gary Tate & Edward P. Corbett eds., 1981).
- “In the coming months, you will stretch your muscles and vocal chords [read cords], study the origin of mankind and learn more about yourself.” Tad Bartimus, “A Warm Welcome, Students and Parents, to the Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship,” Seattle Times, 15 Sept. 2002, at L2.

And sometimes cord displaces chord in references to music—e.g.:

- “These statements struck a harsh cord [read chord] with me.” Al Hohl Evergreen, “Ratings Don’t Reflect a Radio Station’s Impact” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 14 Mar. 1996, at A47.
- “Though her first song was inspired by poetry that just came to her, Emma said most of the time she’s inspired by cords [read chords] or a melody.” Linda Murphy, “Westport Junior Composes Original Song for Contest,” Herald News (Fall River, Mass.), 14 Sept. 2014, at D1.

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1. chord misused for cord: Stage 3
Current ratio (vocal cords vs. *vocal chords): 4:1
2. cord misused for chord: Stage 1
Current ratio (strike a chord vs. *strike a cord): 25:1

choreograph, like orchestrate, has become a cliché when used figuratively. In the most jejune modern language, careers are choreographed and events are orchestrated. See orchestrate & Vogue words.

chrestomathy. This word, denoting an anthology of literary passages (especially those from one author), is best pronounced /kre-stɒm-a-theel/.

Christian, n., appears unfortunately in contexts in which it seems to be used synonymously with fundamentalist right-winger. A letter to the editor in The New York Times quite rightly objects: “I was disappointed to read a headline that began ‘As Christians Pull the G.O.P. to the Right’ (news article, June 27). Such broad-brush characterizations [are misleading]. . . . Liberals proud to be Christian include Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern, the Browns of California, Jimmy Carter, Mario Cuomo and the Rev. Jesse Jackson. Of course, it is also true that certain other Christians have heard their religious beliefs
chronology

Many writing problems—though described in various other ways—result primarily from disruptions in chronological order. In narrative presentations, of course, chronology is the essential organizer. The brain can more easily process the information when it’s presented in that order. So generally, the writer should try to work out the sequence of events and use sentences and paragraphs to let the story unfold.

Even at the sentence level, disruptions can occur. The following example comes from a handbook for band directors: “Improved intonation often results when students take up their instruments after singing their parts aloud once the director realizes that there are intonation problems.” This is in reverse chronological order. But the sentence can easily be recast: A director who detects intonation problems should try having the students put their instruments down and sing their parts aloud. Often, when they play again, their intonation will be improved.

Another elementary example: “Eight people died after being taken to a hospital, and 26 were killed instantaneously, the radio said.” “Crash Kills 34 from Aid Flight,” Las Vegas Rev.-J., 19 July 1995, at A10. (A possible revision: The radio report said that 26 were killed instantaneously and that 8 others died after being taken to the hospital.)

But consider the more subtle problem presented by a legal issue phrased (as lawyers generally do it) in one sentence:

Is an employee who makes a contract claim on the basis that her demotion and reduction in salary violate her alleged employment contract, and who makes a timely demand under the Attorney’s Fees in Wage Actions Act, disqualified from pursuing attorney’s fees under this statute without the court’s addressing the merits of her claim?

Now let’s date the items mentioned in that statement:


The dates (which no one would ever actually want in the sentence) show that the sentence is hopelessly out of order. We improve the story line by highlighting the chronology—and we make the issue instantly more understandable:

Lora Blanchard was hired by Kendall Co. as a senior analyst in October 1997. She worked in that position for eight months, but in June 1998 Kendall demoted her to the position of researcher. Two months later, she sued for breach of her employment contract and sought attorney’s fees. Is she entitled to those fees under the Attorney’s Fees in Wage Actions Act?

Of course, part of the improved story line comes from the enhanced concreteness that results from naming
the parties. But the main improvement is finding the story line.

Remember: chronology is the basis of all narrative.

**chrysalis.** Pl. chrysalises or chrysalides. Of these two, -ses is better because it retains the singular's spelling within it, and the pronunciation likewise reflects that of the uninflected noun. (Chrysalides is pronounced /kri-sal-i-deez/.) A third plural, *chrysalids*, should be avoided because it is formed from the noun *chrysalid*, a needless variant of *chrysalis*. See plurals (b).

**chutzpah** /huut-spә/, a Yiddishism dating from the late 19th century, did not gain widespread use until the 1960s and 1970s. It is a curious word, having both negative and positive connotations in AmE. On the one hand, some consider it unfavorable—e.g.: "Alan Dershowitz, the white knight of religious correctness, should have been a tad more judicious in his choice of a title for his book Chutzpah. Leo Rosten's book Hooray for Yiddish! defines chutzpah as 'ultra-brazenness, shamelessness, hard-to-believe effrontery, presumption or gall'—traits that many Jews and Gentiles would hardly classify as desirable." Letter of Chloë Ross, New York, 16 Dec. 1991, at 6.

On the other hand (and perhaps this says something about American culture), many consider chutzpah desirable—e.g.: "Team president Matt Millen approached Detroit management late in the week in hopes of landing coach Marty Mornhinweg a contract extension after the Lions went 2–14 last season. . . . Not only didn't Millen get what he came for, he was told that both he and Mornhinweg would have their positions evaluated at season's end. Ouch. But we do admire Millen's chutzpah," Sean Brennan, "Going Deep," Daily News (N.Y.), 9 Sept. 2002, at 12. W11 defines it first as "supreme self-confidence" but then unnerves us with "nerve, gall." The word sits uneasily on the fence that divides praise and scorn. The coinages with this suffix, naturally, are no more sex-neutral than words in any other corner of the language. The *OED* records uxoricide (= the slayer of one's wife) but not mariticide (= the slayer of one's husband), which can be deduced only from the adjective mariticial (= of, relating to, or involving someone who murders her husband).

Scientists have developed algicides, fungicides, germicides, and insecticides (known also as pesticides, though this word can be used more broadly than *insecticides*). And to disinfect their combs and other utensils, American barbers commonly use a trade-marked product ominously called "Barbicide." Hence this suffix, like -ee, is perhaps losing its literal force.

Naturally, wags have seized on this suffix for jocular purposes to make such words as suitorcidal (= fatal to suitors) and prenticecide (= the killing of an apprentice). The poet Oliver Wendell Holmes invented a word that some dictionaries label jocular. Perhaps, however, this word ought to be taken seriously: verbicide—"That is violent treatment of a word with fatal results to its legitimate meaning, which is its life. . . . Homicide and verbicide . . . are alike forbidden." Oliver W. Holmes [Sr.], *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* (1858). One mission of this dictionary is to prevent verbicide.

For entries related to this one, see homicide, paricide & suicide.

**cider.** See apple cider.

**cigarette;** *cigaret*. The latter is a needless variant. Current ratio: 493:1

**cinematographic;** *cinemagraphic*. In modern print sources, *cinematographic*, the traditionally correct form, is about 130 times as common as *cinemagraphic*, the etymologically inferior form. The latter arose through the linguistic process known as syncope—the loss of an unstressed syllable in the middle of a word. Though increasingly common even among filmmakers, *cinemagraphic* is not yet recorded in general dictionaries and ought to be avoided—e.g.:

One of the most famous government departments in all literature is Charles Dickens’s “Circumlocution Office” in *Little Dorrit* (1857–1858).

**B. And circuity.** *Circumlocution* is not the noun form corresponding to *circu-ous*, which means “winding, tortuous, anfractuous”—the noun for *circu-ous* being *circuity*. E.g.: “I bring this up because only now do I recognize the vast *circumlocution* [read *circuity*] of the route [that] I’ve been cheerfully driving for the past year, a path [that] was anything but a straight line, horizontally or vertically.” Jay Bailey, “Riding on the Disneyland Bypass Road,” *Jerusalem Post*, 6 Sept. 1996, at 10.

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*circumlocution* misused for *circuity*: Stage 1

**C. Adjectival Forms.** If the noun corresponding to *circu-ous* is seldom used, so is the adjective corresponding to *circumlocution*: *circumlocutory*. E.g.: “He’s impatient with compliments, *circumlocutory* in his answers and cheerfully forthcoming with amusing stories that, on reflection, tell you almost nothing about him.” Ken Ringle, “Fighting Words,” *Wash. Post*, 21 Aug. 1996, at D1.

Avoid the synonymous variants *circumlocutionary* and *circumlocutious*—e.g.:


- “It’s my contention that’s in no small part because Tonks, for all his *circumlocutionary* [read *circumlocutory*] council and committee speeches and media scrums, simply cannot get Metro’s message across.” Dick Chapman, “Metro’s Communications Gap,” *Toronto Sun*, 5 Nov. 1995, at C4.


**Language-Change Index**

*circumlocutionary* for *circumlocutory*: Stage 1

1. *circumlocutionary* for *circumlocutory*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (*circumlocutionary* vs. *circumlocutory*): 15:1

2. *circumlocutious* for *circumlocutory*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (*circumlocutionary* vs. *circumlocutious*): 10:1

**Circumlocution.** See be-verbs (b) & periphrasis.

**circumnavigate; circumvent.** *Circumnavigate (= to go completely around [something], esp. to sail around the earth)* is occasionally displaced by *circumvent (= [1] to get around [an obstacle or obligation], esp. by creative means; or [2] to encircle)—e.g.:

- “[Gus] McCloud is now attempting to *circumnavigate* [read *circumnavigate*] the world from pole to pole, [Albert] Rutherford said.” Damiane Ricks, “Pilot Hopes to

**Language-Change Index** *(For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)*

circumscribable


• "These two 50-somethings from Albuquerque were doing this section of the river as a prerequisite to their lifetime goal: to circumvent [read circumnavigate] the southern part of North America on water." Dave Menicucci, "Come Hell or High Water," Albuquerque J., 21 Aug. 2008, at C1. (An even better edit would be to change circumvent to sail around and omit on water.)

Circumnavigate implies active travel. When no act is involved, circumvent (in sense 2) is the better choice—e.g.: "Twenty billion [bottles] . . . . If all of them were laid end to end, they would circumvent the Earth's equator 76 times." Michele Jacklin, "Add Bottled Water to the List of Redeemables," Hartford Courant, 23 Mar. 2005, at A9. Both words involve a way to get around an obstacle. But the obstacle one circumnavigates is always physical, while the obstacle one circumvents is usually legal or social. See circumvent.

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circumvent misused for circumnavigate: Stage 1 Current ratio (circumnavigate the globe vs. *circumvent the globe): 62:1

circumscribable; *circumscriptable; *circumscriptible. The first form is standard. Until about 1950, the standard term was *circumscriptible—but the reversal in word frequency has been so pronounced since then that the older form has become a NEEDLESS VARIANT. See -ABLE (A).

circumstances. A. In or under the circumstances. Some writers prefer in the circumstances to under the circumstances. The latter is unobjectionable, however, and since 1830 or so has been much more common. E.g.: "Under the circumstances, we think that the board made the right decision."

In 1926, H.W. Fowler wrote that the insistence on in the circumstances as the only right form is "puerile" (FMEU1 at 77). In the mid-20th century, G.H. Vallins agreed: "'Under the circumstances' has established itself in English idiom; 'in the circumstances' is merely a proud variant of those who remember their 'grammar' not wisely but too well." G.H. Vallins, Better English 61–62 (4th ed. 1957). But Theodore M. Bernstein found a slight differentiation between the two: "In the circumstances refers merely to existing conditions, and implies a continuing state of affairs . . . . Under the circumstances refers to conditions that impel or inhibit action, and implies a transient situation, long or short." Theodore M. Bernstein, The Careful Writer 101 (1965).

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under the circumstances: Stage 5 B. *Surrounding circumstances. This phrase, which is about as common in BrE as it is in AmE, has been stigmatized as a REDUNDANCY on etymological grounds. The OED confirms this, noting that circumstance derives from the Latin circumstantia "standing around, surrounding condition." In AmE, it appears most commonly in legal contexts, though not exclusively so. It shows no signs of disappearing—e.g.:

• "The emotional and physical shock of giving birth, as well as other surrounding circumstances [read circumstances], led doctors to believe that Kraft was not responsible for stabbing her child." Heather Wiese, "From 'Attempted Murder' to Misdemeanor," Des Moines Register, 17 Oct. 1996, Metro Iowa §, at 4.

• "We try to distinguish saves by surrounding circumstances [read all the circumstances]. We include the size of the score, the length of time pitched, and the presumed difficulty of the situation." Leonard Koppett, "Call the 'Pen, Baseball, to Salvage Saves," Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 2 Aug. 2002, at C5.

C. In some circumstances. This phrase is wordy for sometimes. First popular in the 17th century, it waned in the 19th and then surged in the 20th—in both AmE and BrE. But that's no recommendation of it.

circumvent; undermine. Circumvent = (1) to get around or escape from (a requirement) through means that are unusual but defensible; or (2) to hem in; circumscribe. Today sense 1 is more common—e.g.:

• "By calling them sober houses they circumvent zoning regulations." Carole Paquette, "Reining in Rentals of 'Sober Houses,'" N.Y. Times, 8 Dec. 1996, Long Island §, at 1.

• "Senator Mark C. Montigny of New Bedford, who has fought against laws that allow public universities to circumvent the public bidding process, said the projects must be subject to strict oversight." Peter Schworm, "Work on Dorm Goes On Despite AG Ruling," Boston Globe, 20 Aug. 2008, at B3.

Circumvent is more neutral than undermine, which means "to impair or weaken, esp. by insidious or stealthy means" <the mole successfully undermined the political campaign>. Cf. obviate.

For the misuse of circumvent to mean circumnavigate, see circumnavigate.

cirrus (= [1] a light cloud shaped like feathers, or [2] a flexible appendage or tendril) makes the plural cirri—not *cirruses. See plurals (b).

citable. So spelled—not *citable. See mute e.

Current ratio: 40:1

cite, n. A. As a Casualism for citation. Using cite as a noun—in place of citation—is a CASUALISM. E.g.: "Check and double-check your cites . . . . We are constantly trying to make sense out of erroneous cites." Christopher P. Hamilton, "Trial Management," Mass. Lawyer, 16 Dec. 1996, at B5. The longer form looks more dignified and is much more common in print sources—e.g.: "‘Women in Archaeology’ is professionally produced, with a single bibliography and an index, in distinct contrast to 'Equity Issues,' which has multiple (and repetitive) reference lists, no index, and many typographical errors, misspellings (Virginia Wolf!), and incorrect citations.” Tracey Cullen, “Equity Issues for Women in Archeology,” Antiquity, 1 Dec. 1995, at 1042. Cf. quote.

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cite as a noun in place of citation: Stage 3 B. For site. Cite shouldn't be confused with site (= a location or place)—e.g.:


The opposite error—site for cite—is rarely seen outside legal writing (and almost always involves verbs). E.g.:

• “Nevertheless, the existence of mefloquine-resistant/3, bergheri and the two cited [read cited] cases of P. falciparum with decreased susceptibility are cause for genuine concern about the future deployment of this new drug.” John M. Mansfield, Parasitic Diseases 41 (1984).

• “More materially, the majority sites [read cites] no authority for its position that a decent law abiding citizen of this State can be criminally convicted based solely on one wobbly inference toddling upon another.” Frost v. State, 2 S.W.3d 625, 635 n.7 (Tex. App. 1999).


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1. cite misused for site: Stage 1
   Current ratio (building site vs. building cite): 1,285:1
2. site misused for cite: Stage 2
   Current ratio (citing authority vs. citing authority): 5:1

cite, v.t. A. General Senses and Use. Cite, v.t., = (1) to commend <the mayor cited him for his charitable giving>; (2) to adduce as authority <in arguing the point, he cited the 11th edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica>; or (3) to summon before a court of law <he was cited for contempt>.

In sense 2, the object of cite should be the authority cited, not the person to whom it is cited. The following loose usage is not uncommon in AmE: “Plaintiff is unable to cite the court to any Connecticut cases which [read cite any Connecticut cases that] answer this question.” “Property,” Conn. Law Trib., 1 Apr. 1996, at 374 (reporting a law case). See object-shuffling.

A related problem is using cite as an intransitive rather than as a transitive verb—that is, saying that the writer is *citing to a case* rather than *citing a case*. This looseness, common especially among lawyers, results perhaps from the noun form citation to—e.g.: “In addition, Thomson will make available to any interested party standardized licenses for a West service called Star Pagination, which is a widely accepted method for citing to [read citing] Federal and state case law.” “Thomson Acquisition of West Approved,” Information Today, 17 July 1996, at 3.

In sense 3, some people have recently begun writing that a person is cited to court. In this casualism, cite is shorthand for “to summon with a citation” and is surely inferior to summon—e.g.:

• “He claimed the hunters knew that their activities were illegal because almost 40 other hunters left before TWRA officers could cite [read summon] them to court.” Lance Coleman & Dan Cook, “Baited-Field Bust Bags 40+ Area Dove Hunters,” Chattanooga Free Press, 4 Sept. 1996, at B2.

• “A sheriff’s deputy charged a South Point woman and a Fort Gay, W.Va., man with possession of drugs (marijuana) and drug paraphernalia in Fayette Township and cited [read summoned] them into court last week.” “Man Reports Computer, iPod, DVDs, More Stolen,” Herald-Dispatch (Huntington, W. Va.), 31 Mar. 2012, at 1.

B. And quote. These words are usefully differentiated. To cite an authority is to give its substance and to indicate where it can be found. To quote is to repeat someone else’s exact words and to enclose them in quotation marks or block-quotation form. In scholarly writing, citations routinely follow quotations. See quote.

citizen. A. And resident. With U.S. citizens, the terms citizen and resident are generally viewed as being interchangeable in reference to state residency or citizenship. But the words are not interchangeable when other political entities (e.g., cities) are the frame of reference: citizen implies political allegiance and a corresponding protection by the state, whereas resident denotes merely that one lives in a certain place. It is possible to be a U.S. citizen while being neither a citizen nor a resident of any particular state. (That is, American citizens can reside abroad.) See citizenship.

B. And subject. Subject (= a person subject to political rule; any member of a state other than the sovereign) is not merely the BrE equivalent of the AmE citizen. A citizen is a person from a country in which sovereignty is believed or supposed to belong to the collective body of the people, whereas a subject is someone who owes allegiance to a sovereign monarch.

citizenship; citizens. Both are acceptable plurals of citizen, but citizenship is the more general term that is far more prevalent. Two aspects of citizenship distinguish it: first, it is a collective noun (although it frequently takes a plural verb), emphasizing the mass or body of citizens; and second, it is, as W2 notes, frequently used by way of contrast to soldiery, officialdom, or the intelligentsia. Here it is opposed to one part of officialdom (some might say intelligentsia): “The written Constitution lies at the core of American ‘civil religion’; not only judges but also the citizenship at large habitually invoke the Constitution.”

citizenship; residence; domicile. The distinctions between these related terms are important. Citizenship = the status of being a citizen, with its attendant rights and privileges. Residence = (1) the act or fact of living in a particular place for a time <a one-year residence requirement for in-state tuition>; (2) the locale in which one actually or officially lives <he has recently
made Nevada his residence; or (3) a house or home '<a two-story residence>'. (*Residency is a needless variant of residence in senses 1 and 2.) In some legal contexts, the more specific word domicile is frequently used in place of the broad sense 2 of residence. Domicile = a person’s fixed, permanent, and principal home for legal purposes.

cityward has always been the standard term in AmE—not *citywards (which was standard in BrE only through the early 20th century—but no longer). See directional words (A).

Current ratio: 3:1

civic rights. See civil rights.

civilian clothes; street clothes. The first should be reserved for military or paramilitary (e.g., police) contexts. When contrasting with sports uniforms or theater costumes, street clothes is better—e.g.:

- “Village police Chief Hugh Flanigan told The Star-Beacon in nearby Ashatabula that the unarmed man in civilian clothes [read street clothes] repeatedly tried to convince the Youngstown officer that he was a real lawman, but eventually drove away.” “Take Officer Tries to Pull Over Policeman,” Charleston Gaz. (W. Va.), 5 Aug. 2015, at A6.

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civilian clothes used in nonmilitary contexts: Stage 2

civil rights; civil liberties; civic rights. Commonly viewed as an Americanism, civil rights actually dates back to 16th-century BrE. After two centuries of sporadic use, it gained popularity again by 1750 in BrE and then sprang to worldwide attention in AmE in the 1770s. But the phrase reached its zenith in frequency of occurrence in the late 20th century, beginning in the 1960s. In AmE, the phrase refers generally to the individual rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights and by the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 19th Amendments, as well as by legislation such as the Voting Rights Act. These rights include freedom of speech and religion; the right to vote; freedom from involuntary servitude; the enjoyment of life, liberty, and property; the right to privacy; due process; and equal protection of the law. Some of these rights, such as the right to vote, are restricted to citizens; others, such as due process and equal protection, apply equally to anyone within the state’s jurisdiction.

The phrase civil liberties, a less frequent term, refers generally to the liberties guaranteed to everyone by law or custom against undue governmental interference. Civil rights is also sometimes used in this broader sense: “The subject was ‘civil rights,’ that is, the liberties of man as man and not primarily as an economic animal.” Robert G. McCloskey, American Supreme Court 170 (1960).

Civic rights is a much less common phrase. It sounds at once less weighty than the other two phrases and less idiomatic. When it appears, it often verges on being a needless variant of civil rights—e.g.:

- “Lincoln [was] unwilling to alienate a public opinion that everywhere in the North was implacably, savagely opposed to giving slaves movement or civic rights [read civil rights].” Alfred Kazin, “A Forever Amazing Writer,” N.Y. Times, 10 Dec. 1989, § 7, at 3.
- “The walk started June 1 with O’Neal, civic rights [read civil-rights] legend Bob Zellner, college and graduate students from out of state, and other civil activists.” “Thomasville Pastor Walks to D.C. to Support Rural Hospitals,” News & Record (Greensboro), 4 July 2015, News §.

-ck-. See -ck-.

clamor (= to cry out loudly; raise an uproar) is now sometimes, through word-swapping, misused for clamber (= to climb, usu. with great effort)—e.g.:

- “As they left the road to descend into Junior’s bottom-land, a three-legged, patch-haired dog of the terrier kind clamored [read clambered] out from under the porch and ran low to the ground and completely soundless on a trajectory straight to Inman, who had learned to heed a silent dog more than a barking dog.” Charles Frazier, Cold Mountain 202 (1997). (The error is especially salient in this sentence because the dog is “soundless.”)

- “When we returned to the house, we opened the large windows, let the ocean breeze roll in, and clamored [read clambered] up the oak staircases to bed.” Melissa A. Trainer, “Mobile Guide: Camping in Comfort,” Wall Street J., 2 Sept. 1997, at A16.

What’s the best way to stop this spreading error? Whenever you see or hear it, clamber up on a soapbox and clamor about it. By the way, the two words aren’t homophones: clamber is pronounced /klam-bәr/.

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cloadmor misused for clamber: Stage 1

clandestine is best pronounced /klan-des-tin/ or /-tan/, not /klan-des-tin/ or /klan-da-stìn/.

clangor (= a loud sound that continues for a long time) is the AmE spelling, clangour the BrE. (See -or; -our.) The word is preferably pronounced /klәng-gәr/—not /klәng-gәt/.

clapboard (= a long, narrow board that is thicker at the bottom so that it may be used for siding) is pronounced /klәb-әrd/.
It’s an English word that was borrowed from French and anglicized in Middle English. Some people today mistakenly give it a Frenchified pronunciation (/kla-
ret/ or, worse, /kla-ray/). Cf. Meritage.

clarinetist. So spelled in AmE, clarinetist being standard in BrE.

class is not interchangeable with kind or type. We may have a type or kind of thing, but a class of things. E.g.:

- “His work . . . [on] ionic crystals extended considerably our understanding of this class of material [read either this class of materials or this type of material],” Harvey Flower, “Professor Peter Pratt,” Independent, 17 Mar. 1995, at 20.
- “Traditionally, this criteria [read criterion] has revolved around the class [read type] of vehicle (e.g., sports car vs. family sedan; 8 cylinder vs. 4 cylinder), driver behavior (e.g., number of speeding tickets, the expected annual miles to be driven), and driver characteristics (e.g., age, gender): “ ‘System and Method for Insurance Underwriting and Rating’ in Patent Application Approval Process,” Insurance Business Weekly, 23 Aug. 2015, at 170. (See criterion.)

The second example just above illustrates travel jargon, in which class refers to the level of luxury.

class act. See classy.

CLASS DISTINCTIONS. Many linguistic phenomena discussed in this book—especially those involving vocabulary and pronunciation—are explainable partly under the heading of “class.” That is, many linguistic pratfalls can be seen as class indicators—even in a so-called classless society such as the United States. Several books and essays address the subject, including (most famously) Alan S.C. Ross’s essay “U and Non-U” in Noblesse Oblige (Nancy Mitford ed., 1956; repr. 1974); Charles C. Fries’s American English Grammar (1940); T.H. Pear’s English Social Differences (1955); Richard Buckle’s U and Non-U Revisited (1978); Thomas Pyles’s “The Auditory Mass Media and U” in Pyles, Selected Essays on English Usage 103 (John Algeo ed., 1979); and Paul Fussell’s Class (1983).

Professor Ross’s influential essay divided traits in England into U (upper-class) and non-U (not upper-class—meaning “vulgar” or sometimes “typical of social climbers who put on airs”). Among the linguistic markers he listed were the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U</th>
<th>Non-U</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>black tie</td>
<td>tuxedo, tux</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civilized (of a person) lunch</td>
<td>cultured, cultured dinner (midday meal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dinner, supper</td>
<td>evening meal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sick</td>
<td>ill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have a bath</td>
<td>bathe, take a bath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you do?</td>
<td>Pleased to meet you!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jam</td>
<td>preserves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vegetables</td>
<td>greens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rich</td>
<td>wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She's a nice woman</td>
<td>She's a nice lady</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He’s a nice man</td>
<td>He’s a nice gentleman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ross listed these items as an anthropologist might—not to prescribe what people should do but to describe the way in which speech and writing were class indicators in the England of the 1950s.

American etiquette books have contained similar lists, but with a prescriptive purpose. Emily Post’s Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage contained such a list for Americans (the headings having been supplied here merely for convenience):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U</th>
<th>Non-U</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would like to buy</td>
<td>I desire to purchase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I suppose</td>
<td>I presume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>big house</td>
<td>mansion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good food, delicious food</td>
<td>lovely food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beautiful house</td>
<td>elegant home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>formal clothes</td>
<td>formals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curtains</td>
<td>drapes, draperies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flowers</td>
<td>corsage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other writers have other lists, and other lines of demarcation. The American writer Paul Fussell, for example, puts “proles” on the bottom rung of the ladder: they unconsciously engage in poor usage such as double negatives (“I don’t have no butter”) and subject–verb disagreements (“He don’t have no butter”). Ross and Post are pretty well unconcerned about proles. In the middle, according to Fussell, is the insecure middle class, whose language is often inflated (see officialese & bureaucratese) and pretentious (see euphemisms, formal words & hypercorrection). At the top are the upper-middle and upper classes, whose language is typically relaxed and straightforward—a plainspoken style.

There is perhaps greater fluidity between classes with AmE speakers than with BrE speakers. But T.H. Pear’s observations about the process of changing classes in England apply equally to the United States: “As soon as members of the lower classes rise socially, they tend to adopt, and when ‘middle-middles’ become ‘upper-middles’ they, in their turn, drop, middle-class euphemisms; for unless they do, they may find their ascent of the social ladder hindered by people at both ends of it.” English Social Differences 90 (1955). Part of the rise, of course, depends on educational level, and to that degree the word prole corresponds with lowbrow; middle-class corresponds with middlebrow; and upper-middle-class and upper-class correspond with highbrow.

But taste as well as education enters the assessment, as Fussell observes, and speech is the telltale sign:

[“There is a tight system of social class in this country, and linguistic class lines are crossed only rarely and with great difficulty. A virtually bottomless social gulf opens between those who say “Have a nice day” and those who say, on the other hand, “Goodbye,” those who when introduced say “Pleased to meet you!” and those who say “How do you do?” There may be some passing intimacy between those who think momentarily means in a moment (airline captain over loudspeaker: “We’ll be
taking off momentarily, folks”) and those who know it means for a moment, but it won’t survive much strain. It’s like the tenuous relationship between people who conceive that type is an adjective (“She’s a very classy type person”) and people who know it’s only a noun or verb. The sad thing is that by the time one’s an adult, these stigmata are virtually unalterable and ineffaceable.


That conclusion—that class indicators are “unalterable and ineffaceable”—offers little hope for those who believe in education. The critical phrase, though, is by the time one’s an adult. Somebody who has shown no interest in language through early adulthood is unlikely to acquire the habit later. And to the extent that language reflects class, one’s class is pretty well set by the time one’s an adult

Most usage guides are silent on the subject of class. If they serve as useful guides, they typically reflect upper-middle-class preferences, as this book generally does. For that is the class into which most even modestly intellectual achievers fall, and the class to which the ambitious members of the middle class most aspire. The following charts list some of the obvious markers.

### Vocabulary Markers in AmE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>Non-U</th>
</tr>
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For still more mispronunciations, see Pronunciation (b).

**classic; classical.** *Classical* refers to anything relating to “the classics” (whether in Greek or Latin literature, English literature, or music); *classical* may also serve in this sense, although not in phrases such as *classical education* and *classical allusion*. *Classic,* an overused word, has the additional sense “outstandingly authoritative or important.”

The adverb *classically* can be ambiguous because it answers to both classic and classical.

**classy; class act.** These terms are distinctly déclassé: “I . . . instantly dismiss anyone who tells me that some other person ‘has class,’ ‘is classy,’ or ‘is a class act,’ the last of these being the most arrogant. What these speakers are telling you is that since they are among the few people who recognize class, it is their obligation to point it out to sorry-ass folk like you.” George Carlin, *Brain Droppings* 142 (1997).
claustral. See clostral.

clean, v.t.; cleanse. Clean is literal, cleanse usually figurative. Hence cleanse is often used in religious or moral contexts—e.g.:  

- “Subsequently, a traditional Navajo medicine man and a Hopi spiritual leader conducted a cleansing ceremony that returned the spirit of the student’s mother to its resting place.” Norrine Dresser, “Remaining Safe from the Remains,” L.A. Times, 20 Apr. 1996, at B7.
- “Wells has also delved into such exotic religions as voodoo and Santeria, even attending ceremonies where he was rubbed with chickens to cleanse him of evil spirits.” Mark Mooney, “Medical Examiner Steps into a Harsh Limelight,” Daily News (N.Y.), 22 July 1996, at 4.
- “Online, meanwhile, authorities struggled to cleanse a raging conversation that attacked the official response and the system that had allowed such a disaster to happen.” Nathan Vanderklippe, “Rage Against Leaders Builds in Wake of Tianjin Blast,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 17 Aug. 2015, at A1.

Marketers and advertisers no doubt understand the subtle distinction between clean and pure in promising shampoo that “cleanses your hair” and in naming toilet-bowl cleaners cleaners. So do propagandists in euphemizing mass slaughter and banishment as “ethnic cleansing.”

cleanliness; cleanliness. Cleanliness (the more frequently used word) refers to people and their habits, cleanliness to things and places.

cleanly. This word can be either an adverb or an adjective. Most commonly, it functions as an adverb meaning “in a clean manner”—e.g.:  

- “Even when it hits off-center (as it does this month) instead of cleanly, the moon manages a total eclipse.” Bob Berman, “Earthly Shadows,” Discover, Sept. 1996, at 35.

In this sense, the word is pronounced /kleen/-lee/.  

But sometimes cleanly functions as an adjective—and is pronounced /kleen/-lee/*—in a sense corresponding to the noun cleanliness. It means either (1) “(of a person) habitually clean”; or (2) “(of a place) habitually kept clean.” In sense 2, a simple clean is surely preferable. In the first and second examples that follow, sense 1 applies. In the third, sense 2 applies:  

- “Owing to the leaning and handling of dirty persons, tobacco-spitting, the deposit of broken fruit and waste of all sorts of eatables, and other filthy practices voluntary or otherwise, the summer houses, seats, balustrades, balconies of the bridges are frequently forbidding to cleanly persons, who are thus deprived of what they deem their rights upon the Park.” Elizabeth Barlow, “Rebuilding the Olmsted,” N.Y. Times, 9 May 1981, § 1, at 23 (quoting Frederick Law Olmsted, one of Central Park’s designers and its original administrator, from a writing dated 1860).
- “Our whole approach to quality assurance is not cracking the whip but to point out why things like dusting the pictures, a cleanly [read clean] room, are important,” [Ray] Sawyer said.” Timothy N. Troy, “Budget Host Cultivates Quality,” Hotel & Motel Mgmt., 15 Aug. 1994, at 3.

Note that the first example is antique and that the second and third examples occur in reported speech. Today cleanly is more common in speech than in writing.

cleaness. See cleanliness.

cleanse. See clean.

clearly. Exaggerators like this word, along with its cousins (obviously, undeniably, undoubtedly, and the like). Often a statement prefaced with one of these words is conclusory, and sometimes even exceedingly dubious. As a result—though some readers don’t consciously realize it—clearly and its ilk are weasel words. Just how much clearly can weaken a statement is evident in the following example, in which the author uses the word to buttress a claim about his own state of mind: “Clearly, I am not to be convinced that this is a small matter.” Stephen White, The Written Word 3 (1984). See overstatement, sentence adverbs & very. Cf. obviously.

cleave, v.t. = (1) to divide or separate, split; or (2) to adhere to firmly. In other words, it has opposite meanings. (See contronyms.) In sense 1, cleft yields the past tense cleft (or, less good, clove) and the past participle cleft (or, again less good, cleaved). The past-participial adjective is cleften. Hence: “He cleft the Devil’s cloven hoof with a cleaver.” In sense 2, the verb is infeformed cleave > cleaved > cleaved. Hence: “Antoinette’s tongue cleaved to the roof of her mouth, and she said nothing.” Wayne Thomas Batson, The Final Storm 279 (2006).

The COD sanctions, for BrE usage, cleave > clove > cleften for all senses, though cleft is used adjectively in set phrases such as cleft palate and cleft stick. Luckily, the term is literary, so that generally only literary scholars must trouble themselves with these inflections. See irregular verbs.

The past form *clefted is an infrequent solecism—e.g.:  

- “He doesn’t quite nail the subtleties of Ian’s inner conflicts, but he’s got a fascinating-looking face, with a hugely
clench. See clinch.

cliché, n. & adj.; clichéd, adj. As a noun, cliché was borrowed from French in the mid-19th century to denote a printer’s stereotype block (= a metal printing plate that is stamped or cast from a mold). The process was used to send ads, illustrations, and other matter to be printed, especially in multiple publications. By the end of the 1800s, cliché and stereotype were both being used figuratively, the first for a saying grown trite from overuse, the second for an oversimplified generalization.

Clichéd and cliché are both used as adjectives corresponding to cliché and meaning “trite” or “stale.” Both are 20th-century coinages: the OED dates clichéd from 1928, cliché from 1959. And both have their detractors.

Clichéd is spelled like a regular English verb’s past participle, although it does not correspond to any such verb. But probably because past participles often serve as adjectives, clichéd sounds comfortable to English ears.

In French, cliché is participial in form (analogous to distingué, outré, and passé), answering to the verb clichier (= to click). So while clichéd sounds like an English participial adjective but traditionally isn’t one, cliché is a participle in fact—just not in English. And clichéd might be called a double past participle.

Yet both forms are well established in English as adjectives. And the cliché spelling is becoming more popular all the time.

Language-Change Index
1. cliché as an adjective: Stage 5
2. clichéd as an adjective: Stage 3

Current ratio (clichéd image vs. cliché image): 4:1

Clichés. Writing pundits frequently warn against clichés:

• “The purpose with which these phrases are introduced is for the most part that of giving a fillip to a passage that might be humdrum without them; they do serve this purpose with some readers—the less discerning—though with the other kind they more effectually disserve it.” H.W. Fowler, FMEU1 at 224.

• “Modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words [that] have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug.” George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in Modern Essays on Writing and Style 98, 103–04 (Paul C. Wermuth ed., 1964).

• “Don’t use [clichés] unwittingly. But they can be effective. There are two kinds: (1) the rhetorical—tried and true, the not too distant future, sadder but wiser, in the style to which she had become accustomed; (2) the proverbial—apple of his eye, skin of your teeth, sharp as a tack, quick as a flash, twinkling of an eye. The rhetorical ones are clinched by sound alone; the proverbial are metaphors caught in the popular fancy. Proverbial clichés can lighten a dull passage. You may even revitalize them because they are frequently dead metaphors . . . . Avoid the rhetorical clichés unless you turn them to your advantage: tried and untrue, gladder and wiser, a future not too distant.” Sheridan Baker, The Practical Stylist 243–44 (8th ed. 1998).

As Baker suggests, you’ll sometimes need clichés. They’re occasionally just the ticket, but only when no other phrase fills the bill. Despite that standard, you’ll find more clichés in modern writing than you can shake a stick at. Some common ones are these:

at the end of the day
blissful ignorance
but that’s another story
comparing apples and oranges
conspicuous by its absence
crystal clear
far be it from me
fast and loose
get with the program
his own worst enemy
if you catch my drift
innocent bystander
moment of truth
more in sorrow than in anger
more sinned against than sinning
my better half
nip in the bud
on the same page
pulled no punches
sea change
six of one, half a dozen of the other
throw the baby out with the bathwater
viable alternative

In deciding whether to use a cliché, consider the following approaches.

First, you might occasionally pun with the final word of a cliché to arrive at a new kind of memorable truth: a drink might be conspicuous by its absinthe; a dirt-talking disc jockey might be his own worst enema; a farmer might tend to his better calf; bankruptcy is sometimes a fate worse than debt. But if you’re going
to play with a cliché, it should usually be with a pun: don't simply change one word to arrive at the same meaning. That is, don't write more in sorrow than in outrage or comparing apples and pomegranates. And don't twist the cliché out of shape or extend it and think it becomes fresh again, as one newscaster read from her script about an official's resignation: *It was the ultimate straw that broke the conscience of everyone's back.*

Second, when a cliché suggests itself, you would do well to follow these guidelines: use it only if (1) you work to replace it but can't find a good substitute, and (2) it doesn't strike your ear as being stale. Cf. set phrases.

For more on the subject, see Robert Hartwell Fiske, The Dimwit's Dictionary: 5,000 Overused Words and Phrases and Alternatives to Them (2002); Christine Ammer, Have a Nice Day—No Problem! (1992); Walter Redfern, Clichés and Coinages (1989); Peggy Rosenthal & George Dardess, Every Cliché in the Book (1987); Eric Partridge, A Dictionary of Clichés (1940; repr. 1963).

client. A. And customer. By definition, a client is someone who engages the services of a professional, whereas a customer gives custom or trade to a business, often with regularity. An accountant or a lawyer has clients; a grocery store or telephone company has customers.

Yet the line of demarcation between these two words has shifted considerably in recent years. By the 1980s, Massachusetts bureaucrats had begun calling welfare recipients their “clients.” See Jon Keller, “Massachusetts’s Strange Protest Vote,” Wall Street J., 20 Sept. 1990, at A14. By the 1990s, things had gotten worse. For example, the Sunday Times writes of two prostitutes: “Both women took clients to their flats.” John Davison & Michael Durham, “Prostitutes Go in Bites,” Sunday Times (London), 18 Aug. 1991, § 1, at 5.

The bad trend continues(e.g.):

- “Yesterday’s manslaughter conviction marks the first time in Norfolk County history that a drug dealer has been held accountable for contributing to a client’s [read customer’s] death,” Dave Wedge, “Man Jailed for Supplying Fatal Drug Dose,” Boston Herald, 28 June 2002, News §, at 28.

B. Plural Form: clients; clientele; *clientage; *clientelage; *clientry. Clients is the best choice because it is the least pretentious and by far the most common. Clientele has degenerated somewhat in meaning, having been widely used in nonprofessional contexts. E.g.: “Ella B. Sunshine operated a thriving business as a custom dressmaker for an exclusive clientele in Greater Cleveland for 25 years.” “Ella B. Sunshine, 99, Custom Dressmaker” (obit.), Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 27 Jan. 1995, at B11. Indeed, the profession for which clientele is perhaps most often used today is the oldest one—e.g.: “Police said the alleged sex-for-sale operation used Asian prostitutes and served an exclusively Asian clientele.” Peyton Whitely, “Global Links Sought in Alleged Sex Ring,” Seattle Times, 1 Feb. 1995, at B3.

*Clientage, *clientelage, and *clientry are needless variants of clientele.

Current ratio (in order of headwords in (b)): 230,399:11,202:398:4:1

climactic; climacteric; climatic. Until the mid-20th century, climactic (/ˈkli-mə-tɪk/) was thought to be inferior to climacteric (/ˈkli-mæk-tə-rɪk/). But by the early 1950s, the shorter word had eclipsed the longer variant as the adjective corresponding to climax—e.g.:

- “As the band breaks at the climax, out of the sudden silence Curtis Fowlkes bursts into a solo even more climactic.” Robert Bourne, “Goin’ to ‘Kansas City,’” Down-Beat, Mar. 1996, at 22.
- “In the climactic trial, Roxie beats the rap, only to be abandoned by reporters rushing on to the next case.” Richard Zoglin, “ ‘That Old Razzle-Dazzle,’” Time, 25 Nov. 1996, at 102.

Having fallen into disuse as a needless variant of climactic, climacteric is now to be avoided in this sense. It lives on as a rare scientific term: a climacteric fruit is one that can be picked unripe and then induced to ripen in the presence of a hormone-bearing ethylene gas that the fruit itself produces. Apples are climacteric fruits and can be forced to ripen (or even spoil) in a paper bag.

But climacteric also has legitimate uses as a noun: (1) “an epochal event or critical turning point”; (2) “menopause, or the male phase corresponding to menopause”; or (3) “years of human life marked by multiplying by 7 the odd numbers 3, 5, 7, and 9, the resulting periods occurring at ages 21, 35, 49, 63—some add 81.” In sense 3, the ages 63 and 81 are both called the grand climacteric.

Climatic (/ˈkli-mæ-tɪk/) is the adjective corresponding to climate—e.g.: “Long-term weather forecasts, which have been feeding the corn price frenzy, are seen by some as ominous because they include certain climatic events associated with droughts in the recent past.” John Schnittker, “Thought for Food,” Wash. Post, 1 May 1996, at A19.

Occasionally, though, climatic becomes a malapropism for climactic. This error became widespread in print sources only in the late 20th century—e.g.:
• “In a climactic [read climactic] finish to more than four hours of questioning, prosecutor Chris Darden asked Lopez if she had told her friend Sylvia Guerra that she was going to be paid $5,000 for her testimony,” William Carlsen, "Prosecutor Raises Possibility of Bribe in Alibi for O.J.," S.F. Chron., 3 Mar. 1995, at A1.


• “But others are like rocks . . . that plopped into the narrative so loudly that subsequent revelations become anti-climactic [read anticlimactic].” Nancy Pate, “Quindlen Delivers Some Pleasures,” Orlando Sentinel, 17 Sept. 2002, at E1.

See anticlimactic.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. climactic as an equivalent of climacteric: Stage 5
2. climatic misused for climactic: Stage 1

Current ratio (anticlimactic vs. *anticlimactic): 28:1

climb. A. Declension: climb > climbed > climbed. The past-tense *clumb or *climbed and the past-participial *clumb are dialectal. They sometimes occur in reported speech, especially *clumb—e.g.:

• “In 'The Busher Pulls a Mays,' Keeffe writes to 'Friend Al' that 'the way we been going you would think we clumb in to 1st.'” Jerry Klinkowitz, “Let the Games Begin,” Chicago Trib., 23 Apr. 1995, at C1.

• “Mr. Wimerly, who's 73, says he hasn't 'clumb a tree' and used a cane pole since his 40s.” Nancy Kruh, “The Path to Pecan Pie,” Dallas Morning News, 23 Nov. 1995, at C1.

• “Like Lt. Zebulon Pike said when he discovered it in 1806, 'I seen it and I clumb it, it: we clumb it too, and thrilled to a midsummer snowball fight.'” Larry Alexander, “Little Monsters' Head West,” Intelligencer J. (Lancaster, Pa.), 25 July 2001, at 1.

See irregular verbs (d).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*climb for climbed: Stage 1

Current ratio (climbed vs. *climb): 2,969:1

B. Climb down. Although some purists have branded this phrasing illogical, in fact it is perfectly idiomatic—and certainly more natural-sounding than descend. E.g.: “When he [Esteban Toledo] was 8, he used to hide in the trees on the golf course in Mexicali. He would climb down, fish golf balls out of a pond with his toes, then clean the balls and sell them back to the golfers at the country club.” Thomas Bonk, “Behind the Ball,” L.A. Times, 7 Dec. 1996, at C1. This phrasing became widespread beginning about 1850.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
climb down: Stage 5

clinched. These words are historically identical: one word with two spellings. But by 1900 they had undergone differentiation, and they are now distinct words. Clinch is figurative, and clench physical. Hence you clinch an argument, case, or debate, but you clench your jaw, or your teeth, or your fists—e.g.:


• “Janet clench'd her teeth together, the way she did when Lynnanne was being snide, and took a step forward.” Patricia C. Wrede, “The Lorelei,” in Book of Enchantments 128, 143 (1996).

• “The lightning was in Rose's eyes, and her hands sparked as she clench'd them.” Ursula K. Le Guin, Tales from Earthsea 129 (2001).

Although clench is traditionally transitive, it is occasionally used in intransitive constructions to good effect—e.g.: “Her stomach clench'd in fear.” Kathy Lynn Emerson, Face Down Under the Wych Elm 8 (2000).

The exceptions to the clinch–clench distinction occur in boxing, carpentry, and metalworking: clutching one's opponent in boxing is clinching, and fastening something with a screw or a rivet is likewise clinching. Apart from these specialized meanings, clinch should be reserved for nonphysical contexts. Here it is used ill- advisedly: “After their speeches, Mr. Bentsen and Mr. Clinton clinched [read clench'd] hands together with Gov. Ann Richards on the stage of the party's state convention as 'Deep in the Heart of Texas' played over the loudspeakers.” Sam Attlesly & Wayne Slater, “Bentsen Strongly Endorses Clinton,” Dallas Morning News, 6 June 1992, at A1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
clinched misused for clench: Stage 1

Current ratio (clenched fists vs. *clenched fists): 16:1

cling > clung > clung. So inflected—as it has been since the verb first appeared in Old English more than a thousand years ago. Cling to the strong past forms, despite the pitiable shift toward weakening them. It doesn't matter whether the usage is literal or (as in the first and third examples below) metaphorical—e.g.:

• “They were characterized by maudlin string arrangements and the cries of pedal steel guitars that clanged [read clung] to the pain in her voice.” Dave Hoekstra, “Country's Queen: Wynette's Voice Carried Pain, Soul,” Chicago Sun-Times, 8 Apr. 1998, at 52.


See irregular verbs.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*clung for clung as a past tense: Stage 1

Current ratio (he clung vs. *he clanged): 19,030:1

clique (= a small group of people who keep to themselves and treat others as outsiders) is pronounced either /kleek/ or /klık/ (the former being the preference of most cultivated speakers). The corresponding adjective is cliquish (/kleek-ish/ or /klık-ish/), meaning "snobbishly confining one's interests to a small in-group." E.g.: "Jews and homosexuals appear in
the hater’s mind as small, *cliquish* and very powerful groups, antipathetic to majority values.” Andrew Sullivan, “When Plagues End,” *N. Y. Times*, 10 Nov. 1996, § 6, at 52. *Cliquey (sometimes also spelled *cliquy)* is a needlessly variant.

Current ratio (cliquish vs. *cliquey vs. *cliquy): 131:78:1

citoridectomy; *clitorectomy. Citoridectomy* is the traditional and predominant spelling of the term denoting the surgical removal of part or all of the clitoris. It appears more than ten times as often as *clitorectomy, which was virtually unknown before the mid-20th century.

cloris is traditionally and preferably pronounced /clit-ə-ris/, though /cli-tor-is/ is listed as an alternative pronunciation in most current dictionaries. The corresponding adjective is clitoral (/kli-tor-əl/) — preferably not *clitoric.

Current ratio (clitoral vs. *clitoric): 1,238:1

clostral; claustral. *Clostral* is the preferred adjective answering to the noun cloister in the literal sense. That is, clostral typically refers to spatial confines — e.g.:

• “From this clostral complex, with its neo-Gothic clock tower, grassy quadrangles and vaulting archways painted primrose yellow, Maharishi, speakerphone at hand, is supervising what he believes to be the salvation of the human race.” David Friend, “The Return of Mister Bliss,” *Life*, Nov. 1990, at 82.

• “Another home, Casa Prieto López, is larger than the architect’s own house, more monumental, and is set amid clostral walled gardens for which enchanted is no empty adjective.” Guy Trebay, “Elaborate, Multicolored Altars of Mexico City,” *Int’l N.Y. Times*, 14 June 2014, at 23.

*Clastral* is a Latinate equivalent that is best confined to the metaphorical sense “isolated from the world” — e.g.: “Bosworth’s account does have its share of booze, pills, closeted homosexuality and suicide, but instead of a dark and clastral world of furtive incest, hers is a story told against the broad landscape of mid-20th-century American politics.” *L. A. Times*, 11 May 1997, Book Rev. §, at 9.

*Climb. See climb (A).

Closable. So spelled (traditionally) in AmE and BrE alike — not *closeable* (a spelling that has inexplicably surged in recent years). See Mute e.

Current ratio: 1:1

Close proximity is a redundancy that sprang to popularity in the late 19th century and has not receded.


In AmE, *cloture* is standard in but one narrow sense: “the procedure of ending debate in a legislative body and calling for an immediate vote.” E.g.: “In one Congress in which he was Senate majority leader, the minority leader, Robert Byrd, tried eight times to win cloture and break a Republican filibuster on campaign finance reform.” “A Promise of Reform,” *Wash. Post*, 22 Oct. 1996, at A18. *Closure* is usual in BrE in this parliamentary sense.

clothes is pronounced /klohz/. To pronounce the -th- is to engage in hypercorrection.

clozure. See closure.

clove; cloven. See cleave.

Clubbable (= fit for membership in a club) is the standard spelling. *Clubable* is a variant that vied for supremacy throughout the 19th century and early 20th but had clearly lost by 1950.

Current ratio: 4:1

clue; cluwing. So spelled (traditionally) in AmE and BrE alike — not *clueing* (which, like *closeable, has mysteriously swelled in popularity since about 1980). See Mute e.

*climb. See climb (A).

c/o. This abbreviation for *in care of* has legitimate uses and odd misuses. If Vicki Jackson of Los Angeles is visiting Bob Lindsay, one of her bankers in Dallas, and someone has sent a package to her in Dallas for midday delivery, then the address should probably read: “To Vicki Jackson, c/o Bob Lindsay, InterSecure Bank.” That way, if the receptionist doesn’t know who

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxix, 1-ll)

**Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but... **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but... **Stage 5:** Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
Vicki Jackson is, at least the package will be drawn to Bob Lindsay’s attention.

But there are also nonsensical uses. For example, a letter to Bob Lindsay shouldn’t be addressed to “Inter-Secure Bank, c/o Bob Lindsay.” The address should be simply to “Bob Lindsay, InterSecure Bank.”

co-. A. Hyphenation with. Generally, this prefix—which means “together with” or “joint”—does not take a hyphen (e.g., coauthor, cohost, cosponsor). The hyphen should appear only when the unhyphenated form might lead the reader to mistake the syllables (e.g., co-occurrence, co-organizer) or when the writer thinks that a word is a new form or neologism (e.g., co-golfer, co-secretary). See punctuation (f).

B. Attaching to Noun Phrase. This creates an awkward construction but is sometimes almost inevitable, as in copersonal trainer. Some writers and editors would make this co-personal trainer, which is hardly an improvement. Yet the hyphen is necessary because co- modifies the two-word phrase personal trainer, not just personal. The best solution is simply to avoid the choice altogether, as by writing fellow personal trainer.

C. When Unnecessary. The co- prefix can be distracting (some people find it impossible to read coworker without thinking cow, for example), and it’s usually best to leave it off when it adds nothing to the meaning of the sentence. It is always redundant in some words (copartner) and often redundant in others (co-conspirator). And when the meaning is plain from the context, the co- prefix is unnecessary and prime for editing—e.g.: “For seven years, the restaurant operated in Belmont—until a recent hefty rent increase chased its coowners [read owners], Susan Alper and Lauren Speisman, out of that location.” “Small Bites,” Boston Globe, 4 July 2002, Globe West $, at 5.

course, adj. The word course (= [1] inferior in quality, or [2] unrefined, rude, and vulgar) is sometimes misspelled course (through confusion with the noun, of course). It’s a vulgar, unrefined instance of word-swapping—e.g.: “Never use course [read coarse] sandpaper! The grit imbeds itself in the contact metal.” Vaughn D. Martin, “Troubleshooting for Boaters,” Electronics Now, 1 June 1996, at 41.


“Since it was developed last spring, ‘Action’ has raised eyebrows among insiders for its course [read course] language and references to sex.” Richard Huff, “‘Action’ Up for Tough Rating,” Daily News (N.Y.), 22 July 1999, at 104.

Originally, it is true, coarse and course were the same word. But the difference in spelling and in meaning emerged in the 18th century, and the words have long since gone their separate ways.

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course misused for coarse: Stage 1

coauteur, vb. See author, v.t. (A).

covalent (= sharing an axis) <coaxial cable> is the standard spelling. *Coaxial is a variant.

Current ratio: 194:1

cockscomb; coxcomb. A cockscomb is the fleshy red growth on a rooster’s head. A coxcomb is either a hat resembling a cockscomb (formerly worn by jesters) or a foolishly conceited dandy or fop. Both terms are pronounced /koks-kohm/. The figurative coxcomb has always been the more frequently used term in Modern English. Its corresponding noun, coxcomy, means “foppery.”

cockswain. See coxswain.

cocoa; cacao. Cacao is a brown chocolate powder or a drink made from this powder. Cacao is the tree or the seeds that are the source of cocoa powder. Cocoa butter and cacao bean are the standard terms—not *cacao butter and *cacao bean.

co-conspirator. See conspirator & co-.

coconut is sometimes spelled *cocoanut (which was actually the standard spelling up to about 1920)—e.g.: “The bar offers . . . appetizers, salads, sandwiches and pizza, including spicy cocoanut [read coconut] calamaris and sashimi.” Susan F. Yim, “Mau, Hawaii,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 16 Feb. 1997, at G8. Unless you’re writing a historical novel, stick to coconut.

Current ratio: 7:1

code (= [1] a collection of rules <penal code>; [2] a system of symbolic communication <Morse code>; [3] a system of encryption <The Da Vinci Code>; or [4] computer programming <machine code>) can be a mass or a count noun. A mass mailing, for example, might target specific ZIP codes—there, code is a plural count noun. But in sense 4, code is preferably a mass noun referring to the entire set of instruction lines in a piece of software, and it’s singular in form. E.g.: “[M]any game developers now accept product placements for milk, DVDs and other wares, embedding them deep into the game’s software codes [read code].” Rachel Konrad, “Like Product Placement in Movies, Companies Are Hiding Brands in Secret Code in Video Games,” Houston Chron., 16 Jan. 2007, Bus. $, at 4. See COUNT NOUNS AND MASS NOUNS.

codex. Although the more easily understandable plural of this noun—meaning “a bound sheaf of manuscript leaves, esp. of an ancient or classic work or of the Scriptures”—might be codices, the form codices is standard: it greatly predominates in print sources. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (codices vs. codexes): 60:1

codify is best pronounced /kod-a-fi/, not /koh-da-fi/. This word, like codification, was one of the philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s NEOLIGMS; it dates from around 1800.

coed. This word (which has been traced back to 1875) is quite acceptable as an adjective <coed dormitory>,
but not as a noun <a 23-year-old coed>. Why? Two reasons: (1) the noun use almost invariably denotes a female student in a way that strikes many as sexist (men are just called *students*), and (2) the usage dates back to the time when female college students were relatively rare. See sexism (e).

*coemployee* is a needless variant of *coworker*.

**coequal,** n. & adj., often means nothing that *equal* does not also mean; it should be rejected in those contexts. And while styles vary, it is best spelled without a hyphen (see co-). E.g.:

- "The Founders of this country were wise enough to know that by establishing three co-equal [read equal] branches of government, they were also creating an inherent tension." *Courts for the Future,* Baltimore Sun, 6 Oct. 1996, at F2.

Yet this word, in frequent use from the 17th century on, can be useful in implying the standard of comparison. For example, in *"the co-eternal and co-equal Son,"* a snippet quoted in the *OED* (1891), if only *equal* had been used the reader would wonder, Equal to what? *Coequal* implies the second and third divinities with which the Son is said to be equal. That type of comparison should always be implicit with this word, even when used as a noun—e.g.: "My company is a large, liberal-minded institution that thrives on convivial collegial consensus among persons who . . . are complete coequals right up to the time an actual disagreement occurs. At this point, the rules change slightly. We go from Candy Land to rock–paper–scissors. Editors are rock. Writers are those gaily colored wussy plastic paper clips." Gene Weingarten, "Below the Beltway," Wash. Post, 12 May 2002, Mag. §, at W3. This nuance is fairly rare, however; for most purposes, *equal* suffices. Still, it is simplistic to say, as William Safire does, that "today's usage frowns on co-equal as redundant." *Send in Sovereign for Socialist,* N.Y. Times, 6 Jan. 1991, § 6, at 8, 10. Cf. *copartner.*

Although *equal* usually takes the preposition to, *coequal* takes with.

**coercible.** So spelled—not *coerceable*. See -able (A).

**coercion,** though originally applicable only to physical force, is now commonly used to describe moral and economic pressures. E.g.: "[People are debating] whether 'economically disadvantaged' volunteers can fairly weigh the health risks of tests, or whether the lure of being paid $85 a day, plus room and meals, amounts to economic coercion." Chris O'Malley, "NIH Takes Look at Lilly's Drug Tests," Indianapolis Star, 24 Nov. 1996, at E1. Such uses are a natural extension of the original sense ("the control by force of a voluntary agent or action").

**coffee klatch.** *Kaffeeklatsch,* a German loanword borrowed in the late 19th century, means "a coffee-drinking group that engages in leisurely conversation." It has been Anglicized to *coffee klatch,* which since the 1960s has been standard in AmE and BrE alike. In English-speaking contexts, *kaffeeklatsch* (despite its being the etymon) is a mere variant, as is *coffee klatsch.*

Current ratio (*coffee klatch* vs. *kaffeeklatsch* vs. *coffee klatsch*): 7:2:1

**cognition; cognition.** *Cognition* = thinking; use of the intellect. *Cognition* = a cognate relationship.

**cognitive; *cognitional.** *Cognitive* (= of, relating to, or involving cognition, or to the action or process of knowing) is the standard term. *Cognitive* is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 801:1

**cognizant; *cognisant.** The -z- spelling is standard in AmE and in BrE. Not until the 1940s did BrE begin shedding the -s- spelling.

Current ratio: 8:1

**cognoscente; cognoscenti.** This word, almost always used in the plural (-ti), is often spelled incorrectly. The misspellings are varied—e.g.:

- "He was never a favorite of design cognoscente [read cognoscenti], museum curators and theorists of design." Gary Mullinax, "Raymond Loewy," News J. (Wilmington, Del.), 25 Aug. 2002, at H10 (quoting a museum director).
- "When the preseason polls come out, don't be surprised if a fair number among the hockey cognoscente [read cognoscenti] figure that the Bruins won't make the playoffs." Kevin Paul DuPont, "I Love a Parade but Stanley Cup Party for Bruins Is Only a Dream," Boston Globe, 13 Sept. 2002, at D1.

Generally, experts or authorities will suffice, either one being easier to spell—not to mention to pronounce: /kon-ya-shen-tee/, /kohn-ya-shen-tee/, or /kog-na-shent-ee/.

**cohabit,** the verb for *cohabitation,* is analogous to *inhabit*—e.g.: "To cohabit is to dwell together," says one treatise, "so that matrimonial cohabitation is the living together of a man and woman ostensibly as husband and wife." Joel P. Bishop, *Marriage, Divorce, and Separation* § 1669, at 694 (1891).

*Cohabitate* is a misbegotten back-formation that has never seriously competed with *cohabit* in print sources. It appears only sporadically in edited English—e.g.: "There's little evidence that tax rates are pushing people to cohabitiate [read cohabit] rather than marry (most cohabitating [read cohabiting)]

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- **cohabitate for cohabit:** Stage 2
- **Current ratio: (cohabiting vs. *cohabitating):** 8:1

**cohabitant; *cohabitee; *cohabitor.** *Cohabitee, though increasingly common (especially in AmE) for a person living with another as if married, is etymologically the poorest form. (See -EE.) It ought to be avoided in favor of **cohabitant**, which is more frequent anyway and has long been so—e.g.: “From July, married people who file for divorce will have a legal right to claim part of their ex-spouse’s pension; but **cohabitants** [read *cohabitants*] will still have no such right, irrespective of how long their relationship lasted.” Jean Eaglesham, “Plan Ahead for an Even Break,” Independent, 5 May 1996, at 16. Not only is **cohabitant** etymologically preferable because it is derived from the present participle of the Latin verb, it is also much more common, especially in AmE. *Cohabitor* is a needless variant that seldom occurs.

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- **cohabitee for cohabitant:** Stage 2
- **Current ratio:** (In order of headwords): 38:10:1

**cohabitate.** See cohabit.

**cohabitation.** See adultery (A).

**cohabitative; *cohabitively.** The first, long the prevailing form, is morphologically superior. The general rule is that in Latinate nouns of this type, the adjectival form derives from the noun form. Hence **cohabitative** follows from the noun **cohabitation**. Cf. interpretative.

**Current ratio:** 3:1

**cohabite.** See cohabitant.

**cohabit.** See cohabitative.

**cohabitor.** See cohabitant.

**coherent (1):** [1] clear and reasonable, or [2] connected or united by common goals or beliefs) is preferably pronounced /koh-**heer**-ant/—not /koh-**hair**-ant/.

**cohort(s).** Most traditionally, **cohort** has been a mass noun denoting “a band of warriors.” It was extended to nonmilitary uses <the baby-boom cohort>. Some critics, such as Wilson Follett, can accept that extension but regard anything further as a slipshod extension:

[1]If the word is to retain its force it should observe two requirements: (1) it should designate members, too numerous to be conveniently counted, of some sort of united group, and (2) it should imply some sort of struggle or contest. No one of the candidates succeeded in completely marshaling his cohorts before the first ballot / To the legion of the lost ones, to the cohort of the dammed—in such uses the sense of the word is preserved.

MAU at 99.

This is a very conservative view of the word, especially given that the sense of a singular “colleague, associate, companion” dates from the 18th century and has been by far the more common meaning since the mid-20th. E.g.: “Senator Biden and his **cohorts** didn’t hear, but it appears that thousands of others did.” “Mr. Bork’s Book,” Wall Street J., 8 Dec. 1989, at A10. Still, this newer meaning has remained a rather informal one for this respectable word, which in formal writing often retains its older sense.

Follett’s sense 1 is common in phrases such as **birth cohort,** which is defined as a “group, born in the same year, selected for study as the individuals march through time so that researchers can assess the nature and influence of factors affecting their behavior.” Dermot Walsh & Adrian Poole, A Dictionary of Criminology 22 (1983).

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- **cohort in reference to an individual:** Stage 5
- **coiffeur; coiffure.** A coiffeur is a male hairdresser; the word is pronounced /kwah-**far**/. (A female hairdresser is a coiffeuse /kwah-**fyooz**.) A coiffure—sometimes shortened to **coif**—is a hairstyle; the word is pronounced /kwah-**fyuur**/.

**coin a phrase.** To **coin** is to mint afresh, to invent, or to make current—e.g.: “Whoever said money can’t buy happiness sure knew how to **coin a phrase.”** Tom Weber, “U.S. Mint Causing Two-Bit Ire,” Bangor Daily News, 20 Aug. 2002, at B1. The phrase doesn’t mean “to use,” as some writers have mistakenly thought since the mid-20th century—e.g.:—

- “Rocker kicks it up a notch, to **coin a phrase** [read as they say],” Tom Walter, “Who Is This Helen West?” Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 8 June 2002, at E1.
- “To **coin a phrase** [read use a cliché], ‘Knowledge is power.’” Joseph R. Curnuto III, “Port St. Lucie City Council District 3,” Stuart News/Port St. Lucie News (Stuart, Fla.), 1 Sept. 2002, Martin County §, at V36.

You can’t **coin** an old phrase. See word patronage.


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- **coin a phrase** misused to mean “borrow a phrase:” Stage 3
coitus (= the act of having sex) is pronounced /koh-i-tas/—not /koh-i-tas/ or /koy-tas/.

collander (= a bowl having holes in the bottom and sides for removing liquid, esp. water, from food) has been predominantly so spelled since about 1850. Before that, *cullender was a frequent variant.

Current ratio: 30:1

• "When Tyler's Place burned earlier this year, Orange Mounders lost more than a place to go for great and delicious hamburgers and hot dogs with Glover's famous secret coldslaw [read coleslaw] recipe." Whitt A. Sengstake Jr., "Tyler's Place, Orange Mound Landmark, Rising from Ashes to Former Beauty," Tri-State Defender (Memphis), 20 May 1998, at B8.
• "This week, Jamie Oliver sets out to make enough fried chicken, coldslaw [read coleslaw], sticky potato wedges and charred corn to feed a family of four—for just £10." "Best Documentary," Irish Independent (Belfast), 28 June 2014, at 46.

The error derives from folk etymology, the mistaken notion being that the term refers to the temperature at which the dish is ordinarily served. The true etymology is that coleslaw comes from the Dutch koolsla [kool "cabbage" + sla "salad"]. See etymology (d).

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coleslaw misspelled *coldslaw: Stage 1
Current ratio: 438:1

coliseum; colosseum; Colosseum. For the amphitheater of Vespasian in Rome, Colosseum is the proper name. For any other large building or assembly hall, the word is traditionally coliseum (AmE) or colosseum (BrE). But since 1970 or so, BrE has tracked AmE on this point, so that coliseum is preferred in both the primary varieties of English.

collaborate. For the confusion of this word with corroborate, see corroboration (c).

collaborator. The phrase *fellow collaborator is a redundancy—e.g.: "According to longtime set designer and fellow collaborator [read collaborator] Catherine Martin, Luhrmann succeeds in leaving his mark on a film whose title insists only on the mark that 'William Shakespeare' has left on the Romeo and Juliet legend." Courtney Lehmann, Shakespeare Remains 145 (2002).

collage is pronounced /ko-lahzh/.

collapsible. So spelled—not *collapsible. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 184:1

collate (= [1] to compare critically; [2] to assemble in order; or [3] to verify the order of) is best pronounced /kol-ayt/ or /ko-layt/, not /koh-layt/.

collect is a verb sometimes loosely used in the press. As any lawyer will confirm, being awarded damages is quite a different thing from collecting them: "Under Thursday's ruling, plaintiffs could collect [read seek or receive] damages from local governments only if they proved that discrimination resulted not from the act of an individual but from an official policy." William Choyke, "High Court Backs DISD in Rights Suit," Dallas Morning News, 23 June 1989, at A1. Perhaps most local governments would be good for most judgments, but to use collect in this way is sloppy thinking about the law. Receive, which sounds akin to collect, is actually quite different because it connotes a giver (the jury).

collectible; collectable. First, the adjectival uses. The -ible spelling, long the predominant form, is much more common than the -able spelling in AmE. But in BrE, collectable has prevailed in print sources since about 1935. See -ABLE (A).

With the noun uses, especially as a plural, the story is different. The spelling collectibles is predominant in both BrE and AmE—more strongly so in AmE. That has been so since the noun use came to prominence in the 1970s.

Current ratio (highly collectible vs. highly collectable): 2:1
Current ratio (collectibles vs. *collectables): 13:1

Collective Nouns. A. Number. A collective noun names an aggregate of individuals or things with a singular form. For example, ensemble, group, and team refer to several people, but each word is singular.

The main consideration in skillfully handling collective nouns is consistency in the use of a singular or plural verb. If, in the beginning of an essay, the phrasing is the faculty was, then every reference to faculty as a noun should be singular throughout the whole. On the other hand, a writer who wishes to emphasize the individual members more than the body of people may decide to write the faculty were, though members of the faculty were is preferable because it's more accurate.

But switching back and forth between a singular and a plural verb is lamentably common: "Mark Pattison's Memoirs is not strictly speaking an autobiography . . . . His Memoirs do not so much tell the story of his life . . . . Mark's father, as the Memoirs make plain, dominated his son's early years . . . . The Memoirs describes clearly. . . . " V.H.H. Green, Introduction, Mark Pattison, Memoirs of an Oxford Don 1, 6 (1988). Here, the problem seems to arise because the writer can't decide on a consistent use of the common
noun memoirs, which may be used as a plural noun but should not be capitalized, and the proper noun Memoirs, which is the singular title of a book.

Apart from the desire for consistency, there is little “right” and “wrong” on this subject: collective nouns sometimes take a singular verb and sometimes a plural one. The trend in AmE is to regard the collective noun as expressing a unit; hence, the singular is the usual form. When the individuals in the collection or group receive the emphasis, the plural verb is acceptable <that deconstructionist school were not wholly in error>. But generally in AmE, collective nouns take singular verbs, as in the jury finds, the panel is, the committee believes, the board has decided, etc.

**B. BrE vs. AmE.** Just the opposite habit generally obtains in BrE, where collective nouns tend to take plural verbs. The British tend to write, e.g., “The board have considered the views of the shareholders.” BrE has gone so far in some contexts that many Americans would suspect a typographical error: “Oxford were the winners of the 136th University Boat Race, but many will say that Cambridge were the heroes,” Richard Burnell, “Oxford Hold Off Brave Light Blues,” *Sunday Times* (London), 1 Apr. 1990, at B1. See *concord* (A).

In the days after the American Revolution, not surprisingly, American practice was closer to the prevailing British practice. E.g.: “The House of Representatives shall chuse their [modernly, its] Speaker and other Officers; and shall have the sole Power of Impeachment.” U.S. Const. art. I, § 2.

The reversal in practice has become so firmly established in AmE that it is hardly wrong to say that with certain collective nouns, singular verbs are preferred. But you can’t be doctrinaire on this point of usage. The dilemma frequently occurs with nouns such as couple, faculty, majority, and press—e.g.—:


• “And faculty are [or the faculty is] committed to improving curriculum based on information from a variety of sources.” Sarah A. Derks, “State Nursing Panel OK’s Shelby State,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), 4 Dec. 1997, at A19.

These are questions more of local idiom than of correct or incorrect grammar. See *count nouns and mass nouns.*

**collectivize** (= to confiscate private property, esp. means of production and arable land, for government use) has long had strongly negative connotations. E.g.: “The history of the Ukrainian famine—in which Moscow’s requisitioning of the Ukrainian harvest, along with its orders to collectivize agriculture, caused the starvation of millions of people—was long caught in the disinformation and silence imposed by Stalin,” Felicity Barringer, “A City of Memorials Finds Itself Filling Up,” *N.Y. Times*, 20 Dec. 2006, at A12.

But lately the term has been acquiring senses more positive—e.g.: “Group shows can be lacking in cohesion, but they can also collectivize a definite vibe, a current in art or society.” Rosemary Ponnekanti, “Quilts, Nativity House Artists Reflect Societal Contrasts,” *News Trib.* (Tacoma), 5 Nov. 2006, at E5. Given the word’s history, however, a substitute such as generate would serve better in such a sentence.

**collegial; collegiate.** It would serve the purposes of differentiation and would accord with educated usage to reserve collegial as the adjective for colleague, and collegiate as the adjective for college—e.g.:

• “By forging a collegial triumvirate with Senate President Stanley Rosenberg and Speaker of the House Robert DeLeo, Baker and his legislative colleagues created budgetary solutions under dire circumstances.” “Baker Continues to Earn Our Endorsement” *Enterprise* (Brockton, Mass.), 16 Aug. 2015, at 6.

• “A 2014 study of youth joblessness . . . found roughly 8.5 percent of college graduates between the ages of 21 and 24 were unemployed. . . . It tells us that the post-collegiate job market, just like the rest of the labor market, certainly isn’t nearly back to normal.” “Another Education Subsidy,” *Courier* (Findlay, Ohio), 19 Aug. 2015, at 4.

Both words are pronounced with a soft -g- sound (like -j-). Collegiate usually doesn’t present a problem, since college also takes a soft -g- sound. (Note, though, that the three-syllable pronunciation /kә-lee-jәt/ is preferred over the four-syllable /kә-lee-jee-at/.) But sometimes collegial is mispronounced with a hard -g-, probably on the influence of colleague. Resist that sort of peer pressure.

**collide** is construed with with or against. Although with is more common today, the *OED* provides historical evidence of against, and that usage still sometimes appears—e.g.: “In the eighth he collided against the outfield wall while chasing a drive by Missouri designated hitter Jake Epstein.” Rick Cantu, “Aspito’s 3-Run Homer Saves Longhorns,” *Austin Am.-Statesman*, 20 Feb. 1999, at C3.

Current ratio (collide with vs. collide against): 86:1

**collodion; *colloidium.** Collodion /kә-loh-dee-әn/ (= an alcohol–ether solution used as a coating for wounds or photographic film) is the standard term. *Colloidium is a needless variant.*

Current ratio: 67:1

**colloque; *collogue.** Both are informal and relatively rare words meaning “to confer (with another) in private.” One usage authority labeled *collogue* “colloquial for talk confidentiality.” George P. Krapp, *A Comprehensive Guide to Good English* 152 (1927). Either would be useful as a verb corresponding to the noun colloquy. Because it is already more common, colloque is more likely to gain wide acceptance—e.g.: “That won’t and shouldn’t prevent members who share interests from colloquing [read colloquing], but it will make at least a small dent in the House budget.” “A Tall Wall for the Deficit Cutters,” *L.A.*
or between a judge and counsel. E.g.: “His curious means "a formal discussion, " as between diplomats of deceit. Occasionally the word is misunderstood to collusion—e.g.: “A Man of Girth," Economist, 11 Mar. 2000.

Is it possible to defraud yourself? No, although writers occasionally try this trick—e.g.: "By working until midnight, you enable your boss to give you assignments late without consequences. No one can take advantage of you without your collusion [read acquiescence]." Lynne Curry, "Rein in Chaotic Manager," Anchorage Daily News, 16 Sept. 2002, at D1.

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Colloquial. A good deal of confusion has surrounded this word. Traditionally, lexicographers used it to denote that a word so labeled is typical of cultivated conversation or informal speech, as opposed to the most formal style of written prose. E.g.: "The sensible man speaks colloquially most of the time. When he wants to be formal or unusually impressive he tries to speak as he thinks he writes. But on these occasions he often makes a pompous ass of himself.” Bergen Evans, “Your Speech Is Changing” (1959), in Readings in the Language Arts 4, 8 (Verna Dieckman Anderson et al. eds., 1964).

But many dictionary users mistook the label as indicating a departure from high grammatical standards—even though the dictionary writers who used the label had no such intention. Hence colloquial, and especially the corresponding noun colloquialism, gradually took on negative connotations. In the second half of the 20th century, most lexicographers dropped the labels. At the same time, mediocre writers strove for hyperformal stiffness, as another authority noted: “Most of us, when we write, have a fear of dropping into colloquialism, and so go to almost any lengths of stilted periphrasis to avoid it.” G.H. Vallins, Good English: How to Write It 145 (1951).

Things have gradually changed, partly as a result of the electronic age: modern communications are increasingly informal. We have come closer to developing a style of speakable writing—one that is natural, idiomatic, and comfortable. Perhaps, after a period of degenerate connotations, colloquial will become a term of praise. See casualisms.

colloquy; colloquium. Colloquy (/kә-loh-/kwee-әm/)—meaning “a formal discussion,” as between diplomats or between a judge and counsel. E.g.: “His curious colloquy with a 17-year-old boy on sentencing day in a marijuana case got more than the boy’s attention.” Bergen Evans, “Crawford at Center Court, ” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 24 Nov. 1996, at 1. Pl. colloquies. For the verb corresponding to colloquy, see colloque.

Colloquium (/kә-loh-/kwee-am/)—meaning “an academic conference or seminar”—is frequently misspelled *colloquium. Most American dictionaries prefer the plural colloquiums, but colloquia has always been predominant in both AmE and BrE. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (colloquia vs. colloquiums): 10:1

collusion (= an agreement between two or more people to trick or defraud another) always has the flavor of deceit. Occasionally the word is misunderstood to mean “collaboration,” as opposed to "collaboration in wrongdoing"—e.g.: • “Golding’s style has the effect of exposing the person of the novelist, as if writer and reader were working in collusion on [read collaborating in] a tricky moral quest.” Jonathan Raban, “The Paper Men,” Atlantic Monthly, Apr. 1984, at 142.

Colombian, adj.; Colombian. Colombian = of, relating to, or involving the South American country of Colombia. Colombian = of, relating to, or involving America or Christopher Columbus.

The adjective pre-Columbian (= of, relating to, or involving America before Columbus’s arrival) should be so written—not *precolumbian.

Colons. See punctuation (c).

Coloradan; Coloradoan. These two names vie closely for predominance. Coloradan has had the slight edge since the 1860s, but there have been periodic reversals in frequency of use in print sources. Coloradan is the safest editorial choice for now, even though Coloradoan has recently shown signs of resurgence. See denizen labels.

Current ratio (Coloradans vs. Coloradoans): 3:1

colosseum. See coliseum.

Columbia; Colombia. Both proper nouns honor Christopher Columbus. The difference in spelling depends on whether the noun derives from Latin or Italian. In North America, the Latin Columbus is the basis of Columbia, as in the District of Columbia and Columbia University. In South America, the Italian form (Colombo) prevails as the name of the nation—Colombia.

Colombian. See Colombian & denizen labels.

Columbusite. See denizen labels.
columnist. In pronouncing this word, be sure to sound the -/n/- as /kәm-/m-nist/.

combustible. So spelled—not *combustable. (See -ABLE (A).) *Combustible engine is a mistake for combustion engine. In fact, it erroneously suggests that the engine is flammable (or, as we used to say, inflammable—see flammable). E.g.:

- "Terror said the use of combustible [read combustion] engines, such as those running chain saws, lawnmowers and weed eaters, should be curtailed, as should campfires." Larry D. Hatfield, "Hot Winds Fan New Fear Fears," S.F. Examiner, 13 Oct. 1995, at A1.

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Current ratio (combustible vs. *combustable): 736:1

*combustible engine for combustion engine: Stage 1

Current ratio (combustion engine vs. *combustible engine): 303:1

come. A. Come > came > come. So inflected. Nonstandard past forms <he come here yesterday> <she hasn’t come yet> typify dialect. For a good discussion, see Sali Tagliamonte, "Come/Came Variation in English Dialects," 76 Am. Speech 42, 42–43 (2001).

B. And go. Usually, come denotes movement toward the speaker’s current location <come here, Fido>, while go is the opposite <you should go now>. But as with take and bring, there is room for nuance in using these words. For example, I’ll come over at 8 tonight is far more idiomatic than I’ll go over at 8 tonight. One who hears the first sentence knows exactly where the speaker is going, but one who hears the second sentence doesn’t. So especially in conversation, it is point of view that determines word choice rather than notions of movement.

For an analogous problem with bring and take, see bring (b). See also immigrate.

C. In Subjunctive Uses. In the phrases come what may and I’ll be ready come Friday, the word come exemplifies a persistent use of the SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD.

D. For cum. See cum.

comedian; comedienne. In AmE, the word comedian is generally used in reference to comic actors or entertainers of either sex—e.g.:

- "The comedian fears she has caught herself saying the wrong thing in discussing her one-woman show," Margot Ebling, "Intimate Exposure," Village Voice, 26 Nov. 1996, at 86.
- "Comedian Amy Schumer wrote and stars in this funny vehicle as a selfish, rude jerk whose pro-pleasure, anti-romance outlook is tested when she meets a nice sports doctor." "Now Showing," Long Beach Press-Telegram, 19 Aug. 2015, at 3.

But comedienne, despite its sex-specific nature, remains quite common—e.g.: "Clad in a sweater set and black slacks, the five-foot-nothing Deirdre Flint looks more like a kindergarten teacher than a rascally musical comedienne." Lisa Suhay, "Strudel Is This Comic Singer's Muse," Christian Science Monitor, 4 Apr. 2003, Features §, at 16. See sexism (d).

comedic. See comic.

comedienne. See comedian.

come off it. This colloquial idiom is as old as Chaucer. For some reason, a few writers who use it feel inclined to make it *come off of it, which is unidiomatic—e.g.:

- "There are some presenters who, with no other knowing it, prompt their audiences to think, 'Oh, come off of it [read come off it].'" Ron Hoff, "I Can See You Naked" 97 (1992).
- "Now, we have people who are saying we shouldn't attack these people due to the fact we will accidentally kill civilians. Come off of it [read Come off it], people; wars and soldiers do not try to pick the civilians as targets, they end up that way." Letter of William Reinhart, Chattanooga Times/Chattanooga Free Press, 10 Oct. 2001, at B8.
- "He also rejected the notion that passing a farm bill would guarantee civilian and military food security. 'Let's come off of it [read Come off it],' Lugar demanded. 'To imply somehow we need a farm bill in order to feed our troops, to defend our nation, is ridiculous.'" Deroy Murdock, Pork-Barrel Spending Cuts into War Dollars," Deseret News (Salt Lake City), 14 Oct. 2001, at AA7.

See *off of.

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*come off of it for come off it: Stage 2

Current ratio (come off it vs. *come off of it): 36:1

comeuppance (= a just rebuke or minor retaliation) is the standard spelling of this Victorian coinage. *Comeupance is a rare variant.

Current ratio: 761:1

comfort. See solace.
**comic; comical; comedic.** These words are confusingly similar. *Comic* and *comical* both mean “funny” or “humorous.” *Comic* is generally used, however, for what is intentionally funny, and *comical* for what is unintentionally funny. Hence the latter term may mean “laughable” in a derisive sense—e.g.: “Kaelin, a struggling actor who was a shaggily-haired, *comical* figure at Simpson’s criminal trial, appeared with his hair cut and neatly combed, wearing a white shirt, green tie and dark green sport coat.” Linda Deutsch, “Kaelin: Simpson Brooded About Ex-Wife’s Sex Life,” *Austin Am.-Statesman*, 20 Nov. 1996, at A5.

*Comedic* = of, relating to, or involving the form or nature of a dramatic comedy—i.e., a play that ends as the audience would wish (as the opposite of tragic). E.g.:


- “His enormous *comedic* talents were known throughout the industry.” Valerie Burgher, “Color Bind,” *Village Voice*, 26 Nov. 1996, at 82.

Sometimes *comedic* is misused for *comical*—e.g.: “Their first attempts to navigate the creek were *comedic* [read *comical*]—an aquatic, slapstick skit of unintended rammings and beachings.” Paul McHugh, “Canoelists Discover Bay Secrets,” *S.F. Chron.*, 18 Dec. 1997, at D7.

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*comedy* misused for *comedic*: Stage 1

**comic**. See commingle.


The word is sometimes (especially in BrE) mistaken as meaning “league” or “federation,” especially in the phrase *comity of nations*. That use typifies *slipshod* extension and involves euphemizing: the vagueness of the phrase seems better to the writer than the directness of a substitute such as *community of nations* or *the family of civilized nations*, which begs the question, Which nations are civilized? Examples of this loose sense follow:

- “It is globally important to bring China into full partnership in the *comity of nations* [read *community of nations*], in spite of recent saber-rattling.” “Shocking Position,” *Baltimore Sun*, 7 Sept. 1995, at A15.

*But those settlements did succeed in bringing France and Germany into the *comity* [read *family*] of European nations, despite the suspicions left by decades of conflict.” Rodric Braithwaite, “The West Has a Russia Problem It Isn’t Facing,” *Int’l Herald Trib.*, 3 Dec. 1996, at 8.

Very occasionally, the phrase *comity of nations* appears in a correct sense (“courtesy afforded by countries to one another’s political entities”)—e.g.: “Furthermore, he said, under the concept of *comity of nations*, or a mutual respect for other countries’ laws, a successful overseas liability claim could be subsequently brought against the company in a U.S. court.” Judy Greenwald, “Exports Create Unique Exposures,” *Bus. Ins.*, 2 Dec. 1996, at 2.

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*comity of nations* for *community of nations*: Stage 1


**Commas.** See punctuation (d).

**Comma Splices.** See run-on sentences.

**commemorative; *commemoratory.*** The first has been standard since the 16th century; the second is a needless variant.

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*commemorative* misused for *comedic*: Stage 1

**commence; begin; start.** Except in describing formal ceremonies or exercises, or legal actions, *commence* is usually unnecessarily stilted for *begin*, with which it is denotatively equivalent. The *OED* notes that “*begin* is preferred in ordinary use; *commence* has more formal associations with law and procedure, combat, divine service, and ceremony[\*].” Often *commence* appears where *begin* would be better—e.g.: “Scungio was told that if she hoped to build a house before the town *commenced* [read *began*] work on the road . . . , she should propose what sort of gravel thoroughfare she could pay for.” Barbara C. Potter, “Planning Board Approves Hartford Pike Rezoning,” *Providence J.-Bull.*, 6 Mar. 1997, at D6. See *begin* (b).

Stylists have long condemned *commence* if it introduces an infinitive, *begin* being preferable—e.g.: “She trekked into the wilds of Africa and *commenced* to live among and study [read began to live among and to study or began living among and studying] mankind’s closest relations.” Michael Kilian, “Grunt Work,” *Chicago Trib.*, 3 Sept. 1995, at C1.

Definite nuances exist with *start* as opposed to *begin* or *commence*. Usually used of physical movement, *start* suggests an abruptness not present in the
other two words <gentlemen, start your engines>. See institute.

commendable; commendatory. The former means "praiseworthy, laudable" <a commendable achievement>, and the latter means "expressing commendation, laudatory" <a commendatory letter of appreciation>. Like other differentiated pairs ending in -able and -atory, these words are sometimes confused. Most commonly, commendatory erroneously disposes commendable—e.g.:

- "It is reprehensible . . . to write a brief primarily to express an uncomplimentary opinion of one’s adversary; it is commendatory [read commendable] to write a brief for the purpose of advising the court; it is neither reprehensible nor commendatory [read commendable] to write a brief because the client insists—merely good business." Mortimer Levitan, "Confidential Chat on the Art of Briefing," 1957 Wis. L. Rev. 59, 60.


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commendatory misused for commendable: Stage 1 Current ratio (commendable vs. commendatory): 12:1

commensurate. A. And commensurable. In all but mathematical contexts, commensurable is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of commensurate. Commensurable legitimately means "having, or reducible to, a common measure; divisible without remainder by the same quantity" (OED). Commensurate (/kә-men-shuur-әt/) means (1) "coextensive"; or (2) "proportionate."

B. Confounded with commiserate. Through word-swapping, writers sometimes confuse commensurate with commiserate (ka-mi-za-rayt), which is properly a verb meaning "to sympathize with." E.g.:

- "For the first time, the Daytona 500 purse is commiserate [read commensurate] with the race's stature as one of America's premier sporting events." Tony Fabrizio, "Underpaid Drivers Finally Get Due," Fla. Times-Union, 12 Feb. 1998, at C5.


- "Lauren LePage, 22, will serve as assistant to the governor's chief of staff, John McGough—a position that administration officials describe as entry-level and is commiserate [read commensurate] with her experience, work history and education." Kevin Miller, "LePage Gives Staff Position to Daughter," Bangor Daily News, 23 Dec. 2010, at 1.

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commiserate misused for commensurate: Stage 1 Current ratio (is commensurate with vs. *is commiserate with): 459:1

commend; commentate. The longer form is a BACK-FORMATION from commentator, but an established one dating from the late 18th century. If commentate were only a NEEDLESS VARIANT of comment, its existence would be unjustified. But it enjoys the differentiation of meaning "to give a commentary on" or "to expound persuasively or interpretatively." Meanwhile, comment implies brevity. Hence scholarly commentators typically commentate rather than comment when expounding their disciplines. The word is, of course, grandiose when used of television journalists and, more so, sportscasters. Still, it is too late to object to their being called commentators.

Both verbs are traditionally intransitive <she commented favorably on the book> <he commented for ABC Sports during the U.S. Open>. Commentate is now sometimes used as a transitive verb <he commented the U.S. Open>, but the newfangled usage is not recommended.

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1. commentate as a verb: Stage 5
2. commentate as a transitive verb (e.g., He commented the Masters): Stage 1

COMMERCIALESE. This is the peculiar jargon of business, typified by words and phrases such as these (from correspondence):

acknowledging yours of beg to advise enclosed herewith enclosed please find further to yours of [date] in regard to inst. in the amount of of even date pending receipt of please be advised that please return same pleasure of a reply prox. pursuant to your request regarding the matter regret to inform thanking you in advance the undersigned this acknowledges your letter ult. we are pleased to note with regard to your favor has come to hand yours of even date

Books on business writing have long admonished writers to avoid these mind-numbing wads of verbiage—e.g.: "All stereotyped words [that] are not used in talking should be avoided in letter writing. There is an idea that a certain peculiar commercial jargon is appropriate in business letters. The fact is, nothing injures business more than this system of words found only in business letters. The test of a word or phrase or method of expression should be, 'Is it what I would say to my customer if I were talking to him instead of writing to him?'" Sherwin Cody, How to Do Business by Letter 20 (19th ed. 1908). Cf. obscurity.
For more on the subject, see the following books:


**comminate; comminute.** The first means “to denounce,” the second “to pulverize.” Which verb is more frequently used? *Comminate*—from the 18th century on.

**commingle; *comingle.** *Commingle* (= to mingle together) has been the accepted spelling since the 18th century. In contemporary print sources, it is about 17 times as common as *comingle*, which, though slightly older, has failed to become standard. E.g.: “Humor and pathos *comingle* [read *commingle*] evenly.” “Rich, Relevant ’Raisin,’” *Seattle Times*, 28 Oct. 1994, at H25. When *comingle* does appear, it’s often unnecessarily hyphenated—e.g.: “Sexuality and violence *co-mingle* [read *commingle*] here, so this is not for the squeamish.” Kim Morgan, “‘Fudoh’ Highlights Mike’s Intoxicating Violence and Humor,” *Oregonian* (Portland), 18 Oct. 2002, Arts & Living §, at 20.

There are two diametrical tendencies: (1) the growing prevalence of the spelling *commingle*; and (2) the shift in popular pronunciation away from the preferred /ko-ming-gal/ and toward /kah/ for the first syllable. These two tendencies are at odds with each other; they seem certain to keep usage unsettled.

Although *mingle* has also been used in reference to combining funds, *commingle* is the more usual term—e.g.: “You do not want to *mingle* [read *commingle*] these funds with other IRA accounts.” Carla Lazzareschi, “How Co-ops Differ from Condos,” *L.A. Times*, 8 May 1994, at D4.

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*comingle for commingle: Stage 1 Current ratio (commingle vs. *comingle): 17:1

**comminate.** See comminate.

**commiserate.** See commensurate (b).

*commissible.** See committable.

**commitment; commission; committal.** *Commitment* = (1) dedication; devotion to a special task or purpose <the company’s unwavering commitment to the black community>; (2) an engagement to fill a future obligation <she has several commitments this month>; or (3) the action of committing an insane or mentally retarded person to the charge of another <his mental illness led to commitment to an asylum>.

*Commission* = (1) the authority to perform a task or function <this action exceeded the delegate’s commission>; (2) a group of people entrusted with this authority, usu. by appointment <the health commission’s meeting lasted all day>; (3) a military appointment <the cadet received his commission on the eve of battle>; (4) a payment made to an agent or broker, usu. as a percentage of a sale <Joyner received a 4% commission>; or (5) the action of doing or perpetrating (a crime, etc.) <the commission of a felony>.

*Committal* is a useless variant of the other two terms in all but two senses. First, it bears the sense “the action of burying a body in a grave”—e.g.: “*Committal* services and burial will take place at a later date in Cold Spring Cemetery, Cape May.” “Gretchen Neubrand” (obit.), *Stuart News/Port St. Lucie News* (Stuart, Fla.), 20 Mar. 1997, at B4. Second, in BrE *comittal* refers to the imprisoning of a debtor as a way of enforcing a court’s judgment.

**committable; *commissible; *committible.** The first has been the established form since the early 18th century. E.g.: “That leaves Mata, who has had many psychological evaluations since being extradited to Minnesota, in limbo. He is neither competent nor *committable*.” Margaret Zack, “Man Is Incompetent to Stand Trial, but Also Uncommitteable,” *Star Trib.* (Minneapolis), 22 July 1997, at B1. The other forms are needless variants. See *-ABLE* (A).

Current ratio (committable vs. *commissible): 14:1

**committal.** See commitment.

**committee.** So spelled. See spelling (A).

*committible.** See committable.

**common.** See mutual (A).

**commonality; commonness; commonalty; commongage; *commonty.** The common character of these words may cause confusion. The ordinary words are *commonality* and *commonness*. Although historically the two have overlapped, they are best kept separate in accordance with the following definitions. *Commonness*, the general noun corresponding to *common*, may mean: (1) “the state or quality of being common” <the commonness of cable television>; (2) “the quality of being public or generally used” <the commonness of the thoroughfare>; (3) “the state of being run-of-the-mill” <the commonness of his writing>; or (4) “vulgarity” <the commonness of a sot>. *Commonality* = the possession of an attribute in common with another <stressing commonality rather than divisiveness>.

The remaining words are more easily distinguished. *Commonality* = (1) commoners; the general body of the community (excluding nobility); (2) a municipal corporation (a sense to be avoided with this word.
common-law marriage

because corporation is the ordinary term); or (3) a general group or body. In the following sentence, the writer may be using commonality in sense 3—in which case it's a redundancy—or may have intended commonality: "The Alabama code stood as a statement of the rules of the game that a family of professionals . . . adhered to in recognition of their commonality [read commonality?] and because it might, by forcing an affiliation, help keep them out of trouble." Jethro K. Lieberman, *Crisis at the Bar* 56 (1978). But commonality probably displaces commonality as often as it does because it is a typo that spell-checkers can't catch and that proofreaders easily miss—e.g.: "The two candidates—incumbent Leon Young and challenger Walter Lanier—also say they want to create more programs tailored to the youths in the area, but that's where the commonsalities [read commonsalities or, better, similarities] between the two end." Felicia Thomas-Lynn, "Battling Democrats Agree on Profiling," *Milwaukee J. Sentinel*, 4 Sept. 2002, at B5.

Commonage = (1) the right to pasture animals on common land; (2) the condition of land held in common; or (3) an estate or property held in common. *Commonty*, in its existing uses, is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of commonage.

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Commonality misused for commonality: Stage 1

common-law marriage has one meaning in AmE and another in BrE. In American law, the phrase generally denotes an agreement to be married, followed by cohabitation and a public recognition of the marriage. Common-law marriages are valid in many states, such as Texas, though others have abolished the institution, as New York did in 1932.

In England, common-law marriage now refers only to a marriage celebrated according to a common-law form in a place where the local forms of marriage cannot be used (e.g., a desert island) or are morally unacceptable to the parties (e.g., because of religious differences), or where no cleric is available. Additionally—and more commonly in BrE—the phrase refers to an illicit union of some duration. As Sir Robert Megarry writes, "The so-called common-law marriage, little known in England save as a polite verbal cloak for fornication or adultery of the less ephemeral type, has a respectable ancestry in America." *A Second Miscellany-at-Law* 210 (1973).

commonness. See commonality.

common noun. See proper noun.

commonsense, adj. A. And commonsensical; *commonsensible. The adjective commonsense (always solid as this part of speech) dates from the mid-17th century and vastly predominates over the other two, both of which date from the mid- to late 19th century. Commonsense should generally be preferred over commonsensical or *commonsensible <a commonsensical approach>—though commonsense may cause a mis-
cue if it does not immediately precede the noun it modifies <an approach that is commonsense>. That is, it may be read as a noun when it functions as a predicate adjective.

As between commonsensical and *commonsensible, one might suspect that -ible would be the more usual: the dictionaries have traditionally listed it first, and it's modeled on the existing word sensible. (Sensical is rare.) In fact, though, commonsensical predominates in print sources by a more than 120-to-1 ratio—e.g.: "But Kim argued that his actions regarding Flores's artwork were simply practical and commonsensical." Celeste Katz, "Culture Clash," *Providence J.-Bull.*, 6 Nov. 1997, at D1. But again, commonsensical should be confined to uses—as in the example just quoted—in which a noun doesn't immediately follow.

Current ratio (commonsense reasons vs. commonsensical reasons): 7:1

Current ratio (commonsensical vs. *commonsensible): 122:1

B. And common sense, n. Although the adjective is one word, the noun is two: common sense.

*Commony. See commonality.

commonweal; commonwealth. Commonweal = the general welfare or common good. E.g.: "It has become shorter than a Chicago spring, this post-election respite when politicians have some small latitude to do what is necessary for the commonweal rather than what is necessary to get re-elected." John McCarron, "Buckling Down to Work," *Chicago Trib.*, 4 Nov. 1996, at 21.

Commonwealth = a nation, state, or other political unit <the British Commonwealth>. E.g.: "While no one in the police department or the commonwealth's attorney's office could remember a case in which a convicted criminal actually harmed a witness, the threats have intimidated witnesses into retracting testimony or disappearing." Gordon Hickey, "Witness's Safe Houses Sought," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 26 Nov. 1996, at B3. Among the 50 states, four are traditionally known as commonwealths: Kentucky, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. See territory.

communicative; *communicatory. The latter has been a NEEDLESS VARIANT since the 17th century.

Current ratio: 633:1

commute. A. And commute. The latter is a technical term meaning "to regulate the direction of (an electric current)." Commute = (1) to travel back and forth regularly, esp. over a significant distance and esp. to one's job; (2) to exchange (a punishment or penalty) for one of less severity; or (3) to change (one kind of payment) into or for another.

B. And pardon. In sense 2, to commute a punishment or penalty is to reduce it, or to substitute in its place a milder punishment or penalty. To pardon someone who has been convicted or punished is to excuse the person without exacting any further penalty.
compact, n., adj. & v.t. The noun is accented on the first syllable, the verb on the second. The adjective is rendered both ways, preferably /kam-pakt/ except in reference to a midsize car.

compactible; compactable. Since the mid-20th century, the first has been predominant in AmE, the second in BrE. See -ABLE (A).

comparable; comparative. Comparable is stressed on the first syllable (/kəm-pəˈrebəl/); comparative is stressed on the second syllable (/kəm-pəˈrætɪv/ or /ˈpaːr-ət-i/). Comparable = capable of being compared; worthy of comparison <comparable salaries>. Comparative = (1) of, relating to, or involving comparison (<a comparative discourse on economics>); (2) involving comparison <the field of comparative religion>; or (3) estimated by comparison <comparative distances>.

Occasionally comparative is used where comparable is called for—e.g.: “This industry, from the capital standpoint, is quite comparative with [read comparable to] the banking industry.” John M. Boyle, “The Role of Capital in the Banking Industry,” Am. Banker, 2 Dec. 1980, at 4. Though the OED documents this use of comparative with four examples ranging from the early 17th to the early 19th century, it labels the usage obsolete.

For a common mispronunciation of comparable, see pronunciation (b).

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**comparative** misused for comparable: Stage 1

**Comparatives and Superlatives. A. Choice Between Comparative and Superlative.** When two items are being compared, a comparative adjective is needed <the greater of the two>; when more than two are being compared, the superlative is needed <the greatest of the three>. The blunder of using the superlative adjective when only two items are being compared is increasingly common, especially in AmE—e.g.: • “The tallest [read taller] of the two pyramids is nearly 500 feet.” Alan Byrd, “Pyramids? Not in My Backyard, Foes Say,” Orlando Bus. J., 30 Sept. 1994, at 1.
• “He has raced in worst [read worse] conditions, of course, and often won.” Samuel Abt, “Rain Plagues Tour de France,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 2 July 1995, at C8.
• “With the first half of the game over, the most [read more] important half is yet to be played—this time on the voter’s turf.” Dan Luzzader & Lynn Bartels, “Broncos Score Upset on Political Field;” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 12 May 1996, at A5.

One idiomatic exception occurs when we put our best foot forward, since (of course) we have only two.

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Superlative with two objects <best of the pair>: Stage 4

**B. Which to Use—Suffixes or more and most?** Apart from irregular forms such as good > better > best, comparatives and superlatives are formed by either (1) adding the suffixes -er and -est (e.g., broader, broadest), typically when the adjective is one or two syllables; or (2) using the additional words more and most (e.g., more critical, most critical), a form required with words having three or more syllables and typical with two-syllable words. It was once possible to write interestinger and honestest, but no longer. Several words have a choice of forms (e.g., commoner, -est or more, most common; tranquilizer(-er), -est or more, most tranquil; stupider, -est or more, most stupid; naïver, -est or more, most naïve). The terminational forms are usually older, and some of them are becoming obsolete.

Still, if a word ordinarily takes either the -er or the -est suffix—and that formation sounds more natural—it’s poor style to use the two-word form with more or most. E.g.: • “Few things in this world short of yard work are more dull [read dullest] than watching animated characters play basketball.” Daniel Neman, “Double Drivel,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 15 Nov. 1996, at C1.

**C. Be-Verbs Repeated After Comparatives.** It usually isn’t necessary to repeat the verb to be before the second element of the comparison—e.g.: “Thus, full-scale intervention is much less likely than is [read less likely than] subversion or other covert activities in such cases.” Richard K. Herrmann & Michael P. Fischerkeller, “Beyond the Enemy Image and Spiral Model,” Int’l Organization, 22 June 1995. And if the be-verb is repeated, it usually shouldn’t go immediately after than. The preceding example, then, might read: Thus, full-scale intervention is much less likely than subversion or other covert activities are in such cases. See INVERSION & than (A).

**D. The Double Comparative.** Among literate speakers and writers, the double comparative is fairly uncommon. But it does occasionally appear in print—e.g.: “Does it mean that change will be a bit more slower [read slower], a bit more careful, a bit more reasoned than totally revamping the health care system? Yes.” Leonard Marcus, “New Approach Needed to Restore System’s Balance,” Am. Medical News, 2 Dec. 1996, at 45. (If the writer of that sentence wanted the parallelism of three more, then the first phrase should have been more slow.)

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*more slower for slower, etc.: Stage 1

For an example of the double superlative, see *least worst.*
E. Greater of A (or) (and) B. Logic loses to idiom when deciding whether to use the conjunctive and or the disjunctive or in phrases such as the greater of A and/or B. Logic would seem to demand and to include all the options in the comparison before one is singled out as being the lesser, biggest, oldest, latter, etc. But in fact, since the early 20th century or has been about ten times as common in print as and with this type of phrasing.

F. Absolute Adjectives. See adjectives (b).

compare and contrast. See contrast (n).

compare with; compare to. The usual phrase has for centuries been compare with, which means “to place side by side, noting differences and similarities between” <let us compare his goals with his actual accomplishments>. Compare to = to observe or point only to likenesses between <he compared her eyes to limpid pools>. Cf. contrast (A).

Compare and contrast is an English teacher’s tautology, for in comparing two things (one thing with another) one notes both similarities and differences.

Comparisons, False. See illogic (b).

compatible. So spelled—not *compatable. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 2,714:1

compel; impel. Compel is the stronger word, connoting force or coercion, with little or no volition on the part of the one compelled. Impel connotes persuasive urging, with some degree of volition on the part of the one impelled—e.g.: “He moved like a sleepwalker, like one impelled—e.g.: “He moved like a sleepwalker, like one impelled” Ursula K. Le Guin, The Lathe of Heaven 88 (1971).

compendious means “abridged, succinct,” not “voluminous,” as writers often mistakenly believe—e.g.: • “In an archive at Harvard he found a compendious [read bulky?], multivolume, handwritten journal entitled ‘Amos Webber Thermometer Record and Diary.”” Jonathan Yardley, “His Place in Time,” Wash. Post, 4 Feb. 1996, Book World §, at 3.


• “Even if you knew nothing of Mencken, coming to him by way of this fresh new collection, ‘H.L. Mencken on American Literature,’ you would hardly be surprised to learn that in mid-career he published an enormous linguistic study, ‘The American Language,’ whose ever-expanding revisions and compendious [read extensive] supplements preoccupied him nearly to the end of his long life.” Brad Leithauser, “Mencken’s World of Words,” L.A. Times, 16 June 2002, Book Rev. §, at 6. (Notice the redundancy of fresh new, either one of which suffices.)

Perhaps the error stems from the idea that a compendium is, at best, a fairly comprehensive abridgment. But properly speaking, the emphasis falls on abridgment, not on comprehensive. And some would say that the word does not at all suggest comprehensiveness: “‘The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction’ doesn’t carry a guarantee of mauling you if you read it. But thanks to Colin Toibin, who should have been included (one understands why he wasn’t) in the anthology as well, we have the best compendium of Irish fiction since ‘The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing,’ a more comprehensive work published in 1991.” Mike Lanagan, “In Toibin’s Compendium, the Luck of the Irish,” Buffalo News, 12 Mar. 2000, at F5.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX compendious misused for comprehensive: Stage 3

compendium forms either of two plurals: compendiums or compendia. The native-grown plural was prevalent from the 17th century to the mid-20th. Since about 1950, the Latinate plural has enjoyed a resurgence. But many sensible editors haven’t enjoyed it—e.g.: • “Far too many of these books are compendia [read compendiums] of facts designed to provide tidbits for cocktail-party chatter.” Martin Morse Wooster, “The Special Problems with Special Education,” Wash. Times, 11 Sept. 1994, at B6.


See plurals (b). For the sense of the word, see compendious.

Current ratio (compendia vs. compendiums): 3:1

compensable; *compensatable; *compensible. The adjective compensable correlates to the noun compensation. *Compensible is a fairly common misspelling. No major dictionary records the needless variant *compensatable, which since 1913 has infrequently displaced compensable. See -ABLE (A); -ATABLE.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 418:16:1

compensate. A. Transitive or Intransitive. Compensate may or may not take for, and either way means “to make up for, to counterbalance (a loss).” The modern tendency is to omit for, but the sound of a sentence may outweigh the interests of concision. E.g.: • “The International Commission of Jurists . . . concluded that the women’s physical and emotional suffering both during the war and afterwards must be compensated for by the Japanese government.” “Slave Compensation,” Atlanta J.-Const., 23 Nov. 1994, at A8.

• “The Army Corps does address mitigation, but not all wetland and wildlife losses can be compensated.” “Isle of Wight Coal Storage,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 24 Nov. 1994, Suffolk Sun §, at 6.

B. And recompense. These verbs are almost precisely synonymous <to recompense a victim for injuries> but recompense is a formal word less commonly used. Until about 1750, though, the two were about equal in frequency of use. See recompense.

compensatory; *compensative. The latter has been a needless variant since the 17th century.

Current ratio: 269:1
competence; competency. Though H.W. Fowler considered competency a needless variant, since the late 19th century these terms have come to exhibit a differentiation that should be encouraged. Competence usually bears the general sense "a basic or minimal ability to do something." E.g.: "Inman got his reputation in the first place. Was it based on the ability of Washington insiders to judge the character and competence of public officials?" Jeff Greenfield, "Inman Exit Shows Insiders Can Err," Chicago Sun-Times, 24 Jan. 1994, at 23.

Today competence is unnecessary in all but its legal sense: "the ability to understand problems and make decisions; the ability to stand trial." A severely mentally retarded person, an incompetent, is said to have legal incompetency. The usual phrase is competency to stand trial. See incompetent.

Avoid inelegant variation with these two terms—e.g.: "But the primary suggestion is that counselor competency [read competence] is a matter of personal competence and independence, relying on counselor abilities and sensibility to boundaries of loyalty." Ralph D. Barney & Jay Black, "Ethics and Professional Persuasive Communications," Public Relations Rev., 22 Sept. 1994, at 233. (This incompetent sentence, of course, does not quite contain a comprehendible thought—as, perhaps, the variation strives unsuccessfully to disguise.)

complacency; *complacence. Complacency, the preferred form, occurs in print sources 21 times as often as *complacence, a needless variant since the 17th century.

Current ratio: 21:1


Complaisant (/kәm-ˈplә-zәnt/) means "obliging; tending to go along with others." E.g.: "The moans and groans out of Wall Street are echoed by a complaisant financial press that monitors and blows out of proportion (or often misinterprets) every economic indicator or statistic." Hobart Rowen, "Fed's Anti-Inflation Mindset Could Spell Trouble for the Economy," Wash. Post, 9 Oct. 1994, at H2. Today it is a rare word. But until about 1830 it was more common than complacent.

compleat is an archaic variant of complete with no place in modern contexts, unless facetiousness is intended. Even so, it is a one-word cliché.

*complected. See complexioned.

complementary. See complimentary.

complete. See adjectives (b).

completely, an intensive adverb, is often superfluous, as in the phrase completely superfluous (made doubly superfluous by further redundancy in the sentence that follows): "There's a completely superfluous [read superfluous] lemon-basil sauce on and around the fish that's really not necessary [delete phrase], but sopping it up with bread is nice." Nicki Pendleton, "Caffe Milano," Nashville Banner, 19 June 1996, at C3.

Indeed, the word completely creates redundancies when coupled with myriad adjectives—e.g.: • "For 12 long minutes the board was completely silent [read silent], seemingly stunned by this news." Joseph Nocera, "Investing in a Fool's Paradise," Fortune, 15 Apr. 1996, at 86.

"Naturally, the software industry wants to see this change happen, because no software is ever completely perfect [read perfect]." Ed Foster, "The Gripe Line," InfoWorld, 28 Oct. 1996, at 60.

"No gallery of pictures can ever show the true breadth of Christmas because it is celebrated in a completely unique [read unique] and original manner within the heart of each person who treasures it." Charles Hirschberg, "Christmas Around the World," Life, Dec. 1996, at 24.

See adjectives (b).

*completely obsolete. For this phrase, see archaic.

complexioned; *complected. The first has been standard since the 17th century; the second, a 19th-century Americanism, has been a needless variant since it first appeared. Today, complexioned is about four times as common in print sources—e.g.: • "I had hoped to tease some comments from our big-boned, ruddy-complexioned tour guide, who stood in the middle of the gardens as if he were fixed to that dry landscape like a stubborn cactus." Chris Card Fuller, "Sailing into New Waters," L.A. Times, 24 Nov. 1996, at L8.

"Her daughter caught a glimpse of the salesman, who was described at the time as a dark-complexioned man in his mid-20s, wearing beige slacks and a dress shirt and tie." Josh Dulaney, "Gunned Down at Her Front Door," Long Beach Press-Telegram, 26 July 2015, at 8.

Still, an editor could make a good case for dropping complexioned altogether in those two sentences and instead using dark and ruddy. And one wonders whether dark-complexioned is merely a roundabout wording for black or African-American.

But the word *complected—an irregularly formed word, since the noun is complexion and not complection—still occasionally appears. It should be edited—e.g.: "What is it about this rosy-complected [read -complexioned or, better, -faced] man that sends CEOs into rages?" Julie Schmit, "Lerach: Silicon Valley's Nightmare," USA Today, 23 Oct. 1996, at B1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*complected for complexioned: Stage 2

Current ratio (complexioned vs. *complected): 4:1
complicit; *complicitous. Neither term was much used until the late 1960s. Although *complicitous is the older term (dating from the mid-19th century), it appears only rarely in comparison to complicit, which is a back-formation made on the analogy of implicit. It dates from about 1950. Though most dictionaries don't include the word, it has become quite common—e.g.:

- “The murders have come mostly from the right, but from the left, as well, and it is widely felt that the government has been at least complicit in the deaths of several liberals.” Nicholas Lemann, “How Realpolitik Undid One Diplomat,” Wash. Post, 6 July 1980, at A1.
- “‘Shanghai Knights,’ like ‘Shanghai Noon,’ was written by Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, and opens once again in the Forbidden City, where a pretender to the British throne becomes complicit in a dastardly deed.” Joe Morgenstern, “In ‘Shanghai Knights,’ Chan Plays It for Kicks,” Wall Street J., 7 Feb. 2003, at W1.

Because it is at least as well formed as its alternative and has now established itself as the more common form, complicit should be accepted as standard. *Complicitous, despite its promising beginnings, should now be regarded as a needless variant.

Current ratio: 14:1

compliment; complement. Both as verbs and as nouns, these words are often confused. Compliment = (1) vb., to praise <she complimented the book lavishly>; or (2) n., a laudatory remark <her generous compliments emboldened the young author>. Complement = (1) vb., to supplement appropriately or adequately <special Thai desserts complemented the curries nicely>; or (2) n., an adequate supplement <the flowering plants are a splendid complement to the trees offered at the nursery>. Compliment sometimes displaces complement, especially in the phrase full compliment (= a complete set)—e.g.:

- “The Contract Appeals Board has never had a full compliment [read complement] of five administrative judges, the task force said, noting that the agency ‘at times has had difficulty achieving a quorum because of understaffing.’” Vernon Loeb, “Task Force Assails D.C. Procurement System,” Wash. Post, 15 Feb. 1996, at B3.

The reverse error, complement for compliment, is rare but does occur—e.g.: “The letter from Tiger complemented [read complimented] Laddie Boy for sticking by his master despite the hard times and accusations.” Stanley Coren, The Pawprints of History 269 (2002).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. *full compliment for full complement: Stage 1
   Current ratio (full compliment vs. *full compliment): 14:1
2. complement misused for the verb compliment: Stage 1
   Current ratio (complimented her on vs. *complemented her on): 32:1

complimentary; complementary. This pair of adjectives is even more susceptible to confusion than the corresponding nouns. When a mistake occurs, complimentary usually displaces complimentary—e.g.:

- “[William M.] Finkelstein knows his parents can handle it—and then some. ‘If they catch wind of somebody saying some less than complimentary [read complimentary] remarks about the show, they hunt them down,' he said, laughing.” Deborah Seibel, “Creator Draws on His Past to Conduct ‘Civil Wars,’” Chicago Trib., 15 Mar. 1992, TV Week §, at 3.
- “His teacher thought he was quite intriguing and original, and sent the manuscript to Faber in London, who published it, sent him the customary ten copies, complimentary [read complimentary] author’s copies, while he proceeded to get out on the street and try to sell.” William Gaddis, The Rush for Second Place 127 (2002).
- “During their stays, guests will be given complimentary [read complimentary] access to the Queen City Racquet and Fitness Center.” Jenny Callison, “Business Notes,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 13 Apr. 2003, at D3.
- “Casino host Sam Boyd, son of Boyd Gaming Chairman Bill Boyd, keeps the players comfortable with complimentary [read complimentary] rooms and other amenities as the game stretches from hours into days.” Jeff Simpson, “Big Games Bring In Big Money, Big Names,” Las Vegas Rev.-J., 13 Apr. 2003, at E1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
complimentary misused for complimentary: Stage 1

comply. A. Preposition with. Since the 17th century, comply has taken the preposition with, not to—e.g.:

- “In this case its power is further weakened because the Postal Service is not an actual federal agency and complies to [read complies with] the preservation act voluntarily.” Tom Angleberger, “Post Office Closing Won’t Be Delayed,” Roanoke Times, 8 Aug. 1997, at NRV1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*comply to for comply with: Stage 1
Current ratio (comply with vs. *comply to): 185:1

B. For follow. Comply suggests a hierarchy of authority: an inferior complies with an order from a superior. That’s certainly not the case when the Arizona Supreme Court decides not to follow a recommendation of the Arizona Commission on Judicial Conduct: “In its 23-year history, the commission has only once recommended that a judge be removed from office. The Supreme Court did not comply with
Compound Sentences. See subordination and coordination.

complicating, 197


Comprehensive. So spelled—not *comprehensible. See -ABLE (A).

compressible. So spelled—not *compressible. See -ABLE (A).

comprise. A. And compose. Correct use of these words is simple, but increasingly rare. The parts comprise the whole; the whole comprises the parts. The whole is comprised of the parts; the parts are comprised in the whole. Comprise, the more troublesome word in this pair, means “to contain; to consist of”—e.g.:

• “It will be seen that this little book comprises three sections not unusual in a college handbook.” John Crowe Ransom, A College Primer of Writing iii (1943).


• “Summit Hall Farm comprises several hundred acres on the exterior portion of the original settlement of the Gaither family.” Lana White Austin, “History and High Tech in Montgomery,” Wash. Times, 30 May 1997, at F41.

B. Erroneous Use of *is comprised of. The phrase *is comprised of is increasingly common but has long been considered poor usage. It was not a frequent collocation until about 1950. Replace it with some other, more accurate phrase—e.g.:

• “The Rhode Island Wind Ensemble is comprised of [read comprises or has] 50 professional and amateur musicians, ranging in age from 15 to 82.” “At the Colleges: Brown University,” Providence J.-Bull., 14 Sept. 1997, at H3.

• “This group is comprised of [read comprises or is made up of] the 160,000 uninsured residents of Nassau County and an estimated equivalent number of under-insured.” Letter of Rosemarie C. Guercia, “Providing Health Care,” Newsday (N.Y.), 6 Oct. 1997, at A33.

• “Moreover, the crowd in the mysterious room was comprised of [read comprised or was composed of] adults, and Harry knew there were not nearly that many teachers at Hogwarts.” J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire 584 (2000).

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*is comprised of for comprises: Stage 4
Current ratio (comprises vs. *is comprised of): 6:1

C. Comprise for make up or constitute. If the whole comprises the parts, the reverse can’t be true—e.g.:

• “Of the 50 stocks that comprise [read make up] the index, 40 had gains, 8 had losses and 2 were unchanged.” “Market Finishes Monster Week,” Fla. Today, 15 June 1997, at E2.

• “The 18 countries that comprise [read constitute or make up] APEC represent some of the fastest growing economies in the world.” “U.S. Ties to Asia: Why Should We Care?” Daily News (L.A.), 25 Nov. 1997, at B1.

Language-Change Index

Comprise misused for are comprised in or constitute: Stage 3
D. *Comprise for are. This is an odd error based on a misunderstanding of the meaning of comprise. E.g.: "They comprise [read are] three of the top four names in the batting order of the 30 most influential sports people in B.C. for 1997." Mike Beamish, "B.C.'s Top Guns," Vancouver Sun, 22 Feb. 1997, at G1.

E. Misspelled *comprise. This is an infrequent error—e.g.: "Hence, if a sample were comprized of [read comprised] a wide diversity of organizations, drawn from several industries, an accounting firm classified as having an 'elite' culture in this study may be classed as having a 'collegial' culture compared to other organizations included in another study." Scott Holmes & Stephen Marsden, "An Exploration of the Espoused Organizational Cultures of Public Accounting Firms," Accounting Horizons, Sept. 1996, at 26.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*comprise mispronounced: Stage 1
Current ratio (comprise vs. *comprized): 683:1

F. Compromise for *comprise. See DOUBLE BOBBLES.

comptroller (= a government official in charge of finance, audits, and the like) is really the same word as controller (the spelling used for the equivalent person in private business). The word is pronounced /kon-troh-lar/-the same as controller. Sounding the -p- has traditionally been viewed as semiliterate. (See PRONUNCIATION (b.)) Comptroller is more common in AmE than in BrE, where it is archaic.

The strange spelling of comptroller originated in the zeal of 15th-century Latinists who sought to respell medieval French loanwords on the "purer" Latin model. Hence account became accomp, and count became compt. Comptroller is one of the few survivors among such respellings, and it is also one of the bungles perpetrated by those ardent Latinists: the con- in controller was mistakenly associated with the word count, when in fact it is merely the Latin prefix. So the respelling (which was never supposed to affect the pronunciation) should never have been. But we are several centuries too late to correct it, the result being that many people have difficulty pronouncing the word.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
comptroller mispronounced: Stage 4
compute; *compute. The first is standard. The second is a back-formed NEEDLESS VARIANT—e.g.: "The OSRAP gives logisticians the ability to vary the parameters used in computing [read computing] requirements." John R. Millard, "Computing Requirements for a Changing Army," 33 Army Logistician, Mar. 2001, at 21. See BACK-FORMATIONS.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*compute for compute: Stage 1
Current ratio (compute vs. *compute): 18,445:1

Computerese, the JARGON of computer wizards, is making inroads into STANDARD ENGLISH. Thus access and format and sequence have become verbs, input has enjoyed widespread use as both noun and verb, and online and user-friendly have begun to be used as models for NEologisms (e.g., on-stream used of an oil well, reader-friendly used of well-written documents). No one can rightly object, of course, to computerese in computing contexts, where it is undeniably useful. But many computer terms have acquired figurative senses, thereby invading the general language. Careful users of language are wary of adopting any of these trendy locutions. Although some of the terms may remain and become standard, many others will keep their jargonistic stigma. Still others will thrive for a time and then fall into disuse. Such are the vagaries of the English vocabulary. See obscurity.

computerize. See -ize.

comrade; *camarade. The latter, an archaic GALLICISM, is a NEEDLESS VARIANT. See camaraderie.

Current ratio: 12,486:1

comstockery (often cap.) refers to prudish censorship, or attempted censorship, of supposed immorality in art or literature. In 1873, Congress passed the so-called Comstock Law—a federal statute to control obscenity, pornography, abortion, and the use of contraceptives—pushed through by one Anthony Comstock (1844–1915), who was a leader of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. George Bernard Shaw invented the word comstockery, pejorative from the first, when he wrote in The New York Times in 1905: "Comstockery is the world's standing joke at the expense of the United States."

concede. See cede.

concededly. See -edly & sentence adverbs.

*consensus. See consensus.

concept; conception. Both may mean "an abstract idea." Conception also means "the act of forming abstract ideas." H.W. Fowler wrote that conception is the ordinary term, concept the philosophical term (FMEU1 at 88). But the words have undergone a reversal since he was writing in 1926, and today concept is the ordinary term.

True, concept is sometimes just a high-flown equivalent of design, program, thought, or idea—e.g.:

- "Like everyone else familiar with 'Star Trek,' Frakes has his own thoughts about the longevity of the concept [read program or idea], which debuted on television 30 years ago this fall." Ron Weiskind, "Frakes to Helm Next 'Trek' Film—Behind the Camera," Chicago Sun-Times, 12 Apr. 1996, Weekend Plus §, at 58. (On the use of helm as a verb, see helm.)
- "The basic concept [read idea] is to activate a string while lightly touching one of its nodes—a point where the string divides into fractional lengths." Muriel Anderson, "Sweeping Palm Harmonics," Guitar Player, Dec. 1996, at 146.
But the word is becoming so commonplace that it has lost most of the original distinction.

When the reference is to a way of conceiving or a manner of thought, as opposed to some straightforward idea, conception is the right word—e.g.:

- “Economists are often too narrow or mechanical in their conception of risk, viewing it simply as the variance or standard deviation of the expected return.” Charles Catcart, “Broader Implications of the Information Age,” Global Investor, Feb. 1996, at 42.


- “In addition, he returns to Murger's conception of the central character of Mimi, giving her a sexy, tempestuous, flirtatious character as well as making her a heroin addict.” Ellen Pfeifer, “Boheme: Callas Get Worked Over,” Boston Herald, 24 Nov. 1996, at 43.

conceptional, immaculate. See immaculate conception.

**conceputal; conceptualistic; conceptional; concep-tive.** These words are very close. *Conceptual* and *conceptional* both mean “of, relating to, or involving a conception or idea”—*conceptual* being the usual term. E.g.: ”The *conceptual* design work, funded by the Transportation Trust Fund, is scheduled for completion next summer.” Pat R. Gilbert, “Bergen to Get Rte. 4 Project, Light-Rail Study,” Record (N.J.), 7 Nov. 2002, at A3.

When not simply a needless variant of *conceptual*, the word *conceptional* serves as the adjective corresponding to a different kind of conception, namely, the fertilization of an egg—e.g.:

- “It is not easy to reconcile this attitude with the papal concession of some kinds of anti-*conceptual* measures.” Glanville Williams, The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law 69 (1957; repr. 1972).

- “Retardation of neuronal maturation in premature infants was compared with term infants of the same post-*conceptual* age.” Naomi Breslau et al., “Psychiatric Sequelae of Low Birth Weight at 6 Years of Age,” 24 J. Abnormal Child Psychology 385 (1996).

**Conceptualistic** = (1) of, relating to, or involving the philosophical or psychological doctrine of conceptualism; or (2) employing or based on conceptions. In sense 2, *conceptualistic* bears a pejorative sense—e.g.: ”This highly *conceptualistic* reasoning is not only difficult to square with the language of section 2(c); it also impedes efforts to interpret that provision.” Arthur H. Travers, “Commercial Bribery and the Antitrust Laws,” 40 Antitrust Bull. 779 (1995).

**Conceptive** = of, relating to, or involving the process of mental conception (i.e., forming thoughts and ideas). E.g.: ”Contemporary genetic research continues to reveal how profoundly other more ‘spiritual’ traits of the person, such as intelligence and emotive temperament, are molded by one’s *conceptive* history.” John J. Conley, “Narcissus Cloned,” America, 12 Feb. 1994, at 15. Sometimes, though, *conceptive* appears in contexts in which *conceptual* would be better—e.g.: ”Early methods of *preconceptual* [read *preconceptual*] sex selection—which, in contrast to *post-conceptive* [read *postconceptual*] selection, seem to afford greater latitude to human ingenuity—may be roughly sorted into biologic and symbolic techniques.” Owen D. Jones, “Bringing the Child of Your Choice into the Future,” Recorder (S.F.), 31 Aug. 1993, at 8.

**conceptualize**, a 19th-century coinage, is often a bloated word that can be replaced by *conceive*, *envisage*, *think*, *understand*, or *visualize*—e.g.:


- “His ability to *conceptualize* [read conceive or, possibly, understand or see] and demarcate diverse legal systems opened the world of comparative law to generations of students.” Wolfgang Saxon, “Rudolf Schlesinger, 87, Expert on the World’s Legal Systems,” N.Y. Times, 22 Nov. 1996, at D19.

- “Class 29 is seeking an artist or landscape architect to *conceptualize* [read design] and fabricate the monument.” Amanda Purser, “Local Briefs,” Pensacola News J., 14 Aug. 2015, at A4.

**concern**, n., merits editorial attention when used in either of two ways. First, it is sometimes used in the sense of “company,” “firm,” or “business.” In this use, the word smacks of old-fashioned *bureaucratise* and should usually yield to a more precise word—e.g.:

- “He [Erskine Boyce Bowles] has long been the President’s first choice to succeed Mr. Panetta, but he had to be persuaded, having just last January started a merchant banking *concern* [read *firm*] that specializes in buying mid-sized companies on behalf of investors.” Todd S. Purdum, “After the Election: The Players,” N.Y. Times, 9 Nov. 1996, § 1, at 1.

- “Other researchers charged that the Nazis sold leather from Jewish factories to the Swiss shoe *concern* [read *company*] Bally.” Nomi Morris, “Nazis, Gold—and Justice,” Maclean’s, 11 Nov. 1996, at 32.

The word is more defensible when it refers to more than just businesses, as in this example where the *concerns* might also include interests such as land or mineral rights that are leased to the businesses: “Of West Virginia’s 34 senators, . . . [4] have interests in oil, gas and timber *concerns*.” Scott Finn, “Legislators’ Conflicts Can Cut Both Ways,” Sunday Gaz. Mail (Charleston, W. Va.), 28 May 2000, at A1.

Second, the word is sometimes otiose—e.g.: ”This has become one of the most troubling aspects of the Clinton tenure, its across-the-board willingness to subvert national agencies charged with law enforcement and security *concerns* [delete *concerns*].” “Integrity of the Institutions,” Wall Street J., 20 Mar. 1997, at A16, A20. The word adds nothing to that sentence.
concerning. For this word as an acceptable dangling modifier, see DANGLERS (e).

concerto (= a musical composition for orchestra and a solo instrument) has two plurals: concertos (preferable) and concerti (pretentious). The anglicized plural has greatly predominated since the 18th century. Both Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians (Eric Blom ed., 5th ed. 1954—as well as later editions) and the Harvard Dictionary of Music (Willi Apel ed., 1972) use the plural form concertos. But in foreign phrases where the Italian plural is unavoidable, it is quite proper: concerti grossi, concerti ecclesiastici, etc. See PLURALS (b).

Occasionally the incorrect form *concertoes appears—e.g.: “When I work on Mozart concertoes [read concertos], for example, there has to be a minimum of time expended—long periods.” Jeff Simon, “Keith Jarrett: A Rare Interview,” Buffalo News, 25 Aug. 1996, at F1 (attributing the statement to Keith Jarrett).

language-change index

1. concertos as a plural (as opposed to concerti): Stage 5
   Current ratio: 9:1
2. concertos misspelled *concertoes: Stage 1
   Current ratio: 25,893:1

concessionaire (= the owner or manager of a refreshment stand at a recreational facility) is the standard term. *Concessioner and concessionary are NEEDLESS VARIANTS.

concessive; concessionary; concessional. Conces-

sive = (1) tending to concede <a concessive stance in negotiating>; or (2) expressing the idea of con-

cession <whereas is commonly a concessive word>.

Concessionary = of, relating to, or involving conces-

sion or concessions <concessionary companies—

e.g., food vendors at the fairgrounds>. Concessional

is the usual word in financial contexts when the reference is to a concessional loan, one offered on

favorable terms—e.g.: “Generous concessional treatment of debt-burdened African economies is essential if the continent’s development crisis is to end.” “Aid and Reform in Nigeria,” Fin. Times, 6 Jan. 1992, at 10.

language-change index

*concessional for concessive: Stage 1

conch (= the spiral shell of a large mollusk) is pro-

nounced either /konk/ (preferred) or /konch/. The plural form depends on which pronunciation is used. Those who say /konk/ make the plural conchs; those who say /konch/ make the plural conches. Historically, conchs has been the usual plural in both AmE and BrE, but conches has recently surged ahead, especially in BrE.

Current ratio (conches vs. conchs): 1.5:1

concierge /kon-see-airzh/ is frequently mispronounced /kon-see-air/ by those affecting a French pro-

nunciation. In French, though, the -g- is pronounced / zzh/ because the vowel -e follows it. So the word is not like many other French words—lait and rendezvous, for example—in which the final consonant is silent.

Still, an informal survey at hotels in major American cities suggests that about half of all hotel employees use the incorrect pronunciation. See PRONUNCIATION (b) & HYPERCORRECTION (k).

language-change index

concierge mispronounced /kon-see-air/: Stage 2

conciliatory; *conciliative. Conciliatory = (1) tending to conciliate; or (2) of, relating to, or involving concil-

iation or mediation. *Conciliative has been a NEEDLESS VARIANT for centuries.

Current ratio: 1,394:1

concision; conciseness. Drawing a fine distinction, H.W. Fowler wrote: “Concision means the process of cutting down, and conciseness the cut-down state” (FMEU1 at 295). In fact, though, the two are generally used as synonyms for the cut-down state—e.g.:• “Pagels’ footnotes are a model of erudition and conciseness.” Shalom Goldman, “Elaine Pagels Traces the Reli-

gious Roots of the Tendency to Demonize the Other,” Newsday (N.Y.), 4 June 1995, at 29.

• “The type is undoubtedly familiar to Kennedy, a former newspaperman who has successfully transferred the virtues of clarity and concision to fiction.” R.Z. Sheppard, “Living with the Ashes,” Time, 13 May 1996, at 92.

• “The second of the pair seems to me one of the finest things Knussen has ever done, a miracle of conciseness and profundity that is all over in less than three minutes.” Andrew Clements, “Classical CD of the Week,” Guardian, 22 Nov. 1996, at T20.

• “Tempchin’s best songs, whether vintage or on his lov-


Both words are common today, conciseness a little more so in both BrE and AmE. When concision appears, it is typically used in a sense that Fowler implicitly disapproved. This frequency might reflect the influence of precision, by analogy.

What ruling, then? If any differentiation is now possible, the word conciseness—like other -ness words—emphasizes a quality, whereas concision emphasizes a static condition. This is a fine distinction indeed, and one that not all writers will be able to apply. When the distinction is hard to make, let euphony govern. But it would be a mistake (and a bootless one) to brand either word a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

conclusive; conclusory; *conclusionary; *conclu-

sional. Conclusive (the common word) = authorita-

tive; decisive. Conclusionary (a common legal term) = expression of a factual inference without stating the facts or reasoning on which the inference is based <conclusionary allegations>. The other two words are NEEDLESS VARIANTS of conclusory.

Current ratio (conclusory vs. *conclusionary vs.

*conclusional): 108:7:1

concomitance; *concomitancy. Though neither is common, concomitance is standard. *Concomitancy is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 27:1
CONCORD = grammatical agreement of one word with another to which it relates. Concord embraces number, person, case, and gender. It applies most often to (1) a subject and its verb; (2) a noun and its pronoun; (3) a subject and its complement; (4) a noun and its appositive; (5) a relative pronoun and its antecedent; and (6) an adjective and its noun. Errors in concord for (1), (2), and (3) are examined at (A), (B), and (C) below; for (4), see APPOSITIVES; for (5), see (D) below and REMOTE RELATIVES; for (6), see (E) below.

A. Subject–Verb Disagreement. Errors in subject–verb agreement are, unfortunately, legion in AmE, especially in speech—e.g.:  
- “Every one of us have [read has] a role to play . . . .” President Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, 23 Jan. 1996, at 8:49 pm CST.
- “In reference to Haiti: ‘The flow of desperate refugees to our shores have [read has] subsided.’” President Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, 23 Jan. 1996, at 8:56 pm CST.
- “‘When one of us suffer [read suffers], all of us suffers [read suffer].’” President George W. Bush, speech to the Victory 2002 Luncheon, Charleston, S.C., 29 July 2002.

But the error does occasionally find its way into edited publications, too—e.g.:  
- “Because words is [read are] my business, I knew most of the examples on the Web page, though I had to look up ‘oubliette.’” Mel White, “Words Qua Words,” in Active Years, Nov. 2004, at 64.

The most common error occurs with the expletive there, and especially when it’s contracted with the verb is (e.g., There’s two ways we can go instead of There are two ways we can go). This error also occurs with the adverbs here (e.g., Here’s your menu and wine list instead of Here are your menu and wine list) and where (e.g., Where’s my wallet and keys? instead of Where are my wallet and keys?). The grammarian Ed Good, who trains technical writers, calls this “[t]he biggest grammar mistake in the United States.” C. Edward Good, A Grammar Book for You and I . . . Oops, Mel 301 (2002). For more on this error, see there is (n).

The agreement mistake can also come up in relative clauses—e.g.: “‘We must not be silent’, said German Chancellor Angela Merkel at a memorial ceremony in Berlin’s renovated Rykestrasse synagogue, one of the few that was [read were] not burned down that night by the Nazis . . . .” Bret Stephens, “‘Tolerance Is Not the Lesson of Kristallnacht,” Wall Street J., 11 Nov. 2008, at A15. (The antecedent of the relative pronoun that is few, not one, so the pronoun takes on the number of its antecedent.) See one of the [+ pl. n.] who (or that).

Are these merely symptoms of the decay of modern English? Consider: “The adequate narration may take up a term less brief, especially if explanation or comment here and there seem [read seems] requisite to the better understanding of such incidents.” Herman Melville, Billy Budd 73 (1891; repr. [Signet ed.] 1979).

Quoting Melville is not to excuse lapses of this kind: every generation can be more vigilant about its subjects and verbs. But we shouldn’t consider these problems to have been unthinkable two or three generations ago. Slips of the pen can be found in the works of writers from Shakespeare to the present.

The British—oddly to American eyes and ears—consider organizations, especially sports teams, plural—e.g.:  
- “‘On the field, England were going through their ritual reincarnation . . . . England are beset by similar urges.” Kevin Mitchell, "Terrace Provides a Few Horse Laughs," Observer, 25 July 1997, Sport §, at 2.
- “‘When the rain arrived yesterday, Australia were 201 runs ahead.” Graham Otway, "Aussies Turn the Screw," Sunday Times (London), 27 July 1997, § 2, at 1.

Kingsley Amis defends this construction: ‘‘Anybody with a tittle of wit knows that country-plus-plural refers to a sporting event or something similar. This is precisely what the verb is doing in the plural. It shows that a number of individuals, a team, is referred to, not one thing, a country.” Kingsley Amis, The King’s English 59–60 (1997). But Americans are no more accustomed to saying England are than they are to writing anybody with a tittle of wit. It’s pure BrE, and England are surely isn’t BrE at its best.

B. Noun–Pronoun Disagreement. Depending on how you look at it, this is either one of the most frequent blunders in modern writing or a godsend that allows us to avoid sexism. Where noun–pronoun disagreement can be avoided, avoid it. Where it can’t be avoided, resort to it cautiously because some people may doubt your literacy—e.g.: “You can only teach a person something if that person can comprehend and use what is being taught to them [delete to them].” J.M. Balkin, “Turandot’s Victory,” 2 Yale J. Law & Humanities 299, 302 (1990).

This type of disagreement in number is especially common in BrE—e.g.:  
- “A starting point could be to give more support to the company secretary. They are, or should be, privy to the confidential deliberations and secrets of the board and

As this seeming sloppiness mounts—and invades edited AmE—the complaints mount as well. For example: "Columnist James Brady . . . noted on page 38 that Richard F. Shepard was grammatically incorrect when he wrote, 'Nobody remembers a journalist for their writing.' Perhaps it was Mr. Shepard who wrote the headline for the AT&T ad that appeared on Page 37 of the same issue: 'This florist wilted because of their 800 service.'" Letter of Jerry Galvin, Advertising Age, 4 Nov. 1991, at 26.

Why is this usage becoming so common? It is the most convenient solution to the single biggest problem in sexist language—the generic masculine pronoun. A recent advertisement says, “Every student can have their own computer,” so as to avoid saying his own computer—a phrasing that would probably alienate many consumers. The Macmillan Dictionary of Business and Management (1988) defines cognitive dissonance as “a concept in psychology [that] describes the condition in which a person’s attitudes conflict with their behavior” (p. 38). In his 1991 State of the Union address, President George Bush said: "If anyone tells you that America's best days are behind her, then they're looking the wrong way." And one of the best-edited American papers allows this: "If the newspaper can't fire him for an ethical breach surely he can fire him for being stupid." Michael Gartner, "U.S. Law Says We Have to Kill Saddam Hussein the Hard Way," Wall Street J., 31 Jan. 1991, at A15. In all varieties of World English, resistance to the singular they is fast receding.

For related discussions, see each (A), pronouns (D) & sexism (b).

C. Subject–Complement Disagreement: Misplaced Number in Cause and Effect. Another common mistake, in AmE and BrE alike, is to attribute one result to two separate subjects, when logically a separate result necessarily occurred with each subject—e.g.:

- "In school, seats are not assigned, yet students tend to sit in the same seats or nearly the same each time, and sometimes feel vaguely resentful if someone else gets [read others get] there first and takes [their] seat [read take their seats]." Robin T. Lakoff, Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives 121 (1990). (This might be broken into two sentences, the second of which would read: They sometimes feel vaguely resentful if their regular seats are taken by others.)

- "Designated hitter Jason Layne, already sporting a black eye, was hit by a pitch [read pitches] twice." Rick Cantu, "Texas Baseball Team Thumps Favorite Tech," Austin Am.–Statesman, 15 Mar. 1996, at C1, C9. (The grammar here misleadingly suggests that the batter was hit twice by the same pitch.)

A related problem occurs in the following sentence, in which both is followed by a singular complement (candidate): “Today, both camps were enthusiastic about how their candidate fared.” Richard L. Berke, “Rival Camps in Final Debate Faced Subtle and Basic Aims,” N.Y. Times, 18 Oct. 1996, at A1, C21. The error could have been corrected by saying each camp was . . . its candidate or both camps were . . . their candidates.

This is not an infallible rule, however. When the complement is not a concrete noun, the singular is usually required <the compromise let both adversaries retain their dignity>. The singular is also needed with mass nouns, of course <both cities get their water from the same reservoir>. And sometimes neither the singular nor the plural can prevent ambiguity. As one authority pointed out, in Both men rely heavily on their wives, the men may or may not be bigamists; but if the sentence is written Both men rely heavily on their wife, then she most certainly is one. Barbara Wallraff, Word Court 127–28 (2000).

D. Relative Pronoun–Antecedent Disagreement. This problem doesn't often arise, but a relative pronoun is supposed to agree with its antecedent in both number and person. So it's correct to say It is I who am here, not *It is I who is here. Because I is first-person singular, who must also be first-person singular, and the verb—it naturally follows—must be am. Strictly speaking, the following forms are correct:

- I who have made;
- one who has;
- they who have; and
- I who am.

E.g.:


- “In fact, it is they who have been let down.” Randy Harvey, “Robinson Proved Only That He Should Move On,” L.A. Times, 24 Nov. 1997, at C2.

E. Adjective–Noun Disagreement. Some agreement problems arise between an adjective and the noun or nouns it modifies—e.g.: "In an outpouring of grief such as is seldom seen, the 'beloved community' of Martin Luther King’s dream, Tony Brown’s 'Team America' came to say good-bye to Barbara [Jordan]. People of all races, social class [read classes], national origin [read origins] and sexual orientation [read orientations] joined in mourning her death," Rosemary Simmons, “Barbara Jordan’s Example Inspires Texas,” Daily Texan, 21 Feb. 1996, at 4. But that sentence might read better if all were replaced by the “singular” adjective every and if each of the nouns were made singular: People of every race, social class, national origin, and sexual orientation . . .

F. Possessive Noun as Antecedent. See possessives (k).

concrete. See cement.

concupiscence (= inordinate lust; extreme sexual desire) is pronounced /kan-kyoo-pi-sәn/[tʃ/.

concussion; contusion. Concussion = (1) violent shaking; (2) shock caused by a sudden impact; or (3) injury to the brain caused by a heavy blow.
Contusion = a bruise; an injury resulting from a blow that does not break the skin.

condemn; contemn. To condemn, in one sense, is to render judgment against (a person or thing) <the court condemned the accused to life in prison>. The word has passed from legal into general usage mostly in the figurative sense “to disapprove forcefully; to declare reprehensible”—e.g.: “Spiritual rites and modern development clashed when members of a Native American tribe condemned the way the Irvine Co. on Wednesday reburied ancient artifacts unearthed in 1994 during the building of a Newport Beach housing development.” Tina Nguyen, “Chief Unhappy with Reburial of Tribal Artifacts,” L.A. Times, 28 Nov. 1996, at B1.

In AmE, condemn has the additional legal sense “to pronounce judicially (land, etc.) as converted or convertible to public use, subject to reasonable compensation.” E.g.: “In condemning the structure, city inspectors said large sections of the roof and walls had collapsed.” Will Tracy, “Council Approves Spending to Raze State Theater,” Hartford Courant, 26 Apr. 1994, at B3.

• “They fear a massive Everglades restoration project—which includes plans to condemn property and raise the water table—will drive them from their land.” “Property Rights: Quiet Revolt,” Fla. Times-Union (Georgia ed.), 16 Sept. 2002, at B4.

• “Government should condemn property only as a last resort. It should condemn only to acquire property it cannot otherwise get that is necessary, not merely desirable, for the public good.” Editorial, Salt Lake Trib., 19 Sept. 2002, at A18.

Contemn = to hold in contempt; to disregard; esp., to treat (as laws or court orders) with contemptuous disregard. The OED notes that it is “chiefly a literary word”—e.g.:

• “Rooted as he was in the idiom of Shakespeare and Donne, he contemned such trendy ploys.” “Richard Burton, RIP,” Nat’l Rev., 7 Sept. 1984, at 17.

• “From Henry James through John O’Hara, the Irish, once much contemmed in American life, were sensitively attuned to the horrors of snobbery and stimulated by the delights of social attainment.” Joseph Epstein, Commentary (Book Rev.), Nov. 1994, at 52.

• “The best regime would recognize the duty to evaluate all human beings on an equal basis, regardless of nationality, and to respect or to contemn persons strictly in accordance with their virtue.” Thomas L. Pangle, “Justice Among Nations in Platonic and Aristotelian Political Philosophy,” Am. J. Political Science, 1 Apr. 1998, at 377.

In legal contexts, the corresponding agent noun contemnor is common. But see contemner.

condemned, n. As a matter of functional shift, the past-participial adjective condemned is often used as a noun <the condemned were given one last wish>. Occasionally writers erroneously use the word condemn in this sense—e.g. “The drop from the gallow’s [read condemned’s] neck (ensuring near instant death).” Rhett Morgan, “Gallows at Fort Smith Still Attracting Attention,” Tulsa World, 28 June 2001, at 9.

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condemn misused for the attributive noun condemned: Stage 1
condemner; condemnor. The -er spelling (/kәn-dem-әr/) is preferred in the general sense “one that disapproves.” But in AmE, condemnor (/kәn-dem-nәr/) or /kәn-dem-nәr/ predominates in the sense “a public or semipublic entity that expropriates private property for public use.” See -er (A).

condensible. So spelled—not *condensible. See -ABLE (A).

condole, vi.; console, v.t. To console is to express sympathy; one condoles with another on a loss. The verb is intransitive. Although the corresponding plural noun, condolences, is quite common, the verb form is rare, especially in AmE. E.g.:


• “Thompson, though condoling with Ned on his father’s death, hopes that Ned might be persuaded to host a reception for the organisation.” “Guinness Peer Wants to Ban Bomb,” Evening Standard, 22 June 1992, at 8.

To console is to comfort (another), especially in grief or depression. E.g.:

• “Clinton—who consolde victims’ families earlier in the day—ordered that more baggage be screened or hand-searched and that aircraft making international flights be fully inspected.” “Experts Key In on Brief Noise in Cockpit,” Voice Recorder, Detroit News, 26 July 1996, at A1.

• “Fisher consolde the parents at the home and later met with them at All Children’s Hospital in St. Petersburg, where the child was taken.” Phuong Nguyen, “Agency for Victims Seeking Volunteers,” Sarasota Herald-Trib., 29 Nov. 1996, at B1.

Occasionally, condole is misused for console—e.g.:


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condole misused for console; Stage 1
Current ratio (consoling the vs. *condoling the): 33:1

condominium. Pl. condominiums. See plurals (B).

condonation; *condonance; condonement. Condonation = (1) the pardoning of a fault or misdeed, esp. when the pardon is merely implicit, as when a person who has been wronged acts toward the offender as if the offense is forgotten; or (2) in law, the complete
forgiveness and wiping out of a marital offense, esp. adultery. Today, in both AmE and BrE, the word is fairly rare—smacking of sesquipedality—and in law is usually confined to discussions of matrimonial offenses.

*Condonance is a needless variant. Condonement is a technical term in certain card games.

Current ratio (condonation vs. *condonance): 389:1

**conduce to**, though slightly bookish, is often a better and always a shorter way of saying be conducive to (something desirable)—e.g.: "'Writing,' Mamet says in his book, 'is a magnificently solitary occupation. One works by oneself all day long, wondering, dreaming, supposing. All attitudes to which Vermont conduces.'" Tim Rutten, "National Geographic Travels on Literary Paths," L.A. Times (Home ed.), 19 July 2002, Living §, at 1. See be-verbs (b).

When the result referred to is undesirable, lead or contribute is typically a better word choice—e.g.:

- "Finally, the scheme might well conduce to [read lead to] the creation of separatist schools that reject the American civic culture even more forcefully than conventional public schools, under the spell of multiculturalism, are already doing." Chester E. Finn Jr., "Can the Schools Be Saved?" Commentary, Sept. 1996, at 41, 44.
- "[A conditional sentence is] weak, and nothing conduces [read contributes] more certainly to giving the impression that one is a windbag." Reid Buckley, "The 10 Commandments of Public Speaking," Forbes, 18 Nov. 1996, at 61.

**Conductive; conducive.** Conductive describes a thing's ability to conduct energy (conductive wire) (heat-conductive). Conductive describes the quality of promoting, contributing to, or helping to bring about some outcome (conductive to success) (conductive to growth). Conducive is sometimes misused for conductive—e.g.:

- "Ever the competitor, Tiger Woods said he would not bet on himself to win the 2001 U.S. Open, but that's only because the short odds are not conductive [read conducive] to a big payday." Damon Hack, "Transcending the Sport," Newsday (N.Y.), 13 June 2001, at A70.

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**Conductive** misused for **conducive**: Stage 1

Current ratio (conducive to health vs. *conductive to health): 77:1

**Conduit** is pronounced /kon-doo-it/ in AmE, /kon-dit/ or /kan-dit/ in BrE.

**Confectionary; confectionery.** Despite some overlap, these terms are usefully distinguished. Confectionary, an adjectival, means (1) "of, relating to, or resembling a confection"; or (2) "of, relating to, or involving confectioners." Confectionery, always a noun, means (1) "confections collectively; candy"; or (2) "a confectioner's business or place of business; candy store." The latter is the more frequently used term.

**Confederation; federation.** The distinction between these two words is subtle, but it's crucial to understanding the nature and history of American political power.

A **Confederation** is a league of states, each of which retains its sovereignty. The states may delegate some rights and powers to a central authority—but they do not delegate supremacy over their internal affairs, including the right to withdraw from the confederation. A **federation** is a union of states with a strong central authority and no true regional sovereignty. In the United States, we speak of the sovereign states, and they do retain extensive rights and powers of their own. But they are always subject to the U.S. Constitution (the fundamental law of the land) and to the powers it gives to the national government.

William Safire has observed that in 1789 the United States changed, in Northerners' minds, from a confederation to a federation. But to Southerners, the country retained the characteristics of a confederation. Later, of course, in 1860, Southerners thought that the union could be dissolved. When the Southern states seceded, they chose the word **confederation** to describe their own grouping—although they did not put a right to secede in their own constitution, an inconsistency noted in the North. See William Safire, "Confedery Rises Again," N.Y. Times, 29 Sept. 1991, § 6, at 18.

**confers**. In Latin, **confer** means "to compare," whence the present English meaning of the abbreviated form **compare**, namely, cf. The unabbreviated form **confer** no longer has this meaning; today it means (transitively) "to come together to take counsel and exchange views" or (transitively) "to bestow, usu. from a position of authority."

In this latter (transitive) sense, one **confers** something on, not in, another. E.g.:


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*confer in for confer on: Stage 1

**Conferee** = (1) a member of or participant in a conference; or (2) one on whom something is conferred. Although this word has the look of a neologism, it
predates the Declaration of Independence. Sense 1 is now usual—e.g.:


*Conferee is a variant form best avoided.

**conferencing.** Although the OED records conference as a (rare) verb from 1846, the SOED and W3 omit it. Increasingly common in AmE, conferencing is often a bloated NEEDLESS VARIANT of conferring. The word has also become rather widespread in the forms teleconferencing and videoconferencing, favorite activities in American business. The word is likely to survive in those forms.

**conferment.** See conferral.

**conferable.** So spelled. It is pronounced with the stress on the second syllable: /kәn-fәr-ә-bal/. Throughout the 19th century, the spelling *conferible* was common—but that was superseded by 1900. Cf. referable.

**conferral; conferment.** The question is a straightforward one: are we to model the noun after the stress on the second syllable: /kәn-fәr-ә-bal/. In American business. The word is likely to survive in those forms.

**conferral** appears in hundreds of federal-law cases (more than 20 times as often as conferment) and in hundreds of state cases (almost 6 times as often). Judicial usage, then, inclines dramatically toward conferential. E.g.: “A distinct feature of our Nation’s system of governance has been the con- ferral of political power upon public and municipal corporations for the management of matters of local concern.” Owen v. City of Independence, 445 U.S. 622, 638 (1980).

In the popular press, likewise, conferral appears today nearly twice as often as conferment, which pre- dominated for most of the 20th century.

If a distinction between the terms is possible, it is that conferral refers to the awarding of an honor or title (the evening concluded with the conferral of an honorary degree on the graduation speaker), while conferment refers to the event where a conferral takes place (the annual conferment dinner will be held on June 16). This DIFFERENTIATION seems worth encouraging.

**confess. A. Confess to for confess.** Traditionally, people confess crimes, guilt, weaknesses, faults, and the like. Less traditionally—though at least since the 18th century—people have confessed to these things. Euphony should govern the phrasing. In the following three examples, confess to sounds better than confess alone would have:

- “But worse, he was convicted even after the lead witness against him, Ivan F. Boesky, confessed to keeping millions of dollars in ill-gotten profits.” “Adding Insult to Injury,” N.Y. Times, 15 July 1990, at F2.

In this episode, the recipient of the coveted single date, who confesses to being a bit ‘high-maintenance,’ gets to don a bikini and go stand-up paddleboarding.” Sue Yeap, “Remote Patrol,” West Australian, 19 Aug. 2015, at 5.

Cf. admit.

**confessedly** 199

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Cf. admit.
confess innocence

at least 1640, however, and is undeniably (or perhaps confessedly) useful. Still, adverbs ending in -edly can assuredly be overworked.

Following are two typical—and unobjectionable—uses of confessedly:


See -edly.

*confess innocence. See confess (b).

confession. See admission (b).

confidant; confidante; confident, n. The forms confidant and confidante have an interesting history. Until 1700 or so, the English word was confident (= a trusty friend or adherent), the correct French forms being confident and confidente. But early in the 18th century, English writers began substituting an -a- for the -e- in the final syllable, perhaps because of the French nasal pronunciation of -ent and -ente.

Today the forms confidant and confidante predominate in both AmE and BrE, though confidente is falling into disuse because of what is increasingly thought to be a needless distinction between males and females. Despite the poor etymology, one can be confident in using confidant (/kon-fi-dahnt/) for either sex, as it is predominantly used in American writing—e.g.:

- “Her admiration for Richard Nixon, whom she served as adviser and confidant for the last four years of his life, led her to believe that revealing the words he spoke in their private conversations would help restore his reputation.” Myron A. Marty & Dale Singer, “Politics,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 28 Nov. 1996, at 13.

See sexism (d).

In any event, it’s wrong to make confidante refer to a male—e.g.:

- “The executive producer job went to Jeff Zucker, a Katie Couric confidante [read confidant], but someone who is hardly a favorite of Gumbel’s.” Fox TV Reported Seeking ‘Today’ Host Bryant Gumbel,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 30 Nov. 1994, at E10.
- “The leadership he applied to the process, the attention to contrary stratagems, was evident even earlier to another confidante [read confidant] who found himself suddenly consulted by Mr. Powell about the political art of a strategic retreat.” Francis X. Clines, “Variation on a War Game: How Powell Arrived at No,” N.Y. Times, 12 Nov. 1995, at 1, 12.

confide in; confide to. Confide in (= to trust or have faith in) is the more common phrase in general usage—e.g.: “While she didn’t confide in Dallek, she did write a paper on Morris’ twenty-year friendship with Clinton.” “Morris the Catch,” Texas Monthly, Dec. 1996, at 21.

Confide to = (1) to communicate (something) in confidence to; (2) to entrust (an object of care or a task) to. Except in legal contexts <responsible confided to the legislature>, the phrase occurs most commonly today in sense 1—e.g.:

- “In ’90s fashion, he confides to another that he’s now a vegetarian.” Jennifer Phelps, “Heartburn Hotel,” Des Moines Register, 14 Aug. 1996, Today §, at 3.

confirmand. So spelled—not *confineable. See mutē e.

Current ratio: 24:1

confirmand (/kon-far-mand/) = a person confirmed or to be confirmed in a religious rite supplemental to baptism. E.g.:

- “At church, Jonathan, Steffanie and Michael are in the second year of a two-year confirmation program, and all confirmants are required to do a . . . service project.” Clare House & Diane M. Bitting, “A Gift of Reading,” Lancaster New Era, 19 Dec. 2002, Teen Weekend §, at 5.

The word is analogous to *honorand (= to honor, to be honored), a word now generally displaced by honoree. See honoree.

Perhaps because the Latinate suffix -and (meaning “about to be”) is rather unusual in English, many writers misspell confirmand as if it had a different suffix: confirmant. This mistaken form isn’t recorded as a word in the OED or most other dictionaries. Hence it’s a nonword—e.g.:

- “Among those gathered at the church was the family of Ariola Vorm, whose grandson, Dustin Vorm, is a six-generation confirmant [read confirmand] of the church.” Terry Turner, “Re-created Circuit Ride Celebrates Origins of Church,” South Bend Trib., 27 Sept. 2001, Local §, at 1.
- “The Bishop is at Grace Church this weekend to confirm and receive new members into the church. He will meet with the confirmants [read confirmands] and their mentors following dinner.” “Religion in the Twin Tiers,” Star-Gaz. (Elmira, N.Y.), 9 Nov. 2002, at C4.

If confirmant were appropriate at all, it would refer to the priest or minister performing the rite (the celebrant)—not to the person being confirmed. Cf. celebrant.

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confirmand for confirmant: Stage 1
Current ratio (the confirmands vs. the confirmants): 23:1

confirmation; confirmation.Confirmation (= verification) is occasionally displaced by conformation
(= [1] correspondence with norms; or [2] compliance with regulations)—e.g.:
- “For multiple orders, indicate the name of each recipient, telephone number and include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for conformation [read confirmation] ticket and number.” “My Communities,” Honolulu Advertiser, 8 Dec. 2008, at B3.

Conformation is most commonly found in sense 1, especially denoting the match between an animal and the ideal attributes of its breed—e.g.: “The amateur competition continues at 8 a.m. today in the Coliseum, with the horses doing a reining pattern and then working a cow before they are judged on their conformation.” Ann Schrader, “Horses Show Ranch Skills for a Bit of Glory,” Denver Post, 15 Jan. 2009, at B5. Sense 2 verges on officialese—e.g.: “[County planning director Brian] Clifton said the county doesn’t usually require a bond in issuing a location conformation permit, but SME offered to post it.” Karl Puckett, “MEIC Asks Judge to Void Plant Zoning,” Grand Falls Trib., 28 Oct. 2008, at M1.

confirmatory; *confirmative. The latter is a needless variant.

confirmable. So formed—not *confiscatable. See -ABLE (D) & -atable.

confiscatory (/kәn fis-ka-tor-ee/) is the adjective corresponding to the verb confiscate. It means “of, relating to, or involving confiscation; tending to confiscate.” And it most often crops up in the context of taxes—e.g.:

Colloquially, the word bears the sense “stealing with legal authority” <confiscatory landlords>.

confit; confiture. Both derive from the French verb confire, meaning “to prepare.” A confit (/kah-fie/) is a preparation of meat or poultry stewed in its own fat with seasonings and then congealed. The retained French pronunciation reflects the fact that the word confit did not enter the English language until the mid-20th century. A confiture (/kah-fi-chuur/) is a confection of candied fruit—a preserve or jam. The pronunciation was anglicized shortly after the word entered English in the early 19th century.

confiscatory. adj.; confiscatorial. Confiscated means “affected by conflicting emotions, allegiances, duties, or the like.” The word dates back only to the late 1960s. By the 1990s, it had become a vogue word—e.g.:
- “When the teams split a doubleheader two weeks ago in Winona, Minn., Tschida expected to feel conflicted and maybe even slightly uncomfortable, but he had no such emotions.” Jason Wolf, “Coach Makes Smooth Move,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 17 Apr. 2001, at C5.

Confiscatorial, a much rarer term, means “of, relating to, or characterized by conflict.” The word is documented in the OED from 1961—e.g.:
- “The conflict in Kashmir was renewed just as the Berlin Wall fell, and both countries continued their confiscatorial habits without reference to the wider world.” Paula Newberg, “India vs. Pakistan,” San Diego Union-Trib., 22 May 1994, at G4.
- “Whether a marriage is openly confiscatorial or relentlessly harmonious, a marriage that is unable to adapt to changes like births, economic ups and downs, departures of children and retirement will become stressed.” Hugh Leavell, “Don’t Avoid Conflict—Manage It,” Palm Beach Post, 22 Nov. 1996, at F3.

The more popular of these words, conflicted, should be avoided in watered-down senses. For example, if the simple word disagree will work, then use it—e.g.: “Analysts are conflicted about [read disagree] whether the economic slowdown will help or hurt club growth.” Mark Albright, “Expanding the Club,” St. Petersburg Times, 4 June 2001, at E8.

conflict of interest. Today the phrase “ranges from being a euphemism for the result of outright bribery to describing a situation in which one subject to a duty takes a position inconsistent with that duty” John T. Noonan Jr., Bribes 446 (1984).

conform takes the preposition to or with. H.W. Fowler objected to conform with, but most authorities find it quite acceptable. E.g.: “Libya said the investigations conformed with international law and did not violate its sovereignty.” Paul Lewis, “Libya Offers Some Cooperation in Plane Bombings,” N.Y. Times, 15 Feb. 1992, at A5. Even so, conform to is the far more frequent collocation in all phases of Modern English.

Current ratio (conforms to vs. conforms with): 11:1

conformation. See confirmation.

conformity; conformance. Conformity has always been the usual term, conformance being confined
largely to senses regarding technical compliance—e.g.: “Dan Korus, division manager, said that the registration by Underwriters’ Laboratories is . . . part of an overall plan to bring all major facilities of Vishay Electronic Components into conformance with ISO 9000 quality guidelines.” Bernard Levine & Fred Guenther, “Vishay’s Dale Electronics, Inc.,” Electronic News, 15 Apr. 1996, at 32. In a related use, conformance often functions as an adjective in phrases such as conformance testing—e.g.: “We’re urging the FCC to issue strong regulations governing the areas of network interconnection, unbinding, portability, mutual traffic exchange, pricing standards and conformance standards.” Heather Gold, “Perspective—The FCC Better Shape Up Those Monopolies,” CommunicationsWeek, 15 Apr. 1996, at 49.

In other uses, conformance might justifiably be labeled a needless variant. E.g.: “Antista . . . [added] that the fish and game commission, when permitting new wildlife refuges and rescue services, routinely requires applicants to show conformance [read conformity] with local zoning codes.” “Wildlife in the City,” Sarasota Herald-Trib., 25 Nov. 1996, at A8.

Like its corresponding verb, conformity takes either to or with—the latter being more common since the 1820s. E.g.:

- “They attempted to reform the church to be in greater conformity with the Bible that—they believed—forbade such things as wedding rings, Sabbath sports and Christmas celebrations.” Diana Butler, “‘Holy Day’ Isn’t Just for Puritans,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 28 Nov. 1996, at B7.
- “It harkens [read harks] back to years before the mid-2000s when people could eat food without having to consider whether their choices were in conformity with their chosen subculture.” Andrew Edwards, “Contemplating the Cultural Cachet of Curious Chips,” Long Beach Press-Telegram, 8 Aug. 2015, News §, at 3. (See hark back.)

confusible. So spelled—not *confusible. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 11:1

confute. See refute.

congé; congee. Congé (/kon-zhay/ or /kon-jay/) = (1) formal permission to leave; (2) a formal bow signaling goodby; or (3) a farewell. E.g.: “It seems that between 1991, when Mr. Clark signed up, and 1996 when he was given his congé, age withered his prospects.” “Ageism Pays,” Fin. Times, 17 Oct. 1996, at 19. The word is a gallicism that some private American schools use in an annual alumni party called all-school congé, which doesn’t necessarily coincide with graduation. *Congée is a variant spelling. Congee (/kon-jee/) = a rice porridge characteristic of some Asian cuisines. E.g.:

- “Hope Key . . . offers an irresistibly wide variety of serious seafood dishes (including frog and snail dishes) as well as comfort foods such as chow foons (thick noodle dishes), hot pots and congees (rice porridge).” Eve Zibart, “A Clarion Call for Clarendon,” Wash. Post, 22 Nov. 1996, Weekend §, at 25.

congenial; genial. A subtle difference exists and should be promoted. Congenial = (1) having similar tastes; compatible; kindred <a congenial married couple>; or (2) to one’s liking; suitable; pleasant <a congenial workplace>. Genial = affable; friendly; cordial <her usual genial disposition>. Hence genial applies to individuals, while congenial is generally reserved for people collectively or for environments.

The differentiation is less pronounced with the noun forms, the word congeniality often doing the work for both adjectives—hence “Miss Congeniality” (not “Miss Geniality”). But geniality remains current, and there is no reason why beauty-pageant usage—though well established—should control what careful writers do. Congeniality, then, might usefully be reserved for groups of people and environments, geniality for individuals.

congeries (= a collection; aggregation) is ordinarily a singular noun—e.g.:

- “The microchip is a formidable accomplishment, too—one that is also a congeries of some of the most advanced technologies and talents of this age.” Owen Edwards, “The Basilia Chip,” Forbes, 7 Oct. 1996, at 140.

As both examples show, the word frequently has a slightly pejorative cast, suggesting “a perplexing bunch of things.”

The form *congerie (sometimes spelled *congery) is a false-singular noun recorded by the OED and W3, a kind of back-formation made on the mistaken assumption that congeries is the plural of such a noun. E.g.:

- “When a congerie [read congeries] of women’s organizations announced that this was the ‘Year of the Woman’ and that they were going to do their utmost to get more women into Congress, the media instantly took up the cry.” Richard Grenier, “Yearning to Look Down on Someone,” Wash. Times, 18 July 1992, at C3.
- “It is already a congery [read congeries] of standard practices that constitutes assisted suicide or euthanasia in disguise.” William Joseph Buckley et al., “Ethics of Palliative Sedation and Medical Disasters,” 28 Ethics & Medicine no. 1, 1 Apr. 2012, at 35. (On the relative pronoun that in this example, see remote relatives.)

In fact, although the singular congeries is most frequent, the word can also be a plural—e.g.: “I learned [economic theory] all as congeries of interrelated propositions.” H.W. Arndt, A Course Through Life: Memoirs of an Australian Economist 3 (1985).
congratulate. The traditional idiom is to congratulate a person on or for something. The verb shouldn’t be construed with a that-clause—e.g.:

- “Keno should be congratulated that he was [read congratulated on being] able to keep the donation down to $35,000.” Jim Driskill, “Facts on Candidate Hawker Weren’t All on Table,” Ariz. Republic, 14 Mar. 2000, at 4.
- “Board members should be congratulated that they realize [read congratulated for realizing] this.” Workers as Administrators, Salt Lake Trib., 24 Oct. 2000, at A12.
- “Catherine Zeta Jones is to be congratulated that she now bears [read congratulated for now bearing or congratulated now that she bears] the name of one of Scotland’s famous families.” R. Morton Douglas, “Flemish Factor,” Daily Telegraph, 24 Nov. 2000.

This verb is sometimes also the victim of object-shuffling. You’re supposed to congratulate people for their virtues, not congratulate the virtues themselves. This error occurs in BrE more often than in AmE—e.g.:

- “As one who was in the Forum when the bomb arrived, he congratulated the vigilance of staff [read congratulated the staff for their vigilance].” Gerry Moriarty, “Army Defuses ‘Crude but Viable’ Parcel Bomb Sent to UK Unionist Party” Irish Times, 25 July 1997, at 6.

The word should be pronounced /kan-graht-ә-layt/, not /-graj-/. Language-Change Index

1. congratulate construed with a that-clause: Stage 3
2. congratulate with an inanimate object: Stage 2

congratulatory; *congrulant; *congratulative. Congratulatory is the usual word. The other forms are needless variants.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 4,514:3:1

*congregate together is a redundancy that was common in the mid-19th century but has since retreated. Cf. *associate together.

Congress does not require an article, except in references to a specific session <the 104th Congress>. Although some congressional insiders use the phrase, *the Congress is a quirk to be avoided in polished prose. The possessive form is preferably Congress’s—e.g.: “Ms. Rosen said it is Congress’s responsibility because it gave regulators the framework for RESPA.” “HUD Supports RESPA Review,” Nat’l Mortgage News, 4 Nov. 1996, at 16. See possessives (a). Cf. Parliament.

congressional, like constitutional, should be written with a lowercase c-, even though the noun corresponding to the adjective is capitalized.

*Congressperson is an unnecessary substitute for representative, congressional representative, member of Congress, Congressman, or Congresswoman. E.g.: “Be sure to check out the upcoming vote on the amendment just to see if your congressperson [read representative] has the guts to vote against something enormously popular and incredibly dumb.” Molly Ivins, “Budget Amendment Is Popular—and Dumb,” Idaho Statesman, 20 Nov. 1996, at A11. See sexism (c).

Language-Change Index

*Congressperson: Stage 2
Current ratio (Congressman/-woman vs. *Congressperson): 34:1

congruent; congruous. Although these words are largely synonymous—meaning “in agreement or harmony; appropriate”—interesting distinctions have arisen. Congrous (/kong-groo-әs/)—once thought to be the more widely used term—is actually quite infrequent in the sense “appropriate, fitting; marked by harmonious agreement.” But it does occasionally occur—e.g.: “She made it her first priority to create an interior that would be congruous with the exterior, giving the house a more authentically Mediterranean feel.” Glynis Costin, “A House of Her Own,” Town & Country, July 1996, at 68. The negative form incongruous (“not in harmony; unfitting”) is far more common. See incongruous.

And oddly enough, the word congruent (/kong-groo-әnt/ or /kong-groo-әnt/) has largely taken over as the synonym of incongruous. True, it has always had legitimate uses in math and physics, and has long been prevalent in the sense “coinciding throughout; in accordance with.” But today it is also the usual term in the broadest senses—e.g.:

- “Such idiosyncratic experiments in style were hardly congruent with official pressure to honor the ascent of socialism through prescriptive prose about the beauty of collective farming.” Cynthia Ozick, “The Year of Writing Dangerously,” New Republic, 8 May 1995, at 31.
- “Like the congruent decor in our homes or the finely trimmed shrubs dotting our manicured lawns, many of us severely limit the range of our feelings.” Philip Chard, “Embracing Chaos of Life Is Difficult for Most of Us,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 3 Dec. 1996, Good Morning §, at 1.
The corresponding nouns are congruence and congruity. *Congruency is a needless variant.

conjoin generally provides no nuance not included in join or combine—e.g.:

- “In consequence, homosexuality and secrecy were conjoined [read joined] inseparably in a place that became known as the closet.” “A Love That Dares Speak Its Name,” Economist, 15 July 1995, at 68.
- “Those events, conjoined [read combined] with the current DSO season’s unremarkable programming and the orchestra’s inconsistent music-making through the season’s first half, might lead one to wonder where the maestro’s head really is.” Lawrence B. Johnson, “Notes of Caution,” Detroit News, 30 Nov. 1996, Accent §, at C1.
- “Lewis required that Paramount bust down the walls of two adjacent soundstages so he could conjoin [read combine] them to build his massive, all-inclusive set for his second work.” Robert Koehler, “Revered or Reviled, Lewis,” Detroit News, 30 Nov. 1996, Accent §, at C1.
- “Lewis required that Paramount bust down the walls of two adjacent soundstages so he could conjoin [read combine] them to build his massive, all-inclusive set for his second work.” Robert Koehler, “Revered or Reviled, Lewis,” Detroit News, 30 Nov. 1996, Accent §, at C1.

W11 defines conjoin as “to join together (as separate entities) for a common purpose.” Join together is, of course, a venial redundancy, just as conjoin is something of a one-word redundancy. But these phrases do slightly shade join. Perhaps on those rare occasions when you want the precise nuance suggested by W11’s definition—combining for a common purpose—conjoin is the proper word.

Further, the phrase conjoined twins has emerged as a nonethnic substitute for Siamese twins. And in this literal sense, the word seems appropriate—e.g.:


CONJUNCTIONS. A. Starting Sentences with. Wilson Follett called the notion that sentences shouldn’t start with conjunctions a “prejudice [that] lingers from a bygone time . . . . The supposed rule is without foundation in grammar, logic, or art” (MAU at 64). Good writers have long made use of the clear signals that short conjunctions give to the reader—e.g.: “Tell her you love her. And you couldn’t resist telling her what you’d like to do with or without custard. But tell her that you’re married to Matey and any hint of scandal would seriously damage the Chambers image. So you’ll both just have to be extraordinarily brave about it. That way you won’t come out as an idiot who can’t manage his e-mail and she’ll still feel loved.” John Mortimer, “Rumpole and the New Year’s Resolutions,” in Rumpole and the Primrose Path 38, 57 (2003). See and, but, for & so.

B. Correlative Conjunctions. See correlative conjunctions.

C. As Prepositions. See functional shift (g).

D. Subordination and Coordination. See subordination and coordination.
• “In the same decade of the 1990s that gave the US the strength and size of Beethoven and the rapidity and connexity of Ariel, we tried once more to develop an international rule of law; a rule of law that would cover the benign superpower as well.” John Lloyd, “America, with Relish, Spits on Britain,” New Statesman, 8 July 2002, at 18.

At times, though, connexity acts as a needless variant of connection—e.g.: “There should be some connexion [read connection] between this defendant and this crime.” Huey L. Golden, “Knowledge, Intent, System, and Motive,” 55 La. L. Rev. 179, 207 (1994).

Connexity also had a brief—very brief—life as a label for the intent of the new young generation (aka Gen Y) on remaining “wired” at all times. A 1999 study by the ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi tried to coin two new terms, in fact, in the title of its report on “The Connexity Generation: America’s New Digital Prosumers.” But in pop language, those who coin phrases often see them fall through the boardwalk.

Current ratio (connection vs. *connexion): 29:1

connection with, in. See in connection with.

*connect together is a redundancy that was common especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. If the intended sense is “to connect with one another,” connect or interconnect is usually the better choice—e.g.:

• “All of the individual elements are connected together [read connected or interconnected] to perform one function.” Byron Miller, “Fuzzy Logic,” Electronics Now, May 1996, at 29.

• “Check the markings of your electrical decorations to determine the maximum number of decorative lights (light strings) and decorations that may be connected together [read strung together].” Phil Mulkins, “Underwriters Laboratories Sheds Light on Lighting,” Tulsa World, 20 Nov. 1996, at A2.

• “Technology problems like Wednesday’s that temporarily knock out vital services and conveniences of modern life are likely to become more common as computers and other electronic devices increasingly connect together [read interconnect] over the Internet.” Michael Liedtke & Steve Rothwell, “Tech World Takes a Tumble,” Times Union (Albany), 9 July 2015, at A1.

Why isn’t interconnect a one-word redundancy? Because it connotes several things, as in the first example, where interconnected gives a better picture than connected (which has a one-to-one implication) would. See together.

connect up. In this phrase, which is common especially in computing contexts, the word up is usually unnecessary—e.g.: “Paths and steps link the various levels of our landscapes and connect up [read connect] our gardens and houses.” Susan Heeger, “The Hard Stuff,” L.A. Times (Mag.), 23 Oct. 1994, at 32. See phrasal verbs.

*connexion; connexity. See connection.

connexion. So spelled. See spelling (a).

connivance (fr. L. connivère “to wink at”) is not, as popularly supposed, “conspiracy to act together for an illegal end,” although it is a form of collusion. Connivance is passively allowing another to act illegally or immorally, especially when one has a duty to stop or report the action—silence and neglect when one should be vocal and monitory. E.g.: “Already the Bosnians are smuggling in heavy weaponry with the connivance of Turkey and Iran.” Jacob Heilbrunn, “Flirting with Disaster,” New Republic, 2 Dec. 1996, at 28.

connive = (1) (with at) to avoid noticing something that one should report, oppose, or condemn; to passively cooperate (esp. in wrongdoing) by closing one’s eyes as it happens; or (2) (with with) to cooperate secretly.

Sense 1 is traditional—e.g.: “Most of the money being wasted on these nostrums comes from the pockets of people who have connived at their own fleecing.” Katherine A. Powers, “The Honest Truth About Hokum,” Boston Globe, 2 Dec. 2001, at E3. This construction is more common in BrE than AmE—e.g.: “Edward Heath railroaded Britain’s entry into Europe through Parliament, courtesy of revolting Labour Europhile MPs who cheerfully connived at the deception Heath was perpetrating upon British voters.” Melanie Phillips, “Europe Is a Poisoned Chalice,” Observer, 2 June 1996, at 6.

In sense 2, the connotation is usually milder than conspire, more venial and less blameworthy. Because it is a slipseshod extension, it can usually be improved on—e.g.:


• “Navarrette remembers how he and Bustamente, who would one day become his college roommate, connived [read contrived] to get into a class that West Hills Community College didn’t offer.” Phoebe Wall Howard, “Bustamente Ushers In a New Era,” Fresno Bee, 17 Nov. 1996, at A1.

• “Public-choice theory taught that bureaucrats connived [read conspired] to expand their pomp and powers by spending ever more.” “Kenneth Clarke’s Triumph,” Economist, 23 Nov. 1996, at 63.

Perhaps because of the suffix and the word’s unsavoury, even criminal connotations, connive is sometimes used to mean something like con, a slipseshod extension that should be discouraged—e.g.:
connoisseur

• “Facing bankruptcy and eviction, and discovering that Etheline is being courted by her longtime accountant (Danny Glover), Royal connives [read: plots] to move back into the family brownstone.” Dan Webster, “Anderson and Wilson Take Viewers to Alternate [read Alternative] Reality,” Spokesman-Rev. (Spokane), 12 July 2002, Weekend §, at 7. See alternate (n).

• “Protected but not coddled by a loving mom (Helen Mirren), the crippled, odd-looking and hence ‘unemployable’ Bill Porter ingenuously connives [read works] his way into people’s hearts—and eventually their homes—through dogged persistence.” Mike McDaniel, “Macy Sells Story,” Houston Chron., 14 July 2002, Television §, at 2.

• “Set in Florida, it tells the story of a white developer who tries to connive [read con] the predominantly black beach community of Plantation Island into selling a strip of ocean-front land on which he plans to build condominiums.” John Petkovic, “The Characters Are Tasty, but the Plot Isn’t Done,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 2 Aug. 2002, Friday Mag. §, at 46.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. connive misused for conspire or contrive: Stage 4
2. connive misused for plot or con: Stage 2

connoisseur (= an authority, esp. on matters of taste) is best pronounced in three syllables (/kahn-ə-sar/) to rhyme with sir. As pronunciation connisseur Charles Harrington Elster puts it, “there is no sewer in connaisseur” BBBM at 105. Although traditionally a noun <a wine connisseur < a connisseur of Flemish art>, it is often used attributively (that is, as an adjective)—e.g.: “By the time a marathon of bidding ended early Saturday morning, a record $755,185 had been paid for connisseur [or fine] wines, trips to exotic destinations, banquet meals to be cooked by star chefs and a broad selection of what were grouped as ‘luxury items.’” William Rice, “A Rich Toast to Lyric,” Chicago Trib., 26 Feb. 2003, Good Eating §, at 2.

connote. A. And *connote. Connote (/ka-noht/) = to imply something in addition to the literal meaning, esp. some emotional response such as tone, flavor, or association. Denote (/di-noht/) = to convey literal meaning. The nouns are connotation and denotation. Denote is rarely if ever misused. Connote, however, is becoming rarer by the day in its traditional sense, illustrated here: “In careful usage, ‘notoriety’ carries a connotation of wickedness, evil, or gravely bad conduct,” James J. Kilpatrick, “A Little Refresher Course,” Tulsa World, 25 Nov. 1996, at A8.

How are connote and connotation misused? They are frequently confused with denote and denotation, just as literally is often confused for figuratively. E.g.:


• “Surfing (an overused term) connotes [read denotes] unstructured Net browsing for fun or profit.” Gabriel Goldberg, “Surfing the Internet and Other Sources of Enterprise Information,” Enterprise Systems J., July 1996, at 44.

See literally.

Moreover, only words and other symbols can connote, not acts. Connote isn’t a general-purpose equivalent of suggest or associate, nor is connotation a replacement for overtone or implication—e.g.:


• “Clawson said he thinks someone from the skeet shooting party, several of whom did not know Hatfill, told the FBI about the joke, which took on far more sinister connotations [read implications] as agents desperately searched for the anthrax killer,” Wayne Washington, “Fighting Terror Global Impact; Anthrax Probe Raises Doubts on FBI,” Boston Globe, 23 Sept. 2002, at A1.

B. And *connotate. *Connotate is a needless variant of connote—e.g.:


• “As with the PT Cruiser and New Beetle, two other popular, low-priced, four-cylinder offerings introduced during the past five years, Mini styling is best described as retrospective, or heritage, or whatever word connotates [read connotes] a bygone era.” Dave Boe, “Two Vehicles Earn Journalistic Honors at Detroit Show,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 20 Jan. 2003, Auto Plus §, at 1.

See back-formations.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*connotate for connote: Stage 1

consanguineous; consanguine; *consanguineal; consanguinean. The general adjective corresponding to consanguinity is consanguineous (= related by common ancestry). E.g.: “The boy suffered from a rare form of dwarfishism called pyknodysostosis, which is more common in children of consanguineous parents than of others.” Robert Wernick, “A Little Man Who Brought a Parisian Era to Vivid Life,” Smithsonian, Nov. 1985, at 64.


If consanguineous is relatively rare—confined mostly to those who engage in sesquipedality—the other terms are even rarer. Consanguine and *consanguineal
have been taken up by anthropologists and linguists and differentiated from the primary adjective. Consanguine = based on an extended group of blood relations esp. of unilinear descent and constituting the functional familial unit in a society (W3). *Consanguineal shares this sense and is a needless variant. Consanguineal is a Roman-law term meaning “having the same father.” It is opposed to uterine (= having the same mother).

For related words (true blood relations), see sanguine.

 conscience’s sake; conscience’s sake. The traditional and overwhelmingly predominant form is conscience’ sake, which is parallel to goodness’ sake. Many writers, though, have made it conscience’s sake, which is hard to speak—e.g.: “She knows it won’t make a difference, but she has to go through the motions for conscience’s sake” [read conscience’ sake].” Nelson Pressley, “Emotional Jackpot Eludes ’Booemtown,’” Wash. Times, 10 Nov. 1994, at C16. See possessives (n).

Current ratio: 6:1

conscionable is not a mere needless variant of conscientious in its sense of “being guided by one’s conscience,” though some dictionaries so suggest. And indeed, it sometimes performs that unnecessary role—e.g.: “Otherwise conscionable [read conscientious] members of a different party hint that ethics and morality have little, if any, bearing on one’s appropriateness and aptitude for elected leadership.” Donna Madden, “People, Not Parties, Define Values,” Chicago Trib., 31 Oct. 1996, at 26.

As a positive correlative of unconscionable, the word conscionable means “agreeable to a good conscience; just and reasonable” and refers to things as opposed to people <a conscionable bargain>. E.g.:

• “If any politician from a non-tobacco state is going to come to the aid of the country’s least conscionable industry, it stands to reason that it would be America’s least honorable governor.” Steve Wilson, “Symbiont’s Call to Snuff Tobacco Suit Defies Explanation,” Ariz. Republic, 20 Oct. 1996, at A2.

• “It is no more conscionable to indulge in monetary bondage for laborers today than it was to accept human bondage in the past.” A Little Humility Recommended,” Tulsa World, 24 Nov. 1996, at G2.

• “In another time, though, the business on the bend was even less conscionable—for decades, it was the site of the city’s slave pens and auction blocks.” Nicholas Mancusi, “Review: ‘Murder, D.C.’ by Neely Tucker,” Miami Herald, 3 July 2015, at 680.

For a mistake involving the negative form, see unconscionably.

consensual; consentaneous; consentient. Consensual, by far the most common of these terms, means “having or expressing or made with consent.” Consentaneous and consentient are both used in that sense, as well as in two others: (1) “unanimous”; and (2) “agreeing.” When used for consensual, either of the other two words is a needless variant. And when used in either of the other two senses, each is easily simplified—as the defining words above suggest. Gorham Munson said as much in the mid-20th century: “Take the word ‘consentaneous’ . . . . [I]t is a good word in a rich prose pageant. But in a simple style among workaday companions ‘consentaneous’ is as out of setting as a man in evening dress would be in the bleachers at an afternoon baseball game.” Gorham Munson, The Written Word 93 (rev. ed. 1949).

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 149:1:1:1

consensus = a majority opinion or generally accepted view. Hence two common phrases, *consensus of opinion and *general consensus, are prolix. E.g.: “It’s not a surprise that the possibility of war with Iraq has been the hot topic among these veterans lately, and after a few minutes of conversation, it’s easy to understand the general consensus [omit general] at Sweeney Post.” Katharine McQuaid, “Local Sweeney Post Veterans Support American Military Action Against Iraq,” Union Leader (Manchester, N.H.), 20 Sept. 2002, at A18. In the following sentence, we’re accosted by a double REDUNDANCY: “While there is no way of knowing for sure, it appears the general consensus of opinion [omit general and of opinion] is that hunting accidents have been reduced by requiring hunter education in a majority of states before hunters can purchase that first license.” Warren Clonginger, “Were Good Ol’ Days That Good?” Lewiston Morning Trib. (Idaho), 28 Sept. 1995, at C2.

Because a consensus is the collective unanimous opinion of several people, there should be more than two sides agreeing. Strictly speaking, a consensus of two is impossible—e.g.:

• “Oxygen reimbursement cuts have been one of the few areas where the two sides have reached consensus [read agreed or reached an agreement].” “Clinton Administration to Cut Home-Oxygen Payments,” Orange County Register, 20 Jan. 1996, at C2.

• “In the days before the talks broke down, both sides had reached consensus [read agreed] on water rights, new housing permits and several other issues.” “Walking Away from Peace,” St. Petersburg Times, 4 Nov. 1996, at A10.

Consensus is unrelated to census, but that word nevertheless frequently causes the misspelling *consensus—e.g.: “The emphasis on developing leadership capacity in all students, he says, is reflected in corporations where consensus building [read consensus-building] and working in teams have replaced the old style of centralized authority.” Nina McCain, “Striving

Language-Change Index

1. *general consensus of opinion: Stage 2
   Current ratio (consensus was vs. *general consensus of opinion was): 25:1

2. *general consensus: Stage 4
   Current ratio (the consensus was vs. *the general consensus was): 3:1

3. *consensus of opinion: Stage 4
   Current ratio (the consensus was vs. *the consensus of opinion was): 13:1

4. consensus misspelled *consensus: Stage 1
   Current ratio: 501:1

consent. See assent.

consentaneous; consentient. See consensual.

consequent; consequential; subsequent. Consequent means “following as a direct result” <consequent injuries>. Consequential (a rarer term) means “following as an indirect or secondary result” <consequential costs>. In its other proper sense, consequential may serve as an opposite of inconsequential, thus meaning “important” (or, occasionally, “self-important”). In the following sentences it means “important, of consequence,” a sense prematurely labeled obsolete by the OED:

- “Looking back on it now, I see clearly that it was the single most consequential thing that ever happened to me professionally,” Pete Dexter, “Decision 20 Years Ago Made All the Difference,” Sacramento Bee, 18 Nov. 1996, at C2. (On the use of single most in that sentence, see OED)

In all other senses, consequent is the correct term where the choice is between the shorter and longer forms. Usually, consequent is just a fancy equivalent of resulting—e.g.: “South Barrington . . . has five major state highways passing through the village and a consequent high volume of truck traffic.” Joseph Sjostrom, “Trucks Take Heat for Flying Debris,” Chicago Trib., 5 Sept. 1996, at D1.


Consequent is frequently misused for subsequent, perhaps partly because of the logical fallacy post hoc, ergo propter hoc (“after this, therefore because of this”)—a trap for those who equate sequence with causation, thinking that if one event occurred after another, the first event must have caused the second. The word consequent expresses a causal relation and usually a temporal relation as well—she couldn’t contain the scandal and couldn’t prevent her consequent demotion; subsequent is solely temporal <this all came after her elevation to the Senate and subsequent reputation as a coalition-builder>. See subsequently.

consequently. This heavy connector is often best replaced by so. See sentence adverbs. Cf. accordingly.

conservational; conservative; conservatory. adj.

These words are to be distinguished. Conservational = of, relating to, or involving conservation. Conservative = characterized by a tendency to preserve or keep intact or unchanged; believing in the maintenance of existing political and social institutions. Conservatory (rarely used as an adjective) = preservative. For an error with conservative, see conservative.

Conservatism (= the political philosophy that favors preserving what has been firmly established and opposes changes in orthodoxy) is the standard term. *Conservativism is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 62:1

Conservative is surprisingly often, through a kind of visual metathesis, printed *conservative—e.g.: “The Hoover Institution, a conservative [read conservative] California-based think tank at Stanford University, also found that the hijackers were eligible to vote in state and federal elections.” Katrice Franklin, “Immigrants Trapped by DMV Requirements,” Virginian-Pilot & Ledger Star (Norfolk), 23 July 2002, at B1. For the meaning of conservative, see conservational.

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conservative misspelled *conservative: Stage 1
Current ratio: 22,906:1

conservatory. See conservational.

consider, when used alone, most often means “to think of as being” <she considered him rude>. The phrasing consider as is usually redundant. It has only one legitimate use, when meaning “to treat as for certain purposes” <this Dylan song, when considered as poetry, is a masterpiece>. It’s usually desirable to drop as from consider as—e.g.: “In resigning as board chairman, David Ambrose cited what he considered as [read considered] unethical business practices.” Mary McGrath, “Finance Chief Resigns,” Omaha World-Herald, 8 Aug. 1995, at 16.

- “The drug Depo Provera inhibits the sex drive and has been considered as [read considered] a kind of ‘chemical castration’ for chronic offenders.” M.W. Guzy, “Can We Isolate Sexual Predators?” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 27 Mar. 1998, at B7.

considerable, used adverbially, is dialectal—e.g.: “The 5th Street Deli actually has considerable [read considerably] more aesthetic charm than its predecessor.” Lisa Kingsley, “Deli Delivering Delightful Dressings, Savory Salads,” Des Moines Register, 15 Aug. 1996, at 19.
• “Guys such as Gwynn admit[ed] that Montreal’s defeat at Atlanta on the scoreboard was of considerable [read considerably] more interest than the chargers’ score updates against the Raiders.” Mike Downey, “The Padres Are Hardly Shaking [read Quaking] in Their Boots,” L.A. Times, 23 Sept. 1996, at C1.

Language-Change Index
considerable misused adverbially for considerably: Stage 1
Current ratio (considerably more vs. *considerable more): 95:1

considering. For this word as an acceptable dangling modifier, see danglers (e).

consignee (= one to whom goods are consigned) is pronounced /kon-si-nee/ or /kon-si-nee/. Cf. consignor.

consignor; consignee. Consignor is the technical—and consignee the nontechnical—correlative of consignee. A consignor (or consignee) dispatches goods to another on consignment. Perhaps because the very nature of this relationship is legal and technical, the -or spelling has been much more pervasive since the terms came into common use about 1800. The two words are often pronounced differently: consignor /kon-si-nor/ or /kon-si-nor/; consignee /kon-si-nee/. Cf. consignee.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 28:1

consistency; *consistence. The former has been standard since about 1800, before which time the two words tussled for preeminence. The latter is now a needless variant—e.g.: • “Though Natrone Means was unable to run with his usual consistency [read consistence], Ronnie Harmon was often effective in the backfield and Eric Bieniemy contributed one stirring sortie.” Welton Jones, “Bowled Over, Could a Sequel Be Super?” San Diego Union-Trib., 31 Jan. 1995, at E1.

Cf. inconsistency.

Language-Change Index
*consistence for consistence: Stage 1
Current ratio (consistence vs. *consistence): 58:1

consist of; consist in. American writers often ignore the distinction. Consist of is used in reference to materials; it precedes the physical elements that compose a tangible thing. The well-worn example is that concrete consists of sand, gravel, cement, and water.

Consist in (= to have as its essence) refers to abstract elements or qualities, or intangible things. Hence a good moral character consists in integrity, decency, fairness, and compassion. This construction is literary in tone and is not often seen today in general writing. Sad to say, it may now seem creaky to most readers.

The following sentences demonstrate the traditional use of consist in:


The opposite error—using consist in for consist of—is rare but does occur: “Typically [the bill of complaint in equity] consisted in [read consisted of] three parts: the narrative, the charging, and the interrogative parts.” Fleming James, Civil Procedure § 2.4, at 64 (1965).

Language-Change Index
1. consist of is misused for consist in: Stage 4
2. consist in is misused for consist of: Stage 1

console. See condole.

Consonance. See alliteration.

consort is pronounced /kon-sort/ as a noun and /kon-sort/ as a verb.

consortium is pronounced /kon-sor-sh[ee]-am/ and now also, in BrE, /kan-sor-tee-am/. The plural consortium has been standard since the 18th century. The plural consortiums didn’t come into common use until the late 20th century, and it is still far less frequent than consortia. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (consortia vs. consortiums): 7:1

conspectus; prospectus. These terms are not synonymous. A conspectus is a comprehensive survey, summary, or synopsis. (The plural is conspectuses.) A prospectus is a document describing the chief features of something that is forthcoming. (The plural is prospectuses.) See prospectus.

Avoid the hypercorrect plural *conspecti—are attested from the early 19th century. The etymology is a fourth-declension Latin noun whose plural doesn’t change form: one conspectus, two prospectus. So *conspecti is false Latin and ridiculous English. Make it conspectuses. See plurals (b) & hypercorrection.

conspicuousness; *conspicuity. The latter is a needless variant that occasionally appears. Typically,
the sentence can be advantageously reworded—e.g.: “Experts claim that, because daytime running lights do increase the conspicuity of motor vehicles [read make motor vehicles more conspicuous], they must also be increasing safety on the road.” “Daytime Running Lights Are Standard on Some New Cars,” Times Union (Albany), 1 Feb. 1996, at T2.

Current ratio: 1.2:1

*conspirational. See conspiratorial.

*conspirative. See conspiratorial.

conspirator; *conspiratorialist; coconspirator. Conspirator (= one engaged in a conspiracy) finds a need less variant in *conspiratorialist—e.g.: “He ordered Christic and its chief conspiratorialist [read conspirator], Daniel Sheehan, to pay $1 million toward the defendants’ legal bills.” L. Gordon Crovitz, “Lawyers Make Frivolous Arguments at Their Own Risk,” Wall Street J., 20 June 1990, at A17.

The term coconspirator (unlike *copartner) is not always redundant. When speaking or writing of conspirator A and referring to conspirator B, it is far easier to use coconspirator than, say, fellow conspirator.

Language-Change Index
1. *conspiratorialist for conspirator: Stage 1
Current ratio (conspirator vs. *conspiratorialist): 919:1
2. coconspirator meaning “fellow conspirator”:
Stage 5

conspiratorial; *conspiratory; *conspiratorial; *conspirative. The first is standard; the others are needless variants.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 189:2:1:5:1

*conspiratorialist. See conspirator.

*conspiratory. See conspiratorial.

conspire together is almost always redundant—e.g.: “That kind of dramatic, sensory evidence could help prosecutors move their case beyond one of focusing largely on circumstantial clues that suggest that McVeigh and Nichols conspired together [read conspired] to plan and carry out the attack.” Richard A. Serrano & Ronald J. Ostrow, “Government Builds Its Oklahoma Bombing Case with Video, Audiotape,” Fresno Bee, 31 Dec. 1995, at A8.


See together.

Sometimes, though, a word such as together seems necessary to complete the thought or to create parallelism with another idea in the sentence—e.g.: “Those accused] have denied conspiring together and with four others to defraud the Department of Social Security.” “Immigrants in Benefit Fraud Trial,” Daily Telegraph, 27 Oct. 1994, at 6 (and with four others completes the thought).

“Federal prosecutors oppose severance, arguing that McVeigh and Nichols conspired together and should be tried together on charges of blowing up the federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995.” Gaylord Shaw, “Bomb Suspects at Odds,” Newsday (N.Y.), 2 Oct. 1996, at A4 (conspired together is parallel with tried together).

Constitute. See comprise (c).

Constitutional should not generally be capitalized, though Constitution (in reference to the U.S. Constitution) should be. The adjective has two meanings: (1) “of, relating to, or involving the Constitution” <constitutional rights>; and (2) “proper under the Constitution” <constitutional actions by the police>. Thus sense 1: “The diversion of a job to a competitor is not an invasion of a constitutional right.” And sense 2: “The Wisconsin statute, which is similar to the Norris-LaGuardia Act, has also been held constitutional.” The opposite of constitutional in sense 1 is nonconstitutional, and in sense 2 unconstitutional. See nonconstitutional.


Language-Change Index
*constitutionist for constitutionalist: Stage 1

Construe (= to build) for construe (= to interpret) occurs fairly frequently because the word construction serves as the noun for both verbs. (See construction.) As a result, writers sometimes use construct as a kind of back-formation—e.g.: “In his historical interpretation of the Supreme Court’s role in constructing [read construing] the United States Constitution, the late Robert G. McCloskey divided constitutional law into three periods.” Barbara H. Craig, Chadha vii–viii (1988).


Language-Change Index
construct misused for construe: Stage 1

Construction is the noun corresponding to both construct and construe. In law, construction usually corresponds to construe. One might think that the construction of statutes is the business of legislatures, since lawmakers construct (i.e., build) statutes. But construction in that phrase means “the process of construing,” which is the business of the courts. For an extended discussion of confusion wrought by the fact that construction answers to both construe and construct, see Antonin Scalia & Bryan A. Garner, Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts 13–15 (2012).
constructive; constructional. These terms are not to be confused. Constructive = (1) of, relating to, or involving the creation of something <the painstaking constructive process that resulted in the opera>; (2) designed to promote improvement <constructive criticism>; or (3) (of an act, statement, or other fact) having a given effect in law—because a court so declares—though the effect may not exist in fact <constructive fraud> <constructive trust>. 

Constructional = (1) of or relating to building or the construction business; or (2) of, relating to, or involving the act or process of construing. Sense 1: “He retired as a constructional inspector from the Naval Base and was an Army veteran of World War II.” “Nelson B. Clark” (obit.), Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 16 Sept. 1996, at B4. Sense 2: “This court is aware of the general constructional preference in favor of a surviving spouse.” “Estate of Marvin P. Middlemark,” N.Y.L.J., 1 Oct. 1996, at 26.

construe, vb. For the meaning, see construct. For the noun form, see construction.

consul; counsel; council. Consul (/kon-sәl/) = a governmental representative living in a foreign country to oversee commercial matters. Counsel (/kon-sәl/) = a legal adviser or group of legal advisers. (See counsel & lawyer.) Council (/kon-sәl/) = a body of representatives. (See council.)

consulate; consulship. Consulate = the office, term of office, jurisdiction, or residence of a consul. Consulship = the office or term of office of a consul. Consulate is the more common and (therefore) the broader term. Consulship may be useful in conveying one’s meaning precisely.

Because consulate most often means “the office or official premises of a consul,” the phrase *office of the consulate is a redundancy—e.g.: “Starting Tuesday, people wishing to pay their respects may sign the book in the offices of the consulate [read consulate or offices of the consul], on the 13th floor of the south tower of the building, at 400 N. Michigan.” Brenda Warner Rotzoll, “Chicago Bids Farewell,” Chicago Sun-Times, 1 Sept. 1997, at 3.

For a brief mention of consult as a noun in place of consultation, see disconnect. Cf. invite.

consultation. The English writer Philip Howard has stated that in BrE, consultation can mean a conference at which the parties, for example, lawyers or doctors, consult or deliberate. Modern legal usage confines this sense to meetings with more than one counsel present. You can have a consultation with your doctor on your own. But you must be able to afford the fees of at least two lawyers simultaneously before you can properly describe your meeting with them as a consultation.

Philip Howard, Weasel Words 57 (1979).

So in BrE, consultation refers to a meeting of two or more counsel and the solicitor who instructs them by leading the discussion and giving advice on their findings.

No such restrictive meaning is given the term in AmE. If you consult with your lawyer on a certain matter, that act is consultation.

consultative; *consultive; *consultatory; *consultory. Both consultative and *consultive are old: the former is recorded from 1583, the latter from 1616. But consultative is preferable because it matches the stem of its related noun, consultation. Though consultative is also over 200 times as common as *consultive, the latter does occasionally appear in print—e.g.: “Her intention is to get council members involved in coordinating and consultive [read consultative] roles with the citizens drafting the 37 neighborhood plans.” "A Workable Connection for Neighbors, City Hall," Seattle Times, 17 Feb. 1996, at A15. Like *consultive, the forms ending in -ory are needless variants.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 5,541:24:2:1

consummate as an adjective is pronounced /kәn-sә-mәt/ as an adjective is acceptable, but that pronunciation has long been considered an inferior one.

Consummate is sometimes misspelled *consummate—e.g.: “Widey regarded as a consummate [read consummate] professional and bridge builder with a reputation for mediating potentially explosive disputes, Scott, 59, said yesterday he is leaving to spend more time with his family.” William K. Rashbaum, “No. 2 City Cop Plans to Retire in December,” Newsday (N.Y.), 27 Oct. 1994, at A62.

consul general. Pl. consuls general. See plurals (g) & postpositive adjectives.

consulship. See consulate.

 consult, as an intransitive verb, takes the preposition with (another person), or on or about (a matter). The verb may also be used transitively <to consult the document itself>. As with invite (for invitation), avoid the casual use of the verb to mean “consultation.”

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*office of the consulate for consul: Stage 1
consul general. Pl. consuls general. See plurals (g) & postpositive adjectives.

contact, v.t. Many language authorities vehemently objected to this verb in the first half of the 20th century, as H.L. Mencken observed: “When to contact dawned in the early ’20s a howl went up from the
American Holoferneses, and presently it was echoed *fortissimo* in England, and to this day it reverberates from crag to crag of the precipices of Athene. I must confess at once that I share this priggish loathing, and never use the word myself, just as I never use *alright*, but the plain fact remains that there is plenty of excuse for it in the genius of the English language, and that many other verbs in daily use are no more legitimate.

H.L. Mencken, “The Birth of New Verbs,” in *Aspects of American English* 92, 93 (Elizabeth M. Kerr & Ralph M. Aderman eds., 1963). As Mencken suggested, *contact* is now firmly ensconced as a verb. Brevity recommends it over *get in touch with* or *communicate with*; it should not be considered stylistically infelicitous even in formal contexts. E.g.:


*If, however, the meaning is clearly either *call* or *write*, the specific verb is preferable.*

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*contact* as a verb meaning “to get in touch with”: Stage 5

**contagious; infectious.** These words are misused even by educated writers and speakers when discussing diseases. Germs and viruses that cause *contagious* diseases, such as influenza and head colds, are easily transmitted from person to person (or animal to animal, as with foot-and-mouth disease). Those that cause *infectious* diseases, such as cholera and typhoid, are usually spread through the environment (e.g., contaminated food or water). Some infectious diseases, such as sexually transmitted ones, can be passed from infected people to others through direct contact, but not through indirect or casual contact. See *infectious.*

**contemn.** See *condemn.*

**contemnorous, contemptorable.** Most dictionaries list the spelling ending in *-er* as predominant; it was overwhelmingly so in 19th-century BrE and AmE, but is less so today. The *-or* spelling now predominates by a slight margin. See *-er* (A).

*Current ratio (contemnorous vs. contemptorable): 1:1:1*

**contemplative** is preferably accentuated on the second syllable: /kan-tem-pla-tiv/.

**contemporary; cotemporaneous.** Both refer to coinciding periods of time. *Contemporaneous* usually refers to either actions or things, *contemporary* to people. But *contemporary* also commonly refers to things in the sense “current”—a sense to be avoided in contexts referring to past times, lest the word give rise to a *miscue* or outright ambiguity—e.g.:

- “He believes Italy is the best place to sample the major styles of Western architecture, from ancient Greek and Roman temples to medieval, Renaissance and *contemporary* [read *current*] styles.” Thomas W. Gerdel, “Relationships with His Clients Inspire Architect’s Designs,” *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 13 June 1995, at C4. (*Contemporary* could be momentarily misread as referring to styles flourishing in medieval and Renaissance times.)

- “Fantasy fiction . . . is medieval in atmosphere, 19th-century in its concerns, *contemporary* [read *current*] in its manners.” Edward Rothstein, “Flaming Swords and Wizards’ Orbs,” *N.Y. Times*, 8 Dec. 1996, *§*, at 60. (*Contemporary* might be read as referring to the 19th century.)

- “Italian art, too, has enjoyed a renaissance—in appreciation for the old masters and for *contemporary* [read *today’s*] artists.” Helen Forsberg, “It’s Italian,” *Salt Lake Trib.*, 8 Dec. 1996, at J8. (*Contemporary* might be read as referring to lesser artists working at the same time as the old masters.)

When no other time frame is mentioned, then we may infer “contemporary with us” to denote current rather than historical contexts.

*Contemporaneous does not precisely mean “simultaneous”; rather, it means “belonging to the same time or period; occurring at about the same time.” Hence the following sentences are correct:


- “Thus, if Paula Jones’s case ever came to trial, a jury would have to decide if they believe her—and her six contemporaneous witnesses—or Bill Clinton and his state trooper.” Carl M. Cannon, “Days of Reckoning,” *New Republic*, 2 Dec. 1996, at 34.


*Contemporaneous is a needles variant of *contemporary*; likewise, *cotemporary* is a needless variant of contemporary.*

**contempt; contemptibility; contemptuousness; contemptuosity.** These words are quite distinct. *Contempt* = (1) (generally) the act or state of despising; the condition of being despised; (2) (in law) action interfering with the administration of justice. *Contemptibility* = the quality or fact of being worthy of scorn. *Contemptuousness* = the quality of being scornful or disdainful. *Contumacy* = willful contempt of court (*contumacy* being a needless variant). For more, see *contumacy.*

**contumacious.** These words are often interchangeable, but while *contumacious* may connote scorn, it strictly denotes only willful disobedience. *Contumacious* is much more common in print—e.g.: “Mr. Milosevic appears *contumacious* of the judges and prosecutors, reserving his interest and civility for those senior politicians, diplomats and generals from

In the sense “recalcitrant,” con tumacious is chiefly a literary word—e.g.: “The children are unattractive characters, brimming with the misguided assurances of youth. They are proud, naively optimistic, con tumacious, disagreeable.” Bill Eichenberger, “Small-Scale Life Looms Larger in Visitors,” Columbus Dispatch, 1 Feb. 1998, at H7.

contend. See allege & contest, v.t.

content, adj.; contented, adj. These two words are essentially synonyms, though content is somewhat more common as a predicate adjective <I’m feeling quite content>, and contented somewhat more common as an adjective preceding a noun <contented workers>.

content, n. A. And contents. When referring to written matter or oral presentation, content refers to the ideas or thoughts contained (in words) as opposed to the method of presentation. Wilson Follett disapproved of the modern tendency to use content as well as contents for “what is contained” (MAU at 107), but the usage is old and is now common. It got a boost with the growth of the World Wide Web, being commonly used to refer to the material on websites. And the differentiation it represents—as explained below—is genuinely helpful.

Whereas content invariably refers to nonmaterial things, contents refers most commonly to material ingredients—e.g.: “Birthdays, holidays and special occasions, Forman is usually greeted with that flat skinny box that makes no secret of its contents.” “Stick ing Their Necks Out,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 13 Aug. 1996, at F1. But sometimes it refers to nonmaterial ingredients, especially when the suggestion is that many items are being considered—e.g.: “Kirkland police improperly kept secret the contents of a crime report on Northeast District Judge Rosemary Bordlemay and were ordered by a court to release the document.” Kevin Ebi, “City Loses Suit, Bid to Shield Jurist,” Seattle Times, 29 Dec. 1995, at B1.

B. And contentment. In the sense “the fact or condition of being fully satisfied (i.e., contented),” the word contentment is now standard. Content is reserved for a single idiom: to (one’s) heart’s content. But as an adjective it is frequently seen—e.g.: “She was content with her arrangement.” See content, adj.

contentious. See tendentious (c).

contentious; coterminous; *coterminant; *coterminate; *coterminal. Conterminous, the oldest and until 1900 the most prevalent of these words, means “having or enclosed within a common boundary.” E.g.: “One district is conterminous with Cook County, and three justices are elected at-large from there.” Doug Finke, “Redrawing of Court Boundaries Shaky,” State J.-Register (Springfield, Ill.), 6 Dec. 1996, at 13. Cf. contiguous.

Coterminous, now the most frequently used of these words, is an altered form of the original conterminous. It, too, means “coextensive in extent or duration.” For the sake of differentiation, coterminous should be confined to this figurative or metaphorical sense, and conterminous reserved for physical and tangible senses—e.g.:

• “What should trouble Democrats most is the prospect of an avalanche of defections polarizing Southern politics along racial lines, so that being Republican and white and Democrat and black become conterminous [read coterminous].” Ross K. Baker, “A Dixie Democrat Bails Out,” Sacramento Bee, 19 Apr. 1995, at B9. (The word’s meaning is creaky at best in that sentence.)


*Coterminant, *coterminate, and *coterminal are needless variants.

contest, v.t. A. And contend. In the sense “to fight,” contest is almost always transitive <to contest an election>, and contend is intransitive <to contend against an opponent>. Contend may be transitive when it means “to maintain, assert” and is followed by a that-phrase <the striking workers contend that the pension fund is inadequate>.

B. Pronunciation. The noun is pronounced /kon test/; the verb is pronounced /kan-test/.

contested election, in AmE, means either (1) “an election the validity of which has been challenged,” or (2) “a political race with more than one candidate.” Sense 2 is the sole meaning in BrE.

context of, in the; in a . . . context. These phrases are often used superfluously. “During the seventh century b.c., Egypt was repeatedly though always briefly occupied by Assyrian armies and later infiltrated by Greek and other Aegean elements in a military and subsequently a commercial context [read later infiltrated militarily and then commercially by Greek and other Aegean elements].”

contextual, not contextual, is the adjective corresponding to context. But the intrusive -r- often appears—e.g.:

• “For choreographers, contextual [read contextual] issues are at risk. In a bar setting, the cultural context calls for
When it was inhabited and whether it was occupied...“Crow Canyon archaeologists want to study the people’s belongings. “Paul Boden, “Where Can Homeless Go?” USA Today, 3 Dec. 1997, at A24.


Continuous = occurring without interruption; unceasing. E.g.: “Crow Canyon archaeologists want to study the 12th- and 13th-century village to determine exactly when it was inhabited and whether it was occupied continuously or intermittently.” Nancy Plevin, “Dirt, Sweat and Blisters,” Santa Fe New Mexican, 8 Sept. 1996, at E1. A good mnemonic device is to think of the -ous ending as being short for “one uninterrupted sequence.”

The two words are frequently confused, usually because continuous horns in which continual belongs—e.g.:

- “The variety of tactics included continual interruptions frustrating because it often means you have to warm up all over again or don’t get a complete workout.” Nick Lackeos, “Getting into Shape,” Montgomery Advertiser, 1 Jan. 1996, at B1.

The phrase *almost continuous indicates that continual is the right word—e.g.: “The antidepressant Prozac has been in the news almost continually since it was introduced in Belgium in 1986.” Jennifer Barrs, “Prozac on the Front Page,” Tampa Trib., 24 Nov. 1996, at 8.

A related mistake is to use continuous for something that happens at regular intervals—e.g.: “The White House tree-lighting ceremony has been held continually since 1923,” “Lighting the National Christmas Tree,” Herald-Sun (Durham, N.C.), 6 Dec. 1996, at A1.
• “By putting more money in the public schools each year, the state has allowed the **continuation** of a bureaucratic system that seems incapable of improving itself.” “GOP Expected to Push for School-Choice Bills,” *Herald-Sun* (Durham, N.C.), 2 Dec. 1994, at C14.


**Continuity** = connectedness; unbrokenness; uninterruptedness. E.g.: “The transition is as seamless as possible, and the retirement causes little or no interruption of service to the customers. Such continuity is vital in order for companies to maintain a good reputation and a competitive edge.” James E. Challenger, “Wanted: A Better Way to Retire,” *Houston Chron.*, 1 Dec. 1996, Outlook §, at 1.

*continue on* is a minor but bothersome redundancy—e.g.: • “We **continued on** [read continued or went on] and found that the wolf stayed with the marked path.” Chris Welsch, “Making Tracks,” *Star Trib.* (Minneapolis), 4 Dec. 1994, at G1.

• “As he **continued on and on** [read went on and on or continued], uninterrupted by me, he proceeded to answer his own objections.” “To Manage Employees Better, Manage to Listen,” *Indianapolis Bus.* J., 8 July 1996, at 68.

• “Big drops were soon followed by big gains and the market would **continue on** [read continue] its six-year run.” “Stocks Plunge over China Slowdown,” *Detroit News*, 22 Aug. 2015, at A5.

**See phrasal verbs.**

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**continuity. See continuance (b).**

**continuous. See continual.**

**continuum. Pl. **continua** or **continuums**.** The former has always predominated in print sources—and continues to today. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (**continua** vs. **continuums**): 6:1

**contracept,** v.i., is a back-formation that rose to prominence in the late 20th century but is not yet included in most dictionaries. It is a jargonistic word popular among social activists. E.g.: • “Feminist rights include feminist responsibilities; the right to obtain an abortion brings with it the responsibility to **contracept**.” Naomi Wolf, “Our Bodies, Our Souls,” *New Republic*, 16 Oct. 1995, at 26.

• “Put starkly, Buchanan argues in his new book, ‘The Death of the West,’ that white people are too rich, selfish, godless and guilt-ridden to have children, and so are **contracepting** themselves out of existence.” “Godless and Childless,” *Wash. Times*, 25 Jan. 2002, at A2.

**contraceptionist.** See **contractor.**

**contraceptive,** n.; **abortifacient,** n. A **contraceptive** is a device or drug designed to prevent conception. An **abortifacient** is a device or drug intended to produce a miscarriage. Neither term should be used to include the other.

**contractor; contraceptionist.** What is the agent noun corresponding to **contraction**? William Safire prefers **contractionist** (“On Language,” *N.Y. Times*, 30 Dec. 1990, § 6, at 6). But **contractor** is five times as common in modern print sources, and usage suggests a worthwhile distinction: a **contractor** is someone who uses contraception, while a **contractionist** is someone who advocates its use.

**Contractions. A. Generally.** Many writers, especially those who write in formal situations, feel uncomfortable with contractions. And perhaps contractions don’t generally belong in solemn contexts. But why shouldn’t writers use them in most types of writing? Some excellent writers use contractions to good effect, even in books—e.g.: • “I **won’t** offer an analysis of the passage and its working; some of the main points are fairly obvious.” F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* 102 (1952).

• “The ideal book reviewer[s] . . . own literary quality should be obvious in his prose. If he is an academic, he **shouldn’t** allow this to show through.” Joseph Epstein, “Reviewing and Being Reviewed,” in *Plausible Prejudices: Essays on American Writing* 44, 56 (1985).

• “If I **hadn’t** [paid Billy a compliment], I doubt we’d ever have become friends. In fact, if I **hadn’t**, he might just have shot me.” Larry McMurtry, *Anything for Billy* 14 (1988).

• “It’s no longer the sheepish effusions that score for Byron, but his goatish satires and letters.” John Simon, *The Sheep from the Goats: Selected Literary Essays* xviii (1989).


• “I felt almost wonderful. If it **hadn’t** been for the other occupant of my publisher’s waiting room, ther’d have been no ‘almost.’” Phyllis A. Whitney, *Woman Without a Past* 1 (1991).


The common fear is that using contractions can make the writing seem breezy. For most of us, though, that risk is nil. What you gain should be a relaxed sincerity—not breeziness. Among the wisest words on the subject are these:
contractual

• “I don’t and you don’t and we don’t are easy and proper, except where high dignity is required.” Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work 32 (1940).

• “Don’t start using . . . contractions . . . at every single opportunity from here on. It’s not as simple as that. Contractions have to be used with care. Sometimes they fit, sometimes they don’t. It depends on whether you would use the contraction in speaking that particular sentence (e.g. in this sentence I would say would and not would). It also depends on whether the contraction would help or hinder the rhythm that would suit your sentence for proper emphasis. So don’t try to be consistent about this; it doesn’t work. You have to go by feel, not by rule.” Rudolf Flesch, The Art of Readable Writing 97 (1949; rep. 1967).

• “Such common contractions as it’s, that’s, they’re, and she’ll are correct in almost all written communications in business and the professions. Whether or not you choose to use them is a matter of personal preference.” David W. Ewing, Writing for Results in Business, Government, and the Professions 358 (1974).

• “Use occasional contractions. They’ll keep you from taking yourself too seriously, tell your reader that you’re not a prude, and help you achieve a more natural, conversational rhythm in your style.” John R. Trimble, Writing with Style 78 (1975).

• “Your style will be warmer and truer to your own personality if you use contractions like won’t and can’t when they fit comfortably into what you’re writing.” William Zinsser, On Writing Well 75 (6th ed. 1998).

B. Ill-Advised Forms. While you can use contractions such as can’t, don’t, and you’ll to good advantage, you may stumble if you contract recklessly. A few contractions that occur in speech don’t translate well into writing because they’re not instantly readable—the mind’s tongue trips over them, however briefly. Examples of ones generally to avoid (except perhaps in quoted speech) include *I’d’ve, *it’d, *she’d’ve, *there’re, and *who’re. Two in particular—should’ve and would’ve—are common casualisms that can’t be strongly condemned.

Two mistakes commonly occur with such contractions. First, the reduced have in several of these forms is sometimes mistaken for an of. (See of (b).) Second, the conditional past perfect (if I’d [= I had] known) is sometimes mistaken given a superfluous -ve (*if I’d’ve known)—e.g.: “If I’d’ve [read I’d] passed up on the date he’d’ve [read, perhaps, he’d have] been in like Flynn.” Will Self, “A Novella in Several Live Performances,” Independent, 7 June 2000, at 7. See *had have & TENSES (A).

One last point. The form *who’re is particularly ugly because of its visual resemblance to who’re: “How is it that many people who’re [read who are] convinced that Oliver Stone’s JFK was a documentary about a right-wing plot to get Jack Kennedy are satisfied that Vincent Foster’s peculiar death in Fort Marcy Park was an open-and-shut case of suicide?” William P. Cheshire, “You Don’t Have to Be Oliver Stone to Wonder About Foster’s Death,” Ariz. Republic, 29 Sept. 1994, at B6.

C. Miscue with Contracted is. Be careful about contracting is with a noun (the President’s going back to Washington) as opposed to a pronoun (he’s going back to Washington). A miscue commonly results because it reads at first as if it’s a possessive: “If Baker’s spitting [read Baker is spitting] into the wind anyhow, he might as well have a little fun. . . . But Baker’s anything [read Baker is anything] but a quietist.” David Gates, “Paper Chase,” N.Y. Times (Book Rev.), 15 Apr. 2001, § 7, at 8, 9.

D. Mispronounced Contractions. See PRONUNCIATION (B).

contradict. See gainsay.

contradictory; *contradictive; *contradictional; contradictional. Contradictory = opposite, contrary. *Contradictive and *contradictional are NECESSARY VARIANTS of contradictory.

Contradictory = inclined to contradict or quarrel. The word is applied to people—e.g.: “But General Gordon had always been a contradictional person—even a little off his head, perhaps, though a hero; and besides he was no longer there to contradict.” Carol Brightman, “Character in Biography,” Nation, 13 Feb. 1995, at 206.

contraindicate is medical JARGON meaning “to make (a treatment, practice, etc.) inadvisable.” In nonspecialist contexts, though, a simpler, more straightforward term is better—e.g.:

• “Researchers concluded that prophylactic pseudophedrine is useful for preventing barotrauma, but since the medication is contraindicated in [read inadvisable for] patients with many medical conditions . . . , a consultation with your own doctor is recommended.” Allan Bruckheim, “Health Line,” Chicago Trib., 21 Mar. 1995, at C7.

• “Although medical professionals stress the health benefits of breast-feeding, there are instances in which it is contraindicated [read inadvisable or not recommended].” Melanie Choukas-Bradley, “Babes in Arms Get a Hand,” Wash. Post, 1 Oct. 1996, at D5.

Cf. indicated, to be.

And when the subject does not relate directly to health, the word is often a MALAPROPISM—e.g.:

• “At this time we find nothing in our investigation at this point to contraindicate [read contradiact] the medical examiner’s report.” Tommy Perkins, “Autopsy Shows S.C. Man Drowned,” Morning Star (Wilmington, N.C.), 23 June 2000, at B2. (Note the REDUNDANCY in at this time and at this point, which are symptoms of officialese.)

• “What I have been told is that we generally take our lead from the regional office (of the Department of Public Welfare), and the regional office had come out with nothing to contraindicate [read warn against] sending
contralto. Pl. contraltos, preferably not *contralti (an affectation). From 1850 (when the term first became fairly common) to the present day, contraltos has seriously outranged the Italianate plural in frequency of use. See Plurals (b).

Current ratio: 21:1


B. On the contrary; to the contrary; quite the contrary. On the contrary marks a contrast with a statement or even an entire argument just made. It has always been the most usual phrasing—e.g.: • “I hold neither of those views. On the contrary, I argue that biochemical systems—as well as other complex systems—were designed by an intelligent agent.” Letter of Michael J. Behe, “‘And God Saw That It Was Good’,” Newsweek, 7 Oct. 1996, at 24. • “Yet it has no real conclusion. On the contrary, several narrative threads are conspicuously left dangling.” Madison Smartt Bell, “Southern Shadows,” Chicago Trib., 10 Nov. 2002, Books §, at 1.

To the contrary marks a contrast with a specific noun or noun phrase just mentioned. E.g.: “The answer is not a mystery. It is, to the contrary, quite simple and can be given quite simply.” Bob Dole, “Bob Dole’s Acceptance Speech,” Wash. Monthly, Oct. 1996, at 20. (The contrast is with the noun mystery.)

Quite the contrary can do the job of either of the other two phrases. The phrase is usually either a verbless sentence or a verbless clause followed by a semicolon—e.g.: • “Don’t think that if you have been had once, your luck has to change. Quite the contrary; you probably have gotten yourself on a list with others who have been defrauded and are now a prime target.” Jonathan N. Axeird, “Get Poor Quick,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 7 Oct. 1996, at 2.

B. “This is not to suggest that Peres sought to provoke a Lebanon crisis during March and April, though. Quite the contrary. All the evidence indicates that . . . Peres was trying to maintain calm.” Jonathan Marcus, “Toward a Fragmented Policy?” Wash. Q., Autumn 1996, at 19.

contrast. A. Prepositions with. One contrasts something with—not to—something else. But it’s permissible to write either in contrast to or in contrast with. Cf. compare with.

B. Compare and contrast. This is an English teacher’s redundancy.

C. Pronunciation. As a noun, contrast is accented on the first syllable: /kon-trast/. As a verb, it’s accented on the second syllable: /kan-trast/.

contravene. A. And violate. Contravene = (1) (of people) to transgress, infringe (as a law); to defy; or (2) (of things) to be contrary to, come in conflict with. E.g.: “While the matter has been in the courts, the U.S. Department of Transportation issued a letter saying the airport’s regulation contravenes federal law and policy.” Howard Pankratz, “Centennial Injunction Voided,” Denver Post, 13 Dec. 1996, at A24. The word can usually be advantageously replaced by the simpler word violate.

In AmE, contravene is less usual than violate, but in BrE just the opposite is true. Whereas Americans think of contravene as a fancy equivalent of violate, to Britons it (like its corresponding noun, contravention) is more an everyday word—e.g.: • “The origins of the dispute lie in the leakage to the market of Russian diamonds, contravening Russia’s agreement with De Beers.” Kenneth Gooding, “Diamond Cartel Cuts Up Rough,” Fin. Times, 24 Aug. 1995, at 17. • “Its action is a blatant contravention of the 1951 refugee convention, whose signatories are bound not to repatriate refugees by force.” “Border Trouble,” Fin. Times, 24 Aug. 1995, at 11. (In this latter example, note the unpleasant ring of contravention/convention.)

In AmE, a simpler, more direct writing style favors violate over contravene.

B. And controvert. Contravene shouldn’t be confused with controvert (= to dispute or contest; to debate; to contend against or oppose in argument). Although controvert is mostly confined to legal contexts, it does appear elsewhere—e.g.: • “In the Information Culture we flip from one momentous medical theory to another the next day. The second absolutely contraverts the first, and it all seems normal because our heads are spinning with data.” Jim Klobuchar, “Screaming, Hissing and Moaning Over Election Campaign,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 27 Oct. 1994, at B3.

• “Perry is an expert at producing numbers persuasive to his case. They are not easy to controvert.” Greg Heaberlein, “Fearing the Worst? Relax, It Won’t Be That Bad,” Seattle Times, 29 Oct. 1993, at F1.

• “At one point in the tour of Sprague, prisoners hollered about the facility’s dismal conditions. Jail officers did not controvert them.” Christopher Collins, “County Jail System Needs Reform,” Times Record News (Wichita Falls, Tex.), 5 July 2015, at A1.

C. And *controverse. This error, dating from the late 19th century, results from confusion of contravene with controvert. E.g.: “The State’s use of a jailhouse informant to elicit inculpatory information
from Wilson contradvened [read contravened] his right to
counsel.” Wilson v. Henderson, 742 F.2d 741, 748
(2d Cir. 1984). The same problem occurs in the noun
form: “The Long Island Bank is seeking a court order
declaring that the Comptroller acted ‘in controversion
[read contravention] of the law’ and that his approval is
‘null and void.’” “Citibank Branch Target of Suit,” Am.
Banker, 6 July 1979, at 3.

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contravene misspelled *contravene: Stage 1
Current ratio: 1,619:1

D. And *contravent. This form is a misbegotten
back-formation used by writers who, reaching for
the verb corresponding to contravention, forget that
contravene is the correct form—e.g.

• “You should say that it is clear from the letter that it
expects your current code to produce an overpayment,
and that consequently it contravents [read contravenes]
regulation 7(e).” “New Tax Code for Widow,” Fin. Times,

• “[The] decision appears to contravent [read contravene]
the clear legislative intent of IEEPA.” Jules Lobel, “Emer-
gency Power and the Decline of Liberalism,” 98 Yale L.J.
1385, 1417 n.175 (1989).

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*contravent for contravene: Stage 1
Current ratio (contravent vs. *contravent): 4,946:1

Contribute. For the malapropism in which this word
is confused with attribute, vb., see attribute.

contributory; *contributary; contributive; contrib-
torial; contributional. Contributory = (1) making
contribution; contributing to a common fund <contributary
donations>; or (2) bearing a share toward a
purpose or result <contributory negligence>. *Con-
tributary is a needlessly variant of contributory. Contributive = having the power of contributing;
conducive <exercise is contributive to health>. Con-
tributorial = of, relating to, or involving a contributor
<contributorial recognition>. Contributional (a rare
word, rarely necessary) = of, relating to, or involving
a contribution <contributional achievements>.

Current ratio (contributory vs. *contributary): 319:1

Controller. See comptroller.

Contronyms. A surprising number of words can
bear contradictory senses. They’re known as “contron-
yms,” or “autonyms.” Typically, context eliminates
any real possibility of ambiguity. A truly recondite
contronym is anabusis (/ә-nәbә-sәs/), which (accord-
ing to W11) can mean either a military advance or
a military retreat. Xenophon (ca. 431–352 B.C.) used
the word in reference to Cyrus the Younger’s attack
on his brother, Artaxerxes, in 401 B.C. (The Cyrus army
advanced and the Artaxerxes army retreated: it’s all
a matter of perspective.) The word has been recorded
in English from 1706, mostly in reference to advances.
Following are some less erudite examples:

• Appropriate = (1) to take exclusive possession of <appropriate
land for a public school>; or (2) to give over to
another person or group for its own use <appropriate
funds for the biology department>.

• Cleave = (1) to stick together <Shall a man cleave unto his
wife?—Genesis 2>; or (2) to split apart <cleave the logs
with a hatchet>.

• Dispose of = (1) to get rid of; or (2) to have the use of.

• Draw = (1) to open <please draw the curtains>; or (2) to
close <please draw the curtains>.

• Drift = the general direction of an argument. But when an
argument drifts, it has no general direction.

• Dust = (1) to sprinkle powder over <dust the pastries with
powdered sugar>; or (2) to remove the dust from <you
haven’t dusted the shelves yet>.

• Fast = (1) in rapid motion <she ran fast>; or (2) motion-
less <the ship is tied fast to the dock>.

• Let = (1) to allow or permit <let our guests see the paint-
ing>; or (2) (archaically) to prevent or hinder <the sheriff’s
pursuit was let by the suspect’s accomplice>.

• Oversight = (1) an obligation to supervise <the committee
has oversight over the project>; or (2) failure to be vigilant
<it was an oversight—just a silly oversight>.

• Ravel = (1) to disentangle <ravel a tall tale>; or (2) to
entangle <become raveled in a fraud>.

• Sanction = (1) to express approval <the league sanctioned
a new tournament>; or (2) to express disapproval <the
city council sanctioned the city manager for the unauthor-
ized expenditures>.

• Scan = (1) to read hastily <just scan the street signs>; or
(2) to examine carefully <scan the map and plot our
course>.

• Torsibility = (1) capability of being twisted; or (2) resis-
tance to being twisted.

• Trim = (1) to add to the edges of <she trimmed the dress
with lace>; or (2) to cut off the edges or tips <trim your
hair>.

controversial is preferably pronounced /kon-trә-vәr-
sah/l, not the affected /kon-tә-var-see-әl/.

controversy is pronounced /kon-tә-vәr-see/ in AmE
and BrE, but sometimes also /kon-trah-vә[ɾ]-see/ in
BrE. The word appears surprisingly often in the man-
gled form *controversy. One example suffices: “It is
only fitting that we delve into Irish history to relate a
tale fraught with controversy [read controversy] for
lo these past 144 years.” Max Haines, “A Scream from

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controversy misspelled *controversy: Stage 1
Current ratio: 18,339:1

controvert. So spelled—not *contravert, a misspell-
ing that litters much legal writing. See contravene (b).
Current ratio: 90:1

controvertible. So spelled—not *controvertable. See
-able (A).

Current ratio: 313:1

contumacious. See contumacious (b).

contumacy; *contumacity; contumely. Of the two
forms of the noun corresponding to contumacious,
contumacy (/kon-tyuu-mә-see/) is the usual term,
meaning (1) “rebellion against authority”; or (2) “willful
contempt of court.” Sense 1 is the nonlegal sense—e.g.:
“But he was a backslider, and finally was removed from the rolls [of the church] in 1880 for *contumacy*.” Perre Magness, “Church Celebrates a Colorful 150 Years,” Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 21 Apr. 1994, Neighbors §, at ME2. *Contumacy* is a needless variant. For the corresponding adjective, see *conversant* (b).

*Contumely* (/kon-tyoo-ma-lee/), easily confused with *contumacy*, is a literary word meaning “rude and haughty language.” Shakespeare wrote, in *Hamlet*, of the proud man’s *contumely* (3.1.70). More recent examples are not common, but the word does still appear—e.g.:

- “Targets for *contumely* include the Labour MP Russell Kerr (‘a drunken boor’), the journalist John Junior (‘an unamiable . . . old swine’), and his fellow Tory MP Robin Maxwell-Hyslop (whom he describes variously as ‘an unpleasant . . . eccentric’; ‘a nasty bit of work’; and ‘always . . . a man to avoid’).” Gerald Kaufman, “Elegy to a Political Career,” Sunday Telegraph, 2 Oct. 1994, Books §, at 11.

*Contumely* can properly refer not just to scornful language but to scorn itself—e.g.:

- “And congressional concern over subsidized art calculated to arouse *contumely* or hatred of racial, ethnic, gender, religious, or other groups or values reflects a legitimate goal.” Bruce Fein, “Dollars for Depravity?” Wash. Times, 19 Nov. 1996, at A14.

Current ratio (*contumacy* vs. *contumacy*): 100:1

contusion. See concussion.

**conundrum.** Pl. *conundrums*. The mistaken form *conundra* sometimes appears—e.g.: “The rhythms of baseball, unlike those of more hectic games, often induce in the spectator long thoughts and provide ample opportunity to tackle *conundra* [read *conundrums*] that have long stumped philosophers for millennia.” George W. Hunt, “What Are Hyenas Laughing at Anyways?” America, 13 Apr. 1996, at 2. (If the author was trying to make *conundra* parallel to *millennium*, the echo hardly works.) See plurals (b).

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| *conundra* for *conundrums* | Stage 1: Current ratio (*conundra* vs. *conundrums*): 38:1 |

**conven(e)r.** Today the usual term for one attending a convention is *conventioneer*. It has been standard since the 1930s.

Current ratio (*conventioneer* vs. *conventione): 132:1

**conversable; *conversable; convertible.** *Conversable* = easy to talk with; enjoyable as a conversationalist. E.g.: “Friends say Ethel Kropf was as likable as they come—kind, thoughtful, *conversable*, quick with a compliment and full of stories.” Alex Tizon, “Ethel Kropf, 97, Was Full of Stories,” Seattle Times, 20 June 1995, at B6.

*Conversable* is a needless variant of *convertible* (= capable of being converted). E.g.: “As well as Comcast’s deal, an issue for The Limited, the U.S. women’s clothing chain, also had a success with a $50m *convertible* [read *convertible issue*] paying a 6¾ per cent coupon with a put option to give a 9.48 per cent yield after five years.” Maggie Urry, “Low-Cost Borrowing Via a Convertible,” Fin. Times, 2 Sept. 1985, § II, at 20. See -ABLE (A).

**conversant in; conversant with.** Although at times these phrasings have been interchangeable, a differentiation appears to be emerging. *Conversant in* suggests “thoroughly versed in” and connotes a good deal of expertise—e.g.:

- “The MSI show is a means for any user—nonusers, too—to become more fluent with the ‘techie’ concepts and terms used by people more *conversant in* the computer revolution.” Mike Conklin, “Networld Shows the Way,” Chicago Trib., 3 Apr. 2001, at 3.

*Conversant with* (since 1800 the more usual phrasing) tends to suggest somewhat less expertise—that is, a general familiarity with something. E.g.:

- “Chafee said Mr. Bush, plainly *conversant with* the political challenges ahead, pointed out that although the GOP must

conversationalist; *conversationalist. The standard term is conversationalist. Older authorities preferred *conversationist, but that obsolescence word (predominant till about 1850) is now almost never used.

Current ratio (converse, vb., vs. *conversate): 498:1

*convertible. See conversable.

convertible. So spelled—not *convertable. See -ABLE (A) & conversable.

Current ratio: 1,745:1

conveyance, n. A Meaning “vehicle.” Conveyance is sometimes used as a formal word for car or vehicle—a pomposity to be avoided. E.g.: “Parents of bused students who are unhappy with the county’s transportation arrangements always have the option of getting their children to school in private conveyances [read their own cars].” “Children Are Parents’ Responsibility,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 21 Sept. 1995, at A18.

B. And *conveyal. Conveyance is the better noun corresponding to the verb convey. *Conveyal is a needless variant.

conveyer is the general spelling for “a person or thing that conveys.” In mechanical uses, however, as in conveyor belt, the -or spelling is standard.

convict, vt. A person is convicted of a crime, for the act of committing a crime, or on a particular count. But a person is not *convicted in a crime: “A Palestinian suspect in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 was convicted today along with three co-defendants in [read for] a series of attacks in northern Europe four years ago.” “Pan Am Bombing Suspect Convicted in [read for] Other Attacks,” N.Y. Times, 22 Dec. 1989, at 3.

convictable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *convictible. See -ABLE (A).

convince. See persuade.

convolvulus (= a morning glory having funnel-shaped flowers and triangular leaves) predominantly forms the plural convolvuli (/kon-vo-lyi-li/) in all varieties of English. The plural convolvuluses is a variant. Current ratio: 2:1


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cooly misspelled *cooly: Stage 1 Current ratio: 40:1

coop. The shortened form of cooperative (= an organization owned by and run for the benefit of those who use its services), co-op is hyphenated even though the longer form isn’t. Without the hyphen, it looks like the word for a chicken pen.
cooperate; *co-operate. AmE did away with the hyphen about 1910; BrE took till about 1980. The word is solid.

Current ratio: 6:1

copart. This word, from the Latin cōpātēre "to choose or elect," has an obligatory hyphen because without it a miscue almost certainly takes place. Cōpātēr is an old-fashioned variant. The word means (1) "to recruit (someone) as a member," (2) "to gain the allegiance of (an opponent or potential opponent)," or (3) "to absorb or assimilate; to make use of."

Co-opt is sometimes wrongly written co-op (which is properly only a shortening of cooperative): "The danger here is clear—people trying to co-op [read co-opt] the campaign finance reform issue and pass off fake reforms as real." Alison Mitchell, "McCain Returns to an Uneasy Senate," N.Y. Times, 20 Mar. 2000, at A19 (quoting Fred Wertheimer). See co-op.

Current ratio (to co-op the vs. * to co-op the): 193:1

Coordinate Adjectives. See adjectives (c).

coowner. Because the general AmE practice is not to hyphenate prefixes, some writers prefer coowner. For example, the American Law Institute has used the term coowenership in the title of one of its restatements of the law. The question whether the better form is coowner or co-owner is largely one of familiarity. To some writers—particularly lawyers—coowner and coowners are everyday words. But other writers think that the solid versions are visually jarring, so they write co-owner and co-ownerships. See co- & Punctuation (j).

copasetic; *copasetic; *copesetic; *copesettic. The first is the standard spelling for this tongue-in-cheek term meaning "first-rate; quite satisfactory." The word is slangy and jocular. Its etymology—variously attributed to Italian, Creole French, and Hebrew—is unknown. The second, third, and fourth spellings are variant forms (the last one especially rare). See slang.

copulate; cupula. Copula = (1) a linking verb, such as be, feel, or seem, that expresses a state of being rather than action; or (2) a link or connection in general—e.g.: "This is the age of parsing, a word that once referred to the grammatical analysis of sentences. Now it means playing games with words, as Bill Clinton did with the copula 'is' in worming his way out of charges of illicit copulation." Rob Morse, "Outlawing Cock and Bull Stories," S.F. Chron., 31 Aug. 2001, at A2. Copula = an arched or domed roof, as on an astronomical observatory.

Through an odd sort of metathesis, copula wrongly displaces cupula fairly often, probably by writers not versed in architecture—e.g.: • "Each has its own copula [read cupula], Boston Gables, as well as numerous peaks with windows galore, all topped by a metal roof." Karl Kell, "Abita Man Wakes Up Every


- “Naming opportunities remain . . . [Y]ou could donate $40,000 to name the Garden Café Copula [read cupula],” Maryalice Koehne, “Donations Campaign Takes Root,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 26 May 2002, at N8. (Since the cupola hasn’t been named yet, there’s no need to capitalize cupola in that sentence as a proper noun.)

Copulas, Adverbs or Adjectives After. See adjectives (e).

copy, v.t., in the sense “to send a copy to” <he copied me on the letter>, is a voguish casualism to be avoided in formal contexts—e.g.: “It is therefore legitimate to copy [read send a copy to] the recipient’s boss.” Mark H. McCormack, What They Don’t Teach You at Harvard Business School 138 (1984).

COPYEDITOR; COPYEDITING; COPYDIT, vb. Each is now avoided in formal contexts—e.g.: “It is therefore legitimate to copy [read send a copy to] the recipient’s boss.” Mark H. McCormack, What They Don’t Teach You at Harvard Business School 138 (1984).

COPYRIGHT, n. & vb., is so spelled. *Copywrite is a not infrequent mistake for the verb—e.g.:”


- “Most of the really juicy stuff said, sung and written these days is the work of professional scandalmongers, syndicated, copyright [read copyrighted], mass-marketed and protected by free-speech guarantees.” Jack Kisling, “No Joke—It’ll Make You Want to Kill,” Denver Post, 24 Nov. 1996, at H3.

- “Companies also must have formal business plans that outline their potential for increasing jobs and capital investment in the state, and must feature intellectual properties that are patented, copyright [read are copyrighted] or are pending for either process.” Deborah M. Todd, “House Bill Proposes Tax Break for Angel Investors,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 4 Nov. 2011, at A1.

Still another mistake is *copyright—e.g.:”


- “Raptors forward Walt (The Wizard) Williams was asked if he had the foresight to copyright [read copyright] the moniker.” Bill Harris, “Raptors Watch,” Toronto Sun, 8 Dec. 1996, Sports §, at 14.

For a similar error, see playwriting. For copyright as an adjective, see copyrighted.

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COPYEDITOR misused for copula: Stage 1

COPYRIGHTED; COPYRIGHT, adj. For the sense “secured or protected by copyright,” copyrighted is the better and by far the more usual form. As an adjective, the form copyright is uncommon enough that it does not sufficiently announce what part of speech it is playing—e.g.: “Thanks and appreciation for the use of copyright [read copyrighted] material.” Jefferson D. Bates, Writing with Precision xviii (rev. ed. 1985; repr. 1988).

COPYWRITER. See copywriter.

COPYWRITER; COPYRIGHTER. A copywriter is a person who writes copy, especially for advertisements and public relations. A copyrighter is a person who obtains or owns the copyright to an expressive creation. In that correct sense, the word is a shorter but obscure variant of copyright owner or copyright holder. It is frequently, however, misused for copywriter—e.g.: “About a dozen people turned out. One of them was Robert Montecalvo, a 63-year-old advertising copyrighter [read copywriter].” Richard Salit, “North Providence Republicans Looking to Get Back in Race,” Providence J.-Bull., 28 Feb. 2001, at C1.

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COPYWRITER misused for copywriter: Stage 1

COQUETTE /koh-ket/ (= a flirtatious girl or woman) is the standard spelling. Coquet, a variant, is uncommon—no doubt because, in English, this term has historically been sex-specific. See sexism (c).

But coquet is perfectly good as a verb meaning either (1) “to behave as a coquette,” or (2) “to consider (something) jestingly but not as a serious possibility.” Sense 2 isn’t sex-specific, but sense 1 usually is—e.g.: “The band is tight. Sharon’s rich, sensuous voice coquets above the piano, the drums, the bass.” Arthur Allen, “When It Comes to Twins, Sometimes It’s Hard to Tell the Two Apart,” Wash. Post, 11 Jan. 1998, Mag. §, at W6. The verb is inflected coquetted and coquetting.

cord. See chord.

CORNET; CORONET. Cornet (/kor-net/) = a brass wind instrument somewhat smaller than a trumpet. Coronet (/kor-ә-net/) = (1) a crown; (2) the joint of skin and horn at the top of a horse’s hoof; or (3) (cap.) any of various brands of products, such as Dodge cars or paper towels. The second term is sometimes misused for the first—e.g.: “He played coronet [read cornet] in the Modern

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**coronet** misused for **cornet**: Stage 1

Current ratio (cornet player vs. *cornet player*): 52:1

**cornetist** (= a cornet player) has been the standard spelling since the word was first used in the 19th century. *Cornetist* is a variant.

Current ratio: 14:1

**cornucopia** (= a horn-shaped container filled with fruit and flowers, intended to represent a time of bounty and prosperity) has always (from the 18th century) formed the plural **cornucopias** in AmE. In the late 19th century, the Latinate plural **cornucpiae** became predominant in BrE; that preference has persisted in BrE up to this day. The AmE plural is pronounced /korn-ya-koh-pee-əz/, the BrE plural /korn-ya-koh-pi-ee/.

**corollary; correlation.** A **corollary** is a subsidiary proposition inferred from a main proposition—or, by extension, a practical consequence or result. E.g.: “Remember the axiom that says that the bureau-bys extension, a practical consequence or result. E.g.: proposition inferred from a main proposition—or, of injury. ” Mark Stewart, “Locking In Safety, ” Wash. Times, 13 Apr. 1999, at E1.

In recent years, unfortunately, corollary has come to be misused for correlation (the word far more frequently needed)—e.g.: • “Rizzo . . . does not see a logical corollary [read correlation] between accidents, injuries, and a total ban on fireworks sales.” Richard Duckett, “Firefighters on Guard for the Fourth,” Telegram & Gaz. (Worcester), 5 July 1996, at A1.

• “Researchers have found a direct corollary [read correlation] between the number of hours children watch TV and the number of pounds they weigh.” “Not Just Vanity: Obesity Is a Health Problem,” Syracuse Herald-J., 2 Nov. 1998, at B6. A correlation, by contrast, is an interdependence between existing phenomena.

E.g.: “There doesn’t seem to be a proven correlation between the rise of baby-proofing and the decline in the number of injuries.” Mark Stewart, “Locking In Safety,” Wash. Times, 13 Apr. 1999, at E1.

A corollary to the second bulleted example above: there might be a correlation between the number of hours that someone watches TV and that person’s tendency to misuse corollary for correlation.

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**corollary** misused for **correlation**: Stage 1

Current ratio (a correlation between vs. *a corollary between*): 47:1

**coronet.** See cornet.

**corpora.** See corpus.

**corporal; corporeal.** These terms have undergone differentiation. **Corporal** (/kor-pa-ral/) = of or affecting the body <corporate punishment>. **Corporeal** (/kor-por-ee-al/) = having a physical material body; substantial. E.g.: “Actual people aren’t images, but substantial, physical, corporeal beings with souls.” Larry Woiwode, “Television: The Cyclops That Eats Books,” USA Today (Mag.), Mar. 1993, at 84.

**Corporeal** sometimes wrongly displaces corporal—e.g.:


**Language-Change Index**

*corporeal punishment for corporal punishment: Stage 1

Current ratio (corporal punishment vs. *corporeal punishment*): 47:1

**corporeality; corporeity.** A distinction is possible. **Corporeality** (/kor-por-ee-al-i-tee/) = bodily existence. **Corporeity** (/kor-po-ray-i-tee/) = materiality itself; substantiality; the quality of having substance.

**corps.** The singular corpus is pronounced like core. The plural form—also spelled corps—is pronounced like cores. President Barack Obama created a minor furor in February 2010 when he referred to Navy corpsmen as /korps-man/ instead of /kör-man/.

**corpulence; corpulency.** The predominant literary synonym for obesity was *corpulence* in the 18th century. But in the 19th century *corpulence* gradually became the standard term in print sources—first in BrE (about 1850) and then in AmE (about 1870). Current ratio: 3:1

**corpus** (= body, either literally or figuratively) traditionally forms the plural form corpora. This is the usual plural found in linguistic, legal, medical, and other technical contexts—e.g.:

• “Structural linguists had confined themselves, at least in theory, to describing the sentences found in corpora.” Graham Wilson, Foreword, A Linguistics Reader xxiv (Graham Wilson ed., 1967).

• “There is surely no legal impediment to the distant heirs of that Mongolian potestate adding to the corpora of whatever trusts may strike their fancy.” David B. Young, “The Pro Tanto Invalidity of Protective Trusts,” 78 Marq. L. Rev. 807, 835 (1995).
“Inside the penis are two long expandable chambers, filled with spongy tissue, called the corpora cavernosa.” Steve Sternberg, “Impotence Treatment Keeps Urologists Busy,” Wash. Post, 5 Nov. 1996, Health §, at 8.

Occasionally the form *corpuses* appears. It might be more immediately recognizable to most people, but it’s still rare. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (corpora vs. *corpuses*): 69:1

corpus delicti—meaning “the body of a crime” and emphatically not “dead body”—is generally outmoded in law, but it still occasionally appears there and elsewhere. In cases of felonious homicide, the corpus delicti is usually evidence of a death and of a criminal agency as its cause. This corpus delicti is usually established by proof of the dead body and evidence that the death didn’t result from natural causes. But the dead body isn’t necessary to establish a corpus delicti.

Both in and outside law, the phrase is sometimes misspelled *corpus deliciti*, a sort of macabre etymological double entendre (Latin delicti means “of delight”). E.g.: “The medical examiner will no longer examine the corpus delicti [read corpus delicti].” Dominic J. Baranello, “E Pluribus Unum? (Or Something),” N.Y. Times, 15 Sept. 1996, Long Island §, at 19.

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*corpus delicti for corpus deliciti*: Stage 1

Current ratio (corpus delicti vs. *corpus deliciti*): 14:1

corral, vb. Corralled and corralling are so spelled—not *corraled* and *corralling*. See spelling (b).

correctable. So spelled—not *correctible*. See -ABLE (a).

Current ratio: 17:1

correctional; corrective. Correctional = of, relating to, or involving correction, usu. penal correction <correctional officer>. E.g.: “Jack L. Webb, 59, of Haymarket, Va., and Jeffress A. Wells, 60, of Fuquay-Varina, N.C., were fined $2,500 and sentenced to 30 days in a correctional institution and two years’ supervised probation.” Ruth Larson, “2 Ex-Agriculture Aides Get Jail Time for Clinton Fund Raising,” Wash. Times, 14 Dec. 1996, at A2. The phrases correctional facility and correctional institution are really just euphemisms for jail or prison.

Corrective = tending to correct <corrective measures>. E.g.: “Among its charges, he said, are identifying regulations that should be streamlined or eliminated and developing corrective legislation.” Raymond W. Vodicka, “Sen. Bond Seeking to Help Businesses,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 15 Dec. 1994, at 1.

“[There was a] woman with one leg longer than the other, which caused her to walk sideways. The elves arranged for corrective surgery.” Stacy Downs, “Elves Set to Work This Year’s Miracles,” Kansas City Star, Olathe §, 14 Dec. 1996, at 1.

correctness; correctitude. Correctness is the standard noun corresponding to the adjective correct in most senses—e.g.:


“[There was a] woman with one leg longer than the other, which caused her to walk sideways. The elves arranged for corrective surgery.” Stacy Downs, “Elves Set to Work This Year’s Miracles,” Kansas City Star, Olathe §, 14 Dec. 1996, at 1.

Correctness; correctitude. Correctness is the standard noun corresponding to the adjective correct in most senses—e.g.:

“I cannot come to any conclusion as to the correctness of one term over another—‘hot dog’ or ‘frank.’” Paul Donohue, “Hope, Skepticism on Arthritis Diets,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 24 Aug. 1995, at G5.


Correctitude is a portmanteau word—a blend of correct and rectitude. It refers to what is proper in conduct or behavior, and it has moralistic overtones, especially in BrE. E.g.:

“The local political allies of the west tend to be unrepresentative, dissolute or repressive rulers . . . . Against them Islam seems to provide certainty of belief and correctitude of behaviour.” Godfrey Jansen, “The Soldiers of Allah,” Economist, 27 Jan. 1979, at 45 (but since correctitude refers to behavior, the last phrase is redundant).

“It is to Henry VIII that Prince Charles owes the monarch's anomalous position as supreme head of the Church, Defender of the Faith, by which was meant, at the time, the Catholic faith, in all its Catholic correctitudes.” Brian Sewell, “Charles and the Rich Royal Legacy of Lust,” Evening Standard, 3 Sept. 1996, at 11.

In AmE, correctitude often has the connotation of too much rectitude—e.g.: “This is period instrument playing of the dour, forbidding sort, all grainy sonorities and joyless correctitude.” Joshua Kosman, “An Early ‘Silla’ in Time for Mozart Fest,” S.F. Chron., 17 Mar. 1991, Datebook §, at 45.

Since the early ’90s, correctitude has also sometimes been the choice to form the noun corresponding to politically correct. Perhaps the rectitude root connotes the elevation of political views to the level of religious fervor—e.g.:

“One response to PC has been the National Association of Scholars, or NAS, which aims to counter what it sees as the excesses of political correctitude with a devotion to what it sees as traditional scholarly values.” “Multiculturalism Leads to Multifactionalism as Tradition and Change Battle on America’s Campuses,” Boston Globe (City ed.), 7 Apr. 1991, at A23.

“Political correctitude just isn’t a worthy goal for any thinking person. And to seek political correctness in art is to see art through a distorted prism.” Mick LaSalle, “Unreleased Movie on AFI List,” S.F. Chron., 4 Jan. 2015, at M26.

Still, political correctness remains the usual and preferred phrase. See political correctness.

correlation (= a proportional correspondence between things) is the standard spelling. *Corelation* is a variant.

For the misuse of corollary for correlation, see corollary.

Current ratio (correlation vs. *correlation*): 3,726:1

CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTIONS, or conjunctions used in pairs, should join structurally identical sentence parts, sometimes called “matching parts.” Simple nouns never cause problems <neither fish nor fowl>. When we use constructions with phrases and clauses,
However, parallelism may become a problem. Following are examples with some of the more common correlative conjunctions:

- **Both . . . and:** “As with the 1983 news coverage, it is through this sort of presentation that horror video watching becomes both symptomatic [read a symptom] of sickness and the precursor of despicable forms of behavior.” Peter Fraser, “Nasty . . . But Naughty,” Guardian, 9 May 1992, at 26. See both (A).
- **Either . . . or:** “But here’s where the obscenity surfaces: Whenever a black is hired to run anything in professional sports, the inference is always there that he was hired either because of affirmative action or because of a fluke.” Terence Moore, “See Green’s Résumé, Not His Color,” Atlanta J.-Const., 15 Jan. 1992, at D2. See either (C).
- **Neither . . . nor:** “There is little reason to hold manufacturers strictly liable for injuries caused by the misuse of firearms that are neither negligently produced nor defective in design.” Bruce Kobayashi, “Gun-Liability Lawsuits Aim at the Wrong Targets,” San Diego Union-Trib., 5 July 1996, at B7. See neither . . . nor.

Some of the other common correlatives in English are:

- although . . . nevertheless;
- although . . . yet;
- as . . . as;
- as . . . so;
- if . . . then;
- just as . . . so (also);
- not only . . . but also;
- notwithstanding . . . yet;
- since . . . therefore;
- so . . . that;
- when . . . then;
- where . . . there; and
- whether . . . or.

correspondent; co(-)respondent. A correspondent is a person who communicates regularly in writing with another person or a (usu. professional) person who makes reports or sends dispatches from a place where something significant is taking or has taken place. In American law, a correspondent (so spelled, without a hyphen) is (1) a coparty who responds to a petition; (2) (only in some states) a coparty who responds to an appeal; or (3) in a divorce case, a paramour who is named or sued by the injured spouse. Only sense 3 of co-respondent (so spelled) applies in BrE.

corrigendum; erratum. These words are used synonymously to denote an error made in printing discovered only after the work has gone to press. Corrigendum (lit., “a thing to be corrected”) is perhaps technically more accurate (since a correction is being made). But erratum (lit., “error”) is older in English and more common. The plurals are corrigenda and errata—and they occur more frequently than the singulars. See errata.

corroborate. A. Senses and Uses. Corroborate = (1) to support (a statement, argument, etc.) with evidence that is consistent; to confirm; or (2) to confirm formally (a law, etc.). Sense 1 is more common—e.g.: “Experts said a major issue when recovered-memory cases go to court is the lack of corroborating evidence, often because the allegations date so far back.” Jeremy Olson, “Repressed Memories a Gray Area,” Omaha World-Herald (Midlands ed.), 25 Sept. 2002, at A1.

In either sense, this verb is transitive <the last witness corroborated the testimony of other witnesses>. Hence *corroborate with is inferior to corroborate. In the passive voice, the phrasing corroborated by is usual—e.g.: “The novelists Gaskell and Disraeli and Hardy were not so naive, and their realism is corroborated by this book.” “Compassionate Curiosity,” Economist, 25 Jan. 1975, at 96. See -able (d), -atable & spelling (a).

B. Pronunciation. In October 1991, during Justice Clarence Thomas’s confirmation hearings, Senator Joseph Biden and other members of the Senate Judiciary Committee consistently mispronounced this word as if it were cooberate—like cooperate with a -b- instead of a -p-. The correct pronunciation is /ka-roxb-ə-rayt/.

C. And collaborate. The word corroborate is occasionally used where collaborate (= to work jointly with [another] in producing) belongs—e.g.: “The family corroborated [read collaborated] on a project to replicate a 1705 microscope.” Edythe Jensen, “Family Turns Hobbies into Businesses,” Ariz. Republic/Phoenix GAZ., 5 Nov. 1994, Tempe §, at 1.

The opposite error (collaborate for corroborate) is also all too frequent—e.g.: “[Suicide expert Frank] Campbell said it was insulting that the board discounted the woman’s testimony that was corroborated by another expert.” Jeremy Olson, “Repressed Memories a Gray Area,” Omaha World-Herald, 25 Sept. 2002, at A1.

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1. corroborate misused for collaborate: Stage 1
   Current ratio (collaborated on vs. *corroborated on): 78:1
   2. collaborate misused for corroborate: Stage 1
   Current ratio (was corroborated by vs. *was collaborated by): 158:1

corroborate; *corroboratory. The first is standard; the second is a needless variant. Despite the supremacy of corroborative, the phrase corroborating evidence is now much more common than corroborative evidence.

Current ratio (corroborative vs. *corroboratory): 28:1

corrodible (= susceptible to corrosion) is so spelled—not *corrodable. Another variant form, *corrosible, is less than desirable because it doesn’t readily suggest the underlying verb, corrode; it is also less common. See -able (A).
corrupter; *corruptor. The -er spelling has always predominated and is therefore preferred. See -er (A).

Current ratio: 4:1

corruptible. So spelled—not *corruptable. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 689:1

cortex (= the outer layer of a bodily organ, esp. the brain) has predominantly formed the plural cortices since the 17th century. Cortexes is a latecoming variant. In print sources today, cortices predominates. The corresponding adjective is cortical /kɔr-ti-kəl/.

Current ratio: 30:1

*cosey; *cosie. See cozy.

coset. Cosseted and cosetting are so spelled—not *cosseted and *cosetting. See spelling (B).

cost > cost > cost. This is the normal way to inflect this verb. But when the sense is "to determine the cost of," this is the normal way to inflect this verb. This is the normal way to inflect this verb. The sense is "to determine the cost of," cost > cost > cost.

**could care less. See double modals.

*could of. See of (b).

council; counsel. Council (= a deliberative assembly) is primarily a noun. Counsel (= to advise) is primarily a verb, but in legal writing it's commonly used as a noun meaning "a legal adviser or group of legal advisers" <counsel for the corporation>. See counsel & consil.

councillor; counselor. A councillor is a member of a council. (Counselor is a variant spelling.) A counselor is either someone who gives advice (such as personal advice) or a lawyer. (In BrE, it's spelled counselor.) See lawyer. Cf. counselor.

councilmanic, a 19th-century AmE coinage, is the unfortunate—and the only—adjective corresponding to councilman. E.g.: "Bill Cirocco was appointed at that time to fill her vacant councilmanic seat." Nancy Gish, "Murdoch Sworn In to First Full Term," Buffalo News, 2 Jan. 1997, at B5. Of course, council seat or seat on the council would be much better in that sentence. See sexism (c).

council member. Two words for now, but there is a trend to join them into one.

counsel. A Scope of Term. In BrE, counsel is used only of barristers (litigators), whereas in AmE it is frequently used of office practitioners (e.g., general counsel) as well as of litigators. See lawyer, consul & council.

B. Number. Counsel may be either singular or plural. In practice it is usually indeterminate <right to counsel> or plural <all counsel were present>—e.g.:

- "I'm always hesitant to interfere with cases, especially where you have two counsel present.""A Conversation with Judge H. Terry Grimes," Pa. Law Weekly, 5 Dec. 1994, at 7.
countless applies only to count nouns. So you might refer to countless bags but not to *countless baggage. See COUNT NOUNS AND MASS NOUNS.

**Count Nouns and Mass Nouns.** Count nouns are those that denote enumerable things and that are capable of forming plurals (e.g., cranes, parties, minivans, oxen); mass (noncount) nouns are often abstract nouns—they cannot be enumerated (e.g., insurance, courage, mud). Many nouns can be both count <he gave several talks> and mass <talk is cheap>, depending on the sense. These are few, however, in

counterterrorism. See antiterrorism.

counselor, counsellor; counseled, counselled; counselling, counselling; counselable, counsellable. The preferred spellings are counselor, counseled, counseling, and counselable in AmE, and counselor, counselled, counselling, and counselable in BrE. See spelling (b). For the sense in which counselor means “lawyer,” see lawyer. Cf. councillor.

counterfeit; imitation; forgery. These words overlap to some degree. Although something counterfeit is always an imitation, an imitation may not be counterfeit. A counterfeit article is an imitation produced in violation of a law. For example, if the law requires a license to reproduce or copy something or forbids representing a reproduction or copy as genuine, or altogether forbids an item’s reproduction, then an item made or sold in violation of the law is counterfeit <the flea-market seller said the counterfeit “Gucci” handbags from China were discounted factory seconds from Italy>.

An imitation is an exact copy, or a thing made to resemble something else. It is usually identified as a copy <the label says “imitation leather”>.

A forgery is a document made or altered in a way that harms another’s rights. Before the advent of paper money, the distinction between forgery and counterfeiting was clear because counterfeiting referred only to the making of false metallic coins. Once money began to grow on trees, however, criminals looked for ways to copy it—and this activity also came to be known as counterfeiting. Today, the usual expressions are counterfeit a $20 bill and forge a check.
comparison to the nouns that are exclusively either count or mass. Use of these two types of nouns may introduce problems with number, especially when the use of count nouns strays into a use of mass nouns or vice versa. See plurals (j).

coup de grâce /koo duh grah/ means “a blow of mercy,” a compassionate act that puts a mortally wounded person or animal out of misery. The phrase is sometimes mispronounced /koo doh grah/, as if the last word were spelled gras (as in pâté de foie gras). But worse than that, the phrase is sometimes mistakenly written *coup de gras—e.g.:

- “Lady Thatcher may not be indestructible, but her memoirs show that anyone seeking to apply the coup de gris [read coup de gracie] will have to pay highly for the privilege.” Philip Ziegler, “Thatcher Memoirs,” Daily Telegraph, 18 Oct. 1993, at 4.

Even the sense is sometimes mangled. To make coup de grâce cruel, bloody, and painful is to torture the phrase—e.g.: “I saw a fox being torn to pieces by a pack of hounds. It was the final act, the coup de gras [delete erroneous phrase] in what we call a country sport.” Michael Herd, “This Land of No Hope and Gory Pursuit,” Evening Standard, 30 Dec. 1993, at 46.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. coup de grâce mispronounced /koo doh grah/: Stage 2
2. *coup de gras for coup de grâce: Stage 1

Current ratio (coup de grâce vs. *coup de gras): 75:1

couple. A. Number. Couple (= pair) is a collective noun like team, company, or faculty. As a rule, a collective noun in AmE takes a singular verb unless the action is clearly that of the individual participants rather than collective. When two people form a couple, they may act as individuals <the couple plan to take jobs in Philadelphia> or as a single entity <the couple is buying a house>. But unlike other collective nouns, couple should take a plural verb far more often than a singular one. The plural construction is also far more convenient because it eliminates the need to find a suitable pronoun.

Other collective nouns don’t present this problem. When the noun is, say, team, we have no trouble referring to its win–loss record. But the neuter pronoun it feels too impersonal to use with as intimate a word as couple. So we sometimes see a sentence with couple as a subject, a singular verb, and a plural pronoun—e.g.: “In the pilot, one couple is having a sexual ‘dry spell’ in their marriage.” “Looking for Laughs This TV Season? Keep Flipping,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 15 Sept. 2002, Show World §, at 4. There is no graceful fix in these situations—the grammatically correct one, changing to are, is especially jarring here because one couple seems to demand is. It is possible, however, to rewrite: In the pilot, one of the married couples is having a sexual “dry spell.” See preventive grammar.

B. For a few. As a noun, couple has traditionally denoted a pair. (As a verb, it always denotes the joining of two things.) But in some uses, the precise number is vague. Essentially, it’s equivalent to a few or several. In informal contexts this usage is quite common and unexceptionable—e.g.:

- “This slick, cozy shop, which underwent a makeover a couple of years back, is a hybrid of takeout and restaurant.” A.C. Stevens, “Why Cook Tonight?” Boston Herald, 15 Sept. 2002, Food §, at 65.

C. With or Without of. The traditional use of couple has been as a noun, usually meaning “two” (but see B). As a noun, it requires the preposition of to link it to another noun <a couple of dollars>. Using couple as an adjective directly before the noun has been very much on the rise since the late 20th century <a couple of dollars>. This innovation strikes many readers as unidiomatic and awkward—or perhaps downright wrong. But the change will doubtless continue. That is, the age-old expression a couple of people will become *a couple people. For now, the traditional phrasing is still eight times as common as the adjectival use in modern print sources—e.g.:

- “This slick, cozy shop, which underwent a makeover a couple of years back, is a hybrid of takeout and restaurant.” A.C. Stevens, “Why Cook Tonight?” Boston Herald, 15 Sept. 2002, Food §, at 65.

But the clipped phrasing, a low casualism, does surface in print—e.g.: “I mentioned to a couple people [read a couple of people] that the golf courses get paid whether people play or not.” Bob Bestler, “Fair Weather Finds a Way During Event,” Sun-News (Myrtle Beach, S.C.), 29 Aug. 2002, at B1.

When the phrasing is changed, the relative frequency in usage changes. The phrase couple of things is about eight times as common in print sources as *couple things—e.g.: “We will always be able to look back and say a couple of things.” Joe Logan, “Andrade Holds On,” Phil. Inquirer, 15 Sept. 2002, at D1. But couple of hundred things is not even twice as common as couple hundred things. When a numerical term follows couple, many writers delete the idiomatic of. Examples can be found of both types (the of versions consistently appearing 30–40% more often than the of-less versions)—e.g.:
• “De Bizemont sells only to interior designers and other members of the trade, at wholesale prices ranging from a couple of hundred dollars to several thousand.” Kim Boatman, “For a Warm, Homey and Colorful Touch, Try Fabric,” Chicago Trib., 8 Sept. 2002, at 10.

In each of those sentences, some writers wouldn’t use the of after couple.

This shift in usage may be fully acceptable someday. Perhaps everyone will come to use couple as an adjective. (See functional shift (b).) Words can and often do change their parts of speech. After all, the word couple is firmly established in one adverbial use (see (b)). But this idiom has not yet admitted this casual expression as standard.

For the foreseeable future, editors will be justified in editing sentences such as the following:


For just the opposite tendency—the intrusive of—see of (n). Cf. type of.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>couple things for couple of things: Stage 2</th>
<th>Current ratio (couple of things vs. couple things): 8:1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

D. With Words of Comparison. When couple is used with comparison words such as more, fewer, and too many, the of is omitted <have a couple more shrimp>. In the predicate of the previous example, shrimp is the direct object. It is modified by the adjective more, which in turn is modified by the adverbial phrase a couple. There is no place in the example for of (neither *a couple of more shrimp nor *a couple more of shrimp makes sense). But if the informal sentence structure can be slightly inverted, the of becomes idiomatic again <I’ll have a couple of shrimp more>. E.g.:


• “He launched a couple more ringers from his black-gloved hands before calling it a day just after 1 p.m. Saturday.” Justin Kmitch, “Last Day for Last Fling,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 2 Sept. 2002, Neighbor §, at 1.

coupled with, like together with and accompanied by, is used with a singular and not a plural verb when the first of the two nouns is singular <a cup of coffee, coupled with two eggs over easy, makes up her morning ritual>. See subject–verb agreement (e).

couple (of) dozen, hundred, etc. See couple (c).

coupon should be pronounced /koo-pon/, not /kyoo-pon/. The mispronunciation betrays an ignorance of French and of the finer points of English. Imagine coup détat pronounced with /kyoo/ as the first syllable. See pronunciation (b).

Language-Change Index
coupon pronounced /koo/ instead of /koo/: Stage 4
courtesan (= a prostitute who caters to rich customers) is the standard spelling. *Courtesan is a variant. It is pronounced /kor-ta-zan/.

Current ratio: 32:1
courthouse. One word.
court judgment. See judgment (c).
court-martial. A. Generally. Court-martial (= an ad hoc military court convened to try and to punish those accused of violating military law) is hyphenated both as noun and as verb. The OED lists the verb as colloquial, an observation now antiquated. As to spelling, in AmE the final -i is not doubled in court-martialed and court-martialing, although in BrE it is. (See spelling (b).)

The plural of the noun is courts-martial. See plurals (g) & postpositive adjectives.

B. And court marshal. One meaning of marshal is “a judicial officer who provides court security, executes process, and performs other tasks for the court” (Black’s Law Dictionary 1121 [10th ed. 2014]). It’s therefore not surprising that court marshal has become a frequent phrase—e.g.:


• “Mr. Moskowitz and the construction workers refused to leave until last week’s visit by court marshals.” Mark Francis Cohen, “At Former Synagogue, Proper Burial an End to Seamy Chapter,” N. Y. Times, 26 Jan. 1997, § 13, at 7.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the phrase court-martial is now often mistakenly written *court marshal—e.g.:


• “A veritable platoon of foot soldiers from both sides have been whistled off on enforced leave, whether by official court martial [read court-martial] or injury in action.” Mike Davidson, “Calling Time on This Unhealthy Obsession,” Daily Mail, 3 Mar. 1997, at 61.

Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, 1–4.)

court of appeals; court of appeal. Both forms occur in AmE, but court of appeals is more common. (Court of appeal, though, is the only form in BrE.) The correct form is the one that is statistically prescribed or customary in a given jurisdiction. For example, although most appellate courts in the United States are individually called a court of appeals, the term in California and Louisiana is court of appeal.

The plural forms are courts of appeals and courts of appeal. The singular possessive forms are court of appeals' and court of appeal's; the plural possessives are courts of appeals' and courts of appeal's.

Court of St. James's = the British royal court. Although one sometimes encounters *Court of St. James, even in BrE, the better and more traditional form is Court of St. James's. E.g.: "In 1938, Mrs. Kennedy accompanied her husband to the Court of St. James [read James] and was formally welcomed by King George VI." Robert D. McDadden, "Rose Kennedy, Political Matriarch, Dies at 104," N.Y. Times, 23 Jan. 1995, at A1, B7. Despite appearing to be a redundant double possessive, Court of St. James's is historically accurate because the former seat of the British court in London is St. James's Palace. So in Court of St. James's, the term Palace has historically been an understood word at the end. Cf. possessives (d).

covert was traditionally pronounced like covered, except with a -t at the end: /kav-/art/. Still, /koh-vart/, nearly rhyming with overt (but for the stress), is the more common pronunciation in AmE nowadays.

covetous /kav-a-tas/ is so spelled—not *covetous.

coworker. So spelled—without a hyphen. Cf. co- & coowner.

cowrie (= [1] a gastropod that inhabits warm seas and produces a brightly colored shell, or [2] the shell of this creature, esp. as once used as a medium of exchange in parts of Africa and Asia) has been predominantly so spelled since the 1920s. *Cowry is a variant spelling.

cowrite. See author, v.t. (A).

coxcomb. See cockscomb.

coxswain; *cockswain. Both spellings are pronounced /kok-san/. The word denotes a sailor who steers the ship and is in charge of the crew. Most dictionaries, American and British, correctly list coxswain as the main headword. It has greatly predominated since the 18th century.

coyote. In standard American speech, this word is pronounced /kt-yoh-te/. But in the western United States, the pronunciation /kt-oht/ is often heard.

According to Charles Harrington Elster, both pronunciations have been acceptable since the word was first recorded in dictionaries in the late 19th century. The two-syllable version dominated until the 1960s, when "the weight of authority . . . shifted" to the latter, with the two-syllable version "heard chiefly in the western United States." BBMM at 113. Unsurprisingly, the mascot of the University of South Dakota is pronounced /kt-oht/.

cozen /kaz-an/ is a literary and archaic word meaning "to cheat"—e.g.: "We're being had, you know. Cozened, gulled, bamboozled, and led up the garden path by the usual suspects." Walter Stewart, "At the Mercy of Money Traders," Toronto Sun, 30 Jan. 1995, at 11.

Parlance it has increasingly come to be used in the plural as a count noun. This example shows both uses—e.g.: "Today, 24-hour coverage is generally the centralized, and, in some cases, integrated management and administration of the separate insurance coverages that are packaged as a product." Edward Zutler, "Agents, Brokers Must Respond to 24-Hour Challenge," Nat'l Underwriter, 23 Sept. 1996, at 19. Here, coverage is a mass noun like protection, but coverages is a count noun like policies. (Also, in the quoted sentence the phrase and, in some cases, integrated should be placed in parentheses or set off by em-dashes—without the comma before and.) See count nouns and mass nouns & plurals (f).
• "Street-smart prisoners may think they are clever enough to outsmart any cop, but they can often be cozened by detectives who know their culture, as it were." Nat Hentoff, "Yes, Officer, I Want to Confess," Village Voice, 26 Mar. 1996, at 9.

• "Contrived complexity is at the heart of almost all white-collar fraud. Corporate cozeners are praying that the public will soon tire of legal polysyllabics, and go looking for activity that can be capsulized in four-letter words." Don Bauder, "Bored by Boardrooms, Bedazzled by Bedrooms," San Diego Union-Trib., 14 July 2002, at H2.

But some writers, engaging in a recent misusage, have apparently misinterpreted the word as if it meant "coddled" or "pampered"—e.g.:

• "These plants will acquire strength and size until they are ready to be sent into the fields to continue their new life. They will be cozened [read coddled or nurtured?] just as a new child in the family would be flattered and protected." "Truckpatch Remembered," Wash. Post, 1 Mar. 1995, Food §, at E1.

• "Today's car is designed to soothe and placate victims of road angst; it is a place where naked id is cuddled, coddled and cozened [read cozed!]." Bob Wiemer, "Dump Car Phones, but Keep the Fuzzy Dice," Newsday (N.Y.), 12 Feb. 1996, at A26.

• "Strictly for women, it hearksens [read harks] back to the days when very rich, very cozened [read pampered?] women arrived by chauffeured limo with Louis Vuitton trunks stuffed with cocktail dresses for dinner." Cynthia Robbins, "Guilty Pleasures," S.F. Examiner (Mag.), 14 July 1996, at M15. (For the reason for changing "hearkens in that sentence, see hark back (a).)

• "Coupled with Matamoros' gift for stillness, it all creates a cozening [read comfortable or cozy?] bed of sound in which memories blossom and occasionally burst into flame in ways we've rarely seen before." John Coulbourn, "A New Moon Rising," Toronto Sun, 1 Nov. 1996, at 7.

Other writers seem to want the word to mean "summon"—e.g.:

• "Barkers cozened [read hailed?] her as she passed—Step right up! Step right up and have a go!" Annette Curtis Klaus, "The Hoppins," in Short Circuits 183, 186 (Donald R. Gallo ed., 1992).


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1. cozen misused for coddle: Stage 1
2. cozen misused to mean "summon": Stage 1

cozy (= warm and comfortable) is the standard spelling. (The covering for a teapot is a tea cozy.) *Cosy, *cosey, *cosie, *cozie, and *cozy are variant forms.

Current ratio (in order of spellings within entry): 4,057:1,903:186:9:4:1

-cracy. See governmental forms.

craft brewery. See microbrewery.

crape myrtle (= a colorful East Indian shrub commonly grown in the southern and southwestern U.S.)
is often misspelled *crepe myrtle, perhaps by those who mistakenly relate the word to the French delicacy crepe (/krɛp/). Crape (= a band made of thin twill fabric and worn on the upper arm as a sign of mourning) is a 17th-century anglicized spelling of the French word; it's pronounced /krəp/. E.g.:  
- “The gardens are sprinkled with red, yellow and purple blooms adding an array of color to the scene. Flowering plants include black-eye susans, impatients and crepe [read crape] myrtles.” “Magnolia Forest Garden Club’s ‘Garden of the Month,’” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 16 Aug. 2015, at H1.  
See crepe.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX  
crepe myrtle for crape myrtle: Stage 4  
Current ratio (crape myrtle vs. crepe myrtle): 1.04:1  
crappie (= a freshwater sunfish found in the central and eastern United States) is the standard spelling.  
*Croppie, a variant, is closer to a phonetic spelling. Both words are pronounced /krɒp-ɪ/.  
Current ratio: 66:1  
crashworthy. See -worthy.

crawfish; crayfish. Although crayfish has traditionally been considered standard AmE—and crawfish a dialectal variant—things have changed. With the rise in popularity of Cajun cuisine in the 1980s came a general awareness of such dishes as crawfish étouffée. And today, most people who buy the freshwater crustacea for cooking call them crawfish. But in other contexts—for example, among zoologists—crayfish remains standard. Crawdad, another dialectal variant, is still current in parts of the South.  
LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX  
1. crawfish for crawfish: Stage 5  
Current ratio (crawfish vs. crayfish): 2:1  
2. crawdad for crayfish: Stage 2  
Current ratio (crawfish vs. crawdad): 20:1  
cream cheese; *creamed cheese. Although *creamed cheese was the original phrase, cream cheese has been standard since the 18th century. See adjectives (r).  
Current ratio: 522:1  
crèche (= [1] a scene representing the birth of Jesus, [2] a foundling hospital, or [3] a daycare center) is so spelled with a grave accent—not a circumflex (*crèche). Sense 3 applies almost exclusively in BrE, where the accent is typically dropped. See diacritical marks.

credal. See credal.

credible; credulous; creditable. Credible = believable; credulous = gullible, tending to believe; creditable = worthy of credit, laudable. See incredible.
something *reaches a crescendo is woolly-minded—e.g.: “The tension reached a crescendo [read peak or climax] last January, when, in a move to restore peace, Nicastro did not reappoint one of the new board members, Denise Murphy, and replaced her with the Rev. William Barnes.” Loretta Waldman, “Library Board Member Announces Resignation,” Hartford Courant, 11 Jan. 2001, at B1. Pl. crescendos. See plurals (D).

The plural is crescendos—preferably not the Itali- 

*criminate. See incriminate.

A. And the Plural Form criteria. Criterion.

crevice; crevasse. These two words are often confused. A crevice is a narrow crack or break, as in the ground, a sidewalk, or a wall. E.g.: “They are curious animals, nosing into cracks and crevices with their pointy snouts.” Nancy J. Smeltzer, “Hedgehogs Curling Up in crevices nosing into cracks and a sidewalk, or a wall. E.g.: “They are curious animals,

crevices. “News” Traveler’s Death Still a Mystery, ” bag to warm a victim of hypothermia. “Mike Tharp, himself up the deepest slope and slide into a sleeping crevasse. “As Beebe met every criteria [read every criterion or all the criteria] for such a designation—scenic views, mature trees, stone walls, crossings over waterways, a width of less than 20 feet and a dirt surface—the request was granted last October by the planning and zoning commission.” Claudia Van Nes, “Saving the Roads Less Traveled, ” Hartford Courant, 17 Nov. 1996, at B1.

But especially since 1950 or so, writers have sometimes wanted to make criteria a singular—e.g.: “The commission . . . has published its criteria for eligi-

bility. Its central, repeated criterion for participation in the debates: ‘the realistic chance of being elected.’” William Safire, “Three’s a Crowd at the Debates,” Cincinnat 


B. Criterion Misused as a Plural. Oddly, perhaps because criterion is so often wrongly thought to be sin-

gular, the correct singular and plural forms have—in some writers’ minds—done something of a role revers-

al. So criterion is sometimes incorrectly used as the plural form—e.g.:

- “As Beebe met every criteria [read every criterion or all the criteria] for such a designation—scenic views, mature trees, stone walls, crossings over waterways, a width of less than 20 feet and a dirt surface—the request was granted last October by the planning and zoning commission.” Claudia Van Nes, “Saving the Roads Less Traveled,” Hartford Courant, 17 Nov. 1996, at B1.

But especially since 1950 or so, writers have sometimes wanted to make criteria a singular—e.g.: “Grade your business from ‘A’ to ‘F’ on each criteria [read criterion],” Scott Clark, “Self-Test Helps Tell If Your Firm Meets Media’s Grade,” Ariz. Bus. Gaz., 2 Feb. 1995, at 23. 


- “As Beebe met every criteria [read every criterion or all the criteria] for such a designation—scenic views, mature trees, stone walls, crossings over waterways, a width of less than 20 feet and a dirt surface—the request was granted last October by the planning and zoning commission.” Claudia Van Nes, “Saving the Roads Less Traveled,” Hartford Courant, 17 Nov. 1996, at B1.


Cf. media & phenomenon. See plurals (B).
• “Jonathan [Page], 17, won the 72-mile road race and placed fourth and fifth, respectively, in the criterium and the time trials in the 17- and 18-year-old division at the national junior cycling championships.” “Faces in the Crowd,” Sports Illustrated, 24 Oct. 1994, at 26.
• “He also races in dirt criteriums, road races, road criteriums and road time trials,” James Ensign, “Rider of Year’s Wheels Keep Turning,” Des Moines Register, 18 Dec. 1996, at 8.

As the second example illustrates, the plural of criterium in the sense just given is criterions, not criteria.

Occasionally, writers confuse criterium with criterion—e.g.:

• “In that case, a major criterion [read criterion] for breaking ties would be conference records, and the Cardinals would have one of the worst in the group.” Kent Somers, “Playoff Chances Too Tough to Call,” Ariz. Republic, 13 Dec. 1994, at C1.
• “My sole criterium was this: Did he make a difference?” Rick Ryan, “Wuerffel Whiffs on One Man’s Heisman’s Ballot,” Charleston Gaz., 14 Dec. 1996, at C5.

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criterium misused for criterion: Stage 1

critique, n. & v.t. Until recently, this word was almost always a noun. But in the late 20th century (beginning especially in the 1980s), the verb became quite common as a neutral equivalent to the word criticize, which had by then acquired negative connotations. In fact, though, the verb critique dates from the mid-18th century.

The verb is conjugated critiqued and critiquing. Some writers mistakenly write *critiquing (perhaps from the poor influence of cataloging [see catalog(ue)])—e.g.:


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critique as a verb: Stage 5
croccus (= a spring-blooming flower of the iris family, usu. in purple, yellow, or white) has predominantly formed the plural crocuses since the early 19th century—not the Lateinate *crocii.

Current ratio: 5:1

*croiser. See crozier.
croupier, v.i. A cock crows. But if you want to describe what a cock has already done, do you say crowded or crew? The modern preference is for crowded—e.g.:


But until about 1920, published instances of the collocation crows crowed were more common than those of cocks crowed; in BrE, the two collocations were about equal. In the 1920s, that changed in both varieties of English, and crowed came to predominate as the past-tense form.

Occasionally today, crew pops up in allusion to the King James Version—e.g.: “And immediately the cock crew.” Matthew 26:74. Or sometimes the writer needs a rhyme, as in the following title: “When the Cock Crew, the Neighbors Started to Sue,” Smithsonian, Aug. 1988, at 113.

Current ratio (crows crowed vs. cocks crowed): 3:1
crozier; *crosier. Although crozier (= a bishop’s ornate staff resembling a shepherd’s crook) has been the predominant spelling since the early 20th century in all varieties of World English, some American dictionaries have been slow to recognize its preeminence and continue listing the word under the variant spelling *crosier.

Current ratio: 5:1

crudité. The raw vegetables served with a dip or dips are called crudités. Calling them crudities (= things that are rough and unrefined) is shockingly unrefined:

• “The Blythswood Square menu offers an excellent range of afternoon teas, including . . . the Tea Tox Afternoon Tea, consisting of delicious healthy options such as vegetable crudities [read crudités] and a detox salad.” Sophie Hughes, “Britain’s Best Teas,” Daily Telegraph, 13 Aug. 2014, Lifestyle §.
• “I also liked this hybrid between hummus and guacamole for a new dip to serve with fresh vegetable crudités [read crudités], crackers, or tortilla chips.” Nancy Lindahl, “‘Tis Now the Season of Pointy Green Things,” Marin Independent J. (Cal.), 28 Apr. 2015, Features §.

cruel, adj., makes crueller and cruellest in AmE, crueler and cruellest in BrE.
crummy; crummy. When the meaning is “worthless” or “inferior,” the spelling is crummy. When the meaning is “consisting of or giving off crumbs,” the spelling is crumby. But some writers err by using crumby when they mean crummy—e.g.:

• “Perhaps he was one of the new generation of get-rich-quick entrepreneurs—you know the sort of thing—set up a crumby [read crumminy] little chain of theme restaurants or pubs, float it on the stock market, then as the idea begins to pale and lose its appeal, sell to the highest bidder.” Jeremy Warner, “Ten Years After the Big Bang, Little Has Changed,” Independent, 26 Oct. 1996, at 23.

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crumby misused for crummy: Stage 1

crystallize. So spelled—not *crystallize.
cubicize. See -ize.


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*cuckoo* misspelled *coocoo: Stage 1
Current ratio: 345:1

cudgel, vb., makes cudgeled and cudgeling in AmE, cudgelled and cudgelling in BrE. See SPELLING (b).

cue; queue. A. As Nouns. Though pronounced the same, these words have different meanings. Cue = (1) a signal to begin; a hint; or (2) a stick used in billiards, pool, or shuffleboard. Queue = (1) a line of people or things waiting their turn; or (2) a hanging braid of hair. See (c).

Not surprisingly, the two are sometimes confused—e.g.:

- “Like most birds, teal don't start their migration based on air temperatures, but take their queue [read cue] to head south from the shortening hours of daylight.” Bob Marshall, “Teal Season Starts Perfectly,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 25 Sept. 1994, at C16.

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1. queue misused for cue: Stage 1
2. cue misused for queue: Stage 1
Current ratio (long queues vs. *long cues): 86:1

B. Cue up; queue up. To cue up a videotape, an audiotape, a compact disc, or a DVD is to have it ready for playing at a particular point. E.g.:


To queue up is to line up—e.g.:


- “Florida State students queued up for probably the most prized ticket they would ever use.” Tim Layden, "No. 1 vs. No. 2,” Sports Illustrated, 2 Dec. 1996, at 36.

C. In Pigtails. The braid of hair is spelled queue, not cue. E.g.: “Instructed by French dancing masters in the stately steps and deep curtseys of the minuet, the young men had indeed to mind their pieds (feet) and queues (pigtails) to keep from losing their balance or their huge wigs.” Laurie Lucas, “Anniversaries,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 15 Nov. 1995, at D4.

But of course, some writers get it wrong—e.g.: "The pigtail or 'cure' [read 'queue']—as cultivated by sailors—was hair twisted or plaited, commonly prettied up by a binding of spun yarn and the whole applied with a dose of Stockholm tar which gave its gravity-defying look.” Letter of William Wood, “Tarred Pigtail,” Daily Telegraph, 9 July 1992, at 16.

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queue (= pigtail) misspelled cue: Stage 1
cueing. So spelled—not *cuing. See MUTE E.
Current ratio: 3:1

cuisine is pronounced /kwɪ-zeən/ or /kwee-zeən/—not /kyoo-zeən/.

cul-de-sac. Pl. cul-de-sacs—not *culs-de-sac (a common variant until about 1940). See PLURALS (b).
Current ratio: 4:1

-(c)ULE. See diminutives (b).

culinary is pronounced /kyoo-ler-ee/ or (less good) /kol-ə-ner-ee/.

culpable: *inculpable; *culpary; *culpuse. Culpable (= guilty, blameworthy) is the ordinary word among this group. E.g.:

- “Merritt said yesterday that Christian conservatives were not culpable in North's defeat.” Kent Jenkins Jr., “Uncertainties Arise on Morning After GOP Triumph,” Wash. Post, 10 Nov. 1994, at C1.
- “Roberts' husband, who is not being held culpable, was at sea on a Norfolk, Va.-based ship at the time of the baby's death.” Dennis O'Brien & Stephanie H. Davis, “Mom at Base Is Held in Baby’s Death,” Chicago Trib., 15 Nov. 1996, Metro Lake §, at 1.

See blameworthy (A).

*Inculpable is ambiguous. Avoid it as a CONTRONYM. It may mean (1) "(of a person) able to be inculpated [i.e., guilty];" (2) "(of a statement or action) pointing toward guilt"; or (3) "(of a person) not culpable [i.e., innocent]." The word has traditionally borne sense 3, but in fact it is used in all three ways—e.g.:

- “On the other hand, it's nice to know I can join the ranks of those who have excuses that render them inculpable [i.e., guiltless] for their behavior.” Tami Pyler, “Excuses, Excuses, Excuses,” Union Leader (Manchester, N.H.), 7 Mar. 1995, at A5.

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During the period of custodial questioning, the defendant made numerous inculpable [i.e., guilt-pointing] as well as potentially exculpable statements. “People v. James Biggs,” N.Y.L.J., 7 Nov. 1995, at 25.

See inculpable.

The other two terms are rare. *Culpatory, meaning “expressing blame,” is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of inculpatory. (See inculpatory.) *Culpose, the rarest of all, means “characterized by criminal negligence.” Neither has anything to recommend it.

*culls-de-sac.

*cultivable; *cultivatable. The first (pronounced /kәl-ta-va-bә/) predominates in AmE usage, being eight times as common in print as *cultivatable, which has become a NEEDLESS VARIANT—e.g.: “Kenneth Hobbie, president and CEO of the U.S. Feed Grains Council in Washington, said that by 2050, Asia will have nine times more people than the Western Hemisphere per cultivatable [read cultivable] acre.” Ann Toner, “Exports Only Part of Ag Success Story, Official Says,” Omaha World-Herald, 9 Nov. 1996, at 34. See -able (d) & -atable.

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*cultivatable for cultivable: Stage 2
Current ratio (cultivable vs. *cultivatable in World English): 12:1

cultivated. See cultured.

cultural diversity = (1) diversity within a culture; pluralism; or (2) diversity among cultures. The phrase often masks this ambiguity. Sense 1 is more common—e.g.: “The United States Air Force Band of Liberty [will play] songs highlighting America’s musical and cultural diversity.” “Live This Weekend,” Providence J.-Bull., 7 June 2001, at L28.

Some have unconsciously argued that sense 1 represents a self-contradiction. An English professor, for example, argues that a culture is based on shared values and beliefs. That is, culture is what brings us together and makes us one, while diversity is what separates us from one another. So people who share values and beliefs, the reasoning goes, are not diverse, and a culture made up of unshared values and beliefs is not a culture. See David Pichaske, “There Is No Such Thing as ‘Cultural Diversity,’” Monitor (Minn. State Univ. Student Ass’n), Feb. 1995, at 9. Regardless of the merits of the argument, cultural diversity is a useful term in a melting-pot society, and if it falls by the wayside it won't be because it is illogical.

As practiced on college campuses, cultural diversity often takes on sense 2. That is, in the name of cultural diversity, curricula today often emphasize works from outside the Western tradition.

cultured; cultivated. Correctly, the former is used in reference to people and pearls, the latter in reference to the mind, tastes, speech, or behavior. A cultured person has refined tastes; a cultivated mind is well trained and highly developed.

-culus. See diminutives (b).

cum (/kәm/ or /koom/) is a Latin prepositional meaning “with.” In English, it bears that same sense, or sometimes “along with; and.” It’s usually hyphenated before and after—e.g.:

- Such changes have done nothing to tame the fundamental irreverence, particularly among the young, for the high Confucian-cum-communist culture of the mainland.


*cumbrance. See encumbrance.

cumin; *cummin. Cumin (= a carrot-like herb whose seeds are used as a spice esp. in Mexican and Indian cooking) became the predominant spelling in AmE about 1930 and in BrE a few years later. Pronounced /kyoo-min/, cumin has universally replaced the older spelling *cummin (pronounced /kam-in/).

Current ratio: 13:1

cumberbund (= a wide waistband worn with tuxedos and other formal dress) is the standard spelling. *Kumberbund is a variant. *Cumberbun, *cumber- and *cumberbund are simply errors—e.g.:


- “A man dressed in a black tuxedo jacket, red dress shirt, purple and pink cumberbun [read cumberbund] and black pants asked the employee at the Edwards Theater if he could buy some popcorn.” “Costa Mesa Police Blotter,” Orange County Register, 8 Aug. 1996, at 5.

- “Sometimes,’ [Josh] Penn said shortly after midnight, drink in hand and cumberbund [read cumberbund] pressed firmly against the Monty bar, ’the show has to follow the script.’” Mike Scott, “‘Beasts of the Southern Wild’ Makers Look to the Future After Shoutout,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 27 Feb. 2013, Living §, at C1.

The pronunciation is /kam-ar-band/.

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cumberbund misspelled *cumberbun, *cumberbun, or *cumberbund: Stage 1
Current ratio (cumberbund vs. *cumberbund vs. *kummerbund): 69:1.2:1
*cummin. See cumin.

Cummings, E.E. The poet Edward Estlin Cummings (1894–1962), a shy man, early in his career used the lowercase i for the first-person singular pronoun. (This habit, now commonplace in Internet exchanges, was highly unusual.) Cummings’s critics then began referring to him sarcastically in print as e.e. cummings. The practice stuck, and that was how his name appeared on book covers. Does this mean we should all use lowercase letters in spelling his name? Those most familiar with the man think not, and they use ordinary capitalization. Norman Friedman, the founder and then president of the E.E. Cummings Society, summed up the poet’s “philosophy of typography” this way: “that he could use caps and lowercase as he wished, but that when others referred to him by name they ought to use caps.” Spring: The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society, 1992, at 114–21. Nor is it true that Cummings legally changed his name to lowercase letters. That story appeared in the preface to a biography about Cummings, but his widow angrily denied it. See Names (a).

*cumquat. See kumquat.

*cumulate; cumulative. See accumulate.


cuneiform (= [1] wedge-shaped; [2] written in wedge-shaped characters; or [3] the wedge-shaped characters themselves) is pronounced in four distinct syllables (/kyoo-nee-a-form/ or /kyoo-nay-a-form/), not in three (/kyoo-na-form/). Probably because of the mispronunciation, the word is occasionally misspelled *cuniform—e.g.: “His price: Reportedly between $4.5 million and $7 million, depending on how the Sumerian cuniform [read cuneiform] in the contract translates into English.”


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cuneiform misspelled and mispronounced

*cuniform: Stage 1
Current ratio: 308:1

cunnilingus; *cunnilinctus. The standard spelling of this term, dating from the late 19th century, is cunnilingus. *Cunnilinctus, a variant form that appears in some dictionaries, almost rivaled the standard form in print sources of the 1930s, but it ebbed and is rarely used today. Cf. anilingus.

Current ratio: 26:1

cupful. Pl. cupfuls—not *cupful. See Plurals (g).
Current ratio: 33:1

cupola (= a round structure on the top of a building, usu. shaped like an upside-down bowl) is pronounced /kyoo-pa-la/—not /kyoo- па-лой/ or /koo-pa-la/. It has universally formed the plural cupolas since the 18th century—not *cupolae. The inflected form is cupolaed <a cupolaed building>. For a mistake sometimes made with this word, see copula.

curative; *curatory; curatorial. For the meaning “of, relating to, or involving the cure of diseases,” curative is preferred over *curatory, which is a needless variant. Curatorial = of, relating to, or involving a curator. E.g.: “The entries by the museum curatorial staff are brief but intelligent.” David Bonetti, “The Pick of the Art Books,” S.F. Examiner, 10 Dec. 1996, at D1.

curb; kerb. Curb is the AmE spelling; kerb is a BrE variant. And BrE makes an interesting distinction: the physical sense of a raised stone or concrete edge for a road or path is a kerb, while anything that metaphorically halts or checks is a curb—e.g.: • “The chances are you would stumble before even stepping off the kerb.” “Computers That Run Themselves,” Economist, 21 Sept. 2002, Tech. Q., §, at 26. • “In Germany, the government wants to encourage more part-time working and remove curbs on self-employment.” Tony Major, “Germany Drags Europe Down,” Fin. Times, 27 Feb. 2002, at 4. AmE uses curb in all senses.

cure; heal. Both words are commonly used in medical senses. To cure is to successfully treat or remove (an illness, disease, or disorder), especially with medicine and an antibiotic will cure that infection. It is often used as a passive-voice verb meaning “to get well again” or “I’m cured!” Cure is invariably transitive.

Heal may be either transitive or intransitive. As a transitive verb, it is essentially synonymous with cure but is used less frequently. As an intransitive verb, it generally denotes recovery from wounds or injuries and <that cut needs time to heal> or <broken bones heal>...
slowly>. Heal is the word more often used in figurative senses <time heals all wounds>, but at law one cures a title defect, delivery of nonconforming goods, and other legal problems.

curio. Pl. curios. See PLURALS (d).

curiously. See SENTENCE ADVERBS.

current, n.; currant. A current is (1) a steady flow of a fluid element, such as water, air, or electricity, in a definite direction <wind currents>, or (2) metaphorically, the movement of something intangible <the current of time> <the current of conversation>. A currant is a fruit, either (1) a very small raisin produced from a Mediterranean variety of seedless grapes, or (2) the dried, edible berry of a Eurasian shrub. As homophones, the words are occasionally confounded—e.g.:

- “Some [fruits] to consider include apples, apricots, banana chips, blueberries, cranberries, currents [read 'currants'], figs, ginger, mango, pears, peaches, plums, raisins, and strawberries.” Maurie Markman et al., Cancer Nutrition and Recipes for Dummies 248 (2013).

currently. See AT THE PRESENT TIME & PRESENTLY.

curriculum. Pl. curricula or curriculums. The Latin plural remains much more common. E.g.:

- “These curricula don’t ‘radically change the way students learn how to add, subtract, multiply and divide.’” “Bethlehem’s Math Program Gives Students an Edge,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 24 Sept. 2002, at A12.

But curtail is the right word when there is only a scaling back—e.g.:

- “Banking and government offices will be closed or services curtailed in the following countries and their dependencies this week because of national and religious holidays.” “This Week’s Holidays,” L.A. Times, 27 Nov. 1994, at L3.

Curtailed Words. See BACK-FORMATIONS.

curtsy. So spelled—preferably not *curtsey.

Interestingly, the OED records courtesy as an obsolete form of curtsey. Yet it’s not quite obsolete. It occurs many times in a 21st-century book, in each instance as a NEEDLESS VARIANT of curtsey—e.g.:

- “She was making her courtesy [read curtsey] to him. He bowed to her. They both straightened up and stood in silence.” Ursula K. Le Guin, The Other Wind 162 (2001).
- “Lebannen bowed. ‘Your presence honors us, Princess.’ She performed a deep, straight-backed curtsey [read ‘courtesies’ and said, ‘Thank you.’” Ibid. at 201.

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courtesy misused for curtsey: Stage 1

curvaceous. So spelled—not *curvacious.

Current ratio: 110:1

Cussing. See PROFANITY.

customer. See client (A).

cut > cut > cut. So inflected. The past form *cutted is erroneous. See IRREGULAR VERBS.

cut-and-dried, the age-old PHRASAL ADJECTIVE, is sometimes wrongly written *cut-and-dry—e.g. “The gift dilemma is further complicated currently by the ground to snap prey or escape from predators.” David F. Salisbury, “Searching for Key to Bird Flight Amid Tree-Dwelling Dinosaurs,” Christian Science Monitor, 15 June 1984, at 3.


curtail means “to cut back,” not “to stop completely.” Therefore, the phrases *completely curtailed, *totally curtailed, and similar others are misuses—e.g.:

- “The weather has greatly reduced the fishing and seems to have completely curtailed [read, depending on the sense, curtailed or stopped] the fish stories.” Dennis Chapman, “Fishing Report,” Palm Beach Post, 6 Feb. 1996, at C9.

But curtail is the right word when there is only a scaling back—e.g.:

- “Banking and government offices will be closed or services curtailed in the following countries and their dependencies this week because of national and religious holidays.” “This Week’s Holidays,” L.A. Times, 27 Nov. 1994, at L3.
companies' increased activity in international markets, where the ethical questions tend to be much less cut-and-dry [read cut-and-dried].” Diane Trommer, “Supply Chain Model Poses New Ethical Challenges,” Electronic Buyers’ News, 4 Aug. 1997, at E26. (For more on the word choice in that sentence, see dilemma.)

**Language-Change Index**

*cut-and-dry for cut-and-dried; Stage 2
Current ratio (cut-and-dried vs. *cut-and-dry): 8:1

cut in half is the idiom except in cooking, where cut into halves emphasizes the two parts of something, both of which are to be dealt with—e.g.:

- “Cut the cantaloupes into halves, scoop out the seeds and turn them upside down to drain.” “What’s Under the Rind Makes Terrific Soup and Salsa,” Fresno Bee, 31 July 1996, Food & Life §, at 5.

Perhaps because cut in half is synonymous with halve, some writers fall into the error of writing *cut in halve*—e.g.: “If a recipe calls for seeded tomatoes, cut them in halve [read halve them or cut them in half] crosswise and squeeze each tomato half gently to force out the seeds.” Martha Stewart, “Vine-Ripened Tomatoes Beg for Picking, Devouring,” Dayton Daily News, 8 Aug. 1996, at 8. (Stewart was not victimized by a local editor; the syndicated piece appeared throughout the nation in this form.)

**Language-Change Index**

*cut in halve for cut in half; Stage 1
-cy. See -ce.

cyclone. See hurricane.

cyclopean; *cyclopian. This word—meaning (1) “of or like a cyclops”; or (2) “huge, gargantuan”—is now almost uniformly spelled cyclopean or Cyclopean. The spelling *cyclopian is a variant.

The word has two acceptable but very different pronunciations: /sti-kloh-pee-an/ and /sti-klo-ppee-an/. The former predominates and is preferred. See cyclops.

Current ratio (cyclopean vs. *cyclopian): 34:1

*cyclopedic. During the 20th century, these forms were superseded by encyclopedia and encyclopedic. The words *cyclopaedia and *cyclopédic are now needless variants.

In BrE the tendency has been to spell all forms of these words -paed- or -paed-, but today the -ped- spellings are very much on the rise because of the AmE influence. See ae.

*cyclopian. See cyclopean.
D

dachshund is pronounced /dahk-sand/ or /daks-huunt/. It’s occasionally mispronounced /dash-and/, and it’s occasionally misspelled *dachshund or *dachsund.

Current ratio (dachshund vs. *dachshund vs. *dachsund): 256:2:1

daemon; demon. Both are pronounced /dee-man/. The spelling daemon distinguishes the Greek-mythology senses of supernatural being, indwelling spirit, etc. from the modern sense of devil’s helper (demon). E.g.: “The daemon in him played the game just as it wrote the poems.” Jeffrey Meyers, “Poets and Tennis—Drop Shots and Tender Egos,” N.Y. Times, 2 June 1985, § 7, at 24. Daemon is also a term of art in the field of information technology, referring to a background process or thread (primarily in UNIX).

dais is generally pronounced /day-is/ (preferably not /di-is/)—but it may be pronounced, especially in BrE, to rhyme with pace.

Dalmatian. So spelled (and capitalized)—not *dalmatian or (worse yet) *dalmation. E.g.: “Large, muscular and energetic, dalmations [read Dalmatians] typically require a lot of open space to rove and frolic.” Clint Thomas, “Dalmation [read Dalmatian] Owners Urged to Provide Proper Environment,” Charleston Gaz., 12 Feb. 1997, at 15 (misspelled throughout article). As with many other dog breeds, such as German shepherds and French poodles, the name reflects a place of origin: Dalmatia, now a region of northern Croatia.

Dalmatian misspelled *Dalmation: Stage 1
Current ratio: 46:1

damage(s), n. The singular damage refers to loss or injury to person or property; the plural damages refers to monetary compensation for such a loss or injury.

damn, adj. & adv., for damned—as in that damn cat—that is so spelled—preferably not damnedest. Cf. goddamn.

Current ratio (damn thing vs. damned thing): 3:1

damn, v.t.; dampen. Both may mean “to make damp, moisten,” but each word carries at least one additional sense. Damp = (1) to stifle or extinguish <damp the
The text is a continuation of the discussion about danglers, focusing on the danger of using danglers in writing, with examples and explanations of how to avoid them. It also includes a Language-Change Index and references to sources for further reading.

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**DANGLERS. A. Generally.** So-called danglers are ordinarily unattached participles—either present participles (ending in -ing) or past participles (ending usually in -ed)—that do not relate syntactically to the nouns they are supposed to modify. That is, when the antecedent of a participle doesn’t appear where it logically should, the participle is said to “dangle”—e.g.: “Watching from the ground below, the birds flew ever higher until they disappeared.” In effect, the participle tries to sever its relationship with its noun or pronoun and thus to become functionally a preposition. Gerunds may also dangle precariously—e.g.: “By watching closely, the birds became visible.” (See (p).) Usually, recasting the sentence will remedy the awkwardness, illogic, or incoherence: “Watching from the ground below, we saw the birds fly higher until they disappeared.” / “By watching closely, we were able to see the birds.”

Most danglers are ungrammatical. In the normal word order, a participial phrase beginning a sentence (“Walking down the street,”) should be directly followed by the noun acting as subject in the main clause (“I saw the house”). When that word order is changed, as by changing the verb in the main clause to the passive voice, the sentence becomes illogical or misleading: “Walking down the street, the house was seen.” It was not the house that was walking, but the speaker.

Some danglers, though, are acceptable because of long-standing usage. Examples are easy to come by: “Considering the current atmosphere in the legislature, the bill probably won’t pass.” But avoiding the dangler would often improve the style: “With the current atmosphere in the legislature, the bill probably won’t pass.” Several other examples are discussed below in (b).

Despite the sloppiness of danglers in general, they have been exceedingly common even among grammarians. For example, a biographical entry on Lindley Murray (1745–1826), the best-selling grammarian of the early 19th century, damned his participial habit: “[In] spite of his proverbial credit as an authority, his own style was by no means a model of excellence; it was not impeccable even on grammatical grounds, the ‘misallied participle’ being only too frequent.”

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). ▪ Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
Likewise, danglers have appeared in the work of reputable fiction writers. For example, Herman Melville's famous short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1856) contains seven danglers. See Leedice Kissane, "Dangling Constructions in Melville's 'Bartleby,'" 36 Am. Speech 195 (1961).

All this has led one commentator to suggest that danglers are mere peccadilloes: "The loosely related participle phrase occurs pretty frequently in modern usage. Though grammar, insisting on the pure adjectival relationship, is against it, tradition is on its side; and, provided the result is not patently incongruous, it is not too lightly to be condemned." G.H. Vallins, The Pattern of English 56–57 (1956; repr. 1957). Other commentators are less forgiving:

- "In my daily work [as an editor], the presence of a participle at the portals of a statement is as ominous as the buzzing of a rattlesnake in my path." Eugene S. McCartney, Recurrent Maladies in Scholarly Writing 59 (1953).
- "Failures to look ahead and consider the grammatical compatibility of the following clause are exceedingly common, especially in unscripted speech." Robert W. Burchfield, Points of View 93 (1992).

B. Present-Participial Danglers. In the sentences that follow, mispositioned words have caused grammatical blunders. The classic example occurs when the wrong noun begins the main clause—that is, a noun other than the one expected by the reader after digesting the introductory participial phrase. E.g.:

"The newspaper said that before being treated for their injuries, General Mladic forced them to visit the wards of wounded at the Pale hospital, telling them, 'here's what you have done' and 'you have also killed children.'" Marli Simons, "Report Says Serbs Tormented 2 French Pilots," N.Y. Times, 29 Dec. 1995, at A5. That wording has General Mladic being treated for others' injuries. Hence danglers reflect a type of bad thinking. See illogic (c).

Another manifestation of this error is to begin the main clause with an expletive (e.g., it or there) after an introductory participial phrase:

- "Applying those principles to the present situation, it is clear that the company must reimburse its employee." (A possible revision: If we apply these principles to the present situation, it becomes clear that . . . . Or better: Given those principles, the company must . . . .)
- "Turning to England, it ought to be noted first that that country, though late in doing so, participated fully in the medieval development sketched above." Grant Gilmore & Charles L. Black Jr., The Law of Admiralty 8 (2d ed. 1975). (A possible revision: Although England was late in doing so, it participated fully in the medieval development sketched above.)

- "After reviewing the aforementioned strategies, it becomes clear that there is no conclusive evidence regarding their success." Bernard J. Putz, "Productivity Improvement," SAM Advanced Mgmt. J., 22 Sept. 1991, at 9. (A possible revision: Even a detailed review of those strategies provides no conclusive evidence about how successful they are.)

As in that last example, danglers occurring after an introductory word are just as bad as others but are harder for the untrained eye to spot—e.g.: "I have always found John Redwood thoughtful, intelligent and rather convivial. I sincerely hope that we can remain friends after the dust has settled. He has conducted a skilled campaign. Yet, being a thoughtful man, I suspect that in his heart of hearts he wishes some of his supporters . . . would just disappear." Jerry Hayes, "A White-Knuckle Ride I Cannot Join," Independent, 30 June 1995, at 21. (The writer here seems to attest to his own thoughtfulness. A possible revision: Yet because he is a thoughtful man, I suspect that in his heart of hearts he wishes . . . . Or: Yet I suspect that, because he is a thoughtful man, in his heart of hearts he wishes . . . .)

C. Past-Participial Danglers. These are especially common when the main clause begins with a possessive—e.g.: "Born on March 12, 1944, in Dalton, Georgia, Larry Lee Simms's qualifications . . . ." Barbara H. Craig, Chadha: The Story of an Epic Constitutional Struggle 79 (1988). (Simms's qualifications were not born on March 12—he was. A possible revision: Born on March 12, 1944, in Dalton, Georgia, Larry Lee Simms had qualifications that . . . .)

D. Dangling Gerunds. These are close allies to dangling participles, but here the participle acts as a noun rather than as an adjective when it is the object of a preposition:

- "By instead examining the multigenerational ethnic group, it becomes clear that the Irish had fully adjusted to American society by the time of the First World War." Michael Cottrell, Book Rev., Canadian Hist. Rev., Sept. 1994, at 453. (A possible revision: By instead examining the multigenerational ethnic group, we see that the Irish . . . .)
- "Without belaboring the point, the central premise of this article is that the average pharmacist, preparing myriad prescriptions each day, does not have the time to provide CPS." Matthew M. Murawski, "Introduction to Personnel Management," Drug Topics, 10 June 1996, at 170. (A possible revision: In brief, the central premise of this article . . . .)

E. Acceptable Danglers, or Disguised Conjunctions. Any number of present participles have been used as conjunctions or prepositions for so long that they have lost the participial duty of modifying specific nouns. In effect, the clauses they introduce are adverbial, standing apart from and commenting on the content of the sentence. Among the commonest of these are according, assuming, barring, concerning, considering, given, judging, owing to, regarding, respecting, speaking, taking (usu. account of, into account). Thus:

- "Horticulturally speaking, the best way to prune the tree is probably to remove some of the lowest branches by cutting them off at the trunk." Mary Robson, "Pine Needles Won't Harm," Seattle Times, 14 Aug. 1994, at G3.

- "Assuming everyone shows up who's supposed to (not a given in this sport of last-minute scratches), this could be the finest assemblage of talent for a Long Island road race in a decade." John Hanc, "Cow Harbor Still Attracts Big Names," Newsday (N.Y.), 18 Sept. 1997, at A94.

For an arguable example, see except (b).

F. Ending Sentences with Dangers. Traditionally, grammarians frowned on all danglers, but during the 20th century they generally loosened the strictures for a participial construction at the end of a sentence. Some early-20th-century grammarians might have disapproved of the following sentences, but such sentences have long been considered acceptable:

- "Sarah stepped to the door, looking for her friend."
- "Tom's arm hung useless, broken by the blow."

Usually, as in the first example, the end-of-the-sentence dangler is introduced by a so-called coordinating participle: looking is equivalent to and looked. Similarly:

- "Vexed by these frequent demands on her time, she finally called upon her friend, imploring him to come to her aid." (Imploring = and implored.)
- "The New Orleans–bound steamer rammed and sank the freighter ten miles from her destination, sending her to the bottom in ten minutes." (Sending = and sent.)
- "She died before her brother, leaving a husband and two children." (Leaving = and left.)

A few editors would consider each of those participles misattached, but in fact they are acceptable as coordinating participles. As for the few who object, what would they do with the following sentence: "The boy ran out of the house crying?"

dans macabre; dance macabre. An art form meant to remind people of their mortality and of death as a social equalizer, danse macabre is more than ten times as common as dance macabre, an upstart spelling from the 19th century. Because macabre is a postpositive adjective, the plural is danses macabre or dances macabre. See plurals (g).

dare. A. Generally. It's been called "one of the subtlest and most varied verbs in the language" (Robert W. Burchfield, Points of View 123 [1992]) and also "one of the trickiest" (William Safire, "Love That Dare, " N.Y. Times, 17 May 1987, § 6, at 10). The subtleties arise because dare is both an ordinary verb <he dares you to pick up the snake> and a modal verb <he dare not do it himself>. And the form it takes (dares vs. dare in those examples) changes with that grammatical function.

B. As a Full Verb. When dare is used as a full verb, it behaves just like most other verbs: it takes an -s with a third-person-singular subject <Robert always speaks his mind bluntly and dares anyone to disagree>. The form is identifiable by the presence of an explicit infinitive (with to) after dare (here, to disagree).

C. As a Modal. Dare was an Old English modal. When it is used as an auxiliary verb (like the modern modals will, must, and, more closely, ought), the infinitive either is missing its to <Dare he disagree with Robert?> or is missing altogether but understood <He dare not!>. This occurs chiefly, but not only, in interrogative or negative sentences. In those sentences, the form dares—although sometimes used mistakenly in striving for correctness—would be unidiomatic, because dare in this usage behaves like other uninflected modals <Will he disagree with Robert?> <he must not>.

D. Past Forms. As a modal verb, dare raises an interesting question of tense: in reference to past time, should one write (1) Although challenged to do it, he dare not, or (2) Although challenged to do it, he dared not? The OED endorses the first and calls the second "careless," but that advice was written when that part of the great dictionary was published in 1894 (and the dandy but now archaic durst was still available—see (e)). More recent grammarians are more lenient—e.g.:

- "'Dare' in the sense of 'challenge' has formed a new past tense dared . . . as 'He dared not go.' " J.C. Nesfield, English Grammar Past and Present 355 (rev. ed. 1924; repr. 1948).
- "We may say I do not dare and do you dare?, or we may use the older forms and say I dare not and dare you? Some grammarians feel that this is license enough and object when the new forms are used in the old construction, that is, without the to of the infinitive, as in he dares go, he dared go, I don't dare go . . . But the best writers and speakers have not agreed with them." DCAU at 126.
- "As a modal, dare exhibits abnormal time reference in that it can be used, without inflection, for past as well as present time: 'The king was so hot-tempered that no one dare tell him the bad news.' The main verb form dared (to) might also occur here," Randolph Quirk et al., A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language § 3.42, at 138 (1985).
- "The marginal modal auxiliary dare has a past form dared <esp. BrE>." Ibid. § 10.68, at 797 n.(b). These more modern grammarians' analyses are borne out by actual usage—e.g.:

- "A male screener wanded the woman's breasts—twice, even though a female screener was hanging around just steps away; the angry husband said he dared not complain lest they miss their flight." Edwin Black, "Travel Security," Chicago Trib., 2 Dec. 2001, at 1.
- "Another of their quirks is a proclivity for skinny-dipping—something they dared not attempt at the beaches around Flinders." David Wroe, "Fridge Magnet Car Attracts the Curious," The Age, 31 Dec. 2001, at 4.

It is odd, however, to see the past-tense form in the set phrase how dare you—e.g. "'How dare you!' Jon shouted, waving his arms for emphasis. 'That dish was ours, the property of the entire Oder! How dared you even think to appropriate it for your own uses!' " Patricia C. Wrede, Maitrelon the Magician 91 (1991). Most writers and editors would insist on making those phrases How dare you! See (f).

E. And durst. The form durst, which is a past indicative and past subjunctive along with dared,
daredevilry

obsolete in AmE. In BrE, it still occurs rarely, always in a negative sentence or conditional clause in which there is an infinitive either understood or having no to <none durst answer him>. In AmE (and almost always in BrE), dared would substitute: durst today is strictly jocular—e.g.: “How ’bout giving Puffy a ring? With these haggard elders on board, none durst judge the wily ol’ plagiarist’s heart.” Keith Harris, “Souled Out,” Village Voice, 25 June 2002, at 65. See ARCHASMS.

F. How dare. This exclamationary construction involves an inversion: How dare he do that? is an idiomatic phrasing of the interrogative How (does/did he) dare (to) do that? The subject–actor (he) appears after the verb (dare) and is always in the nominative case—e.g.: “How dare she tell taxpayers to take on more responsibility to help neighborhood kids. How dare she be right!” Denise Smith Amos, “It’s Up to Us to Ensure Kids Are OK,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 18 Aug. 2002, at 2. Some people mistakenly think that a pronoun following dare must be in the objective case, apparently misconstruing it as an object of the verb dare—e.g.: “[I]n a state that has predictable and documented needs, how dare us [read we] claim that the responsible public policy was handing out $30 here and $300 there to families that have desperate needs for not the dollars but the services?” Gwyneth K. Shaw, “Improving Children’s Well-Being,” Orlando Sentinel, 22 May 2001, at A1. On the use of the past-tense dared in this phrase, see (d).

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*daredevilry; daredeviltry. The latter has become a needlessly variant—though it was predominant in AmE print sources from 1900 until the 1990s. Perhaps AmE was influenced by BrE, in which daredevilry has always been standard. See deviltry.

Current ratio: 3:1
daresay; dare say. Four points merit attention. First, the term (meaning “to venture or presume to say”) is now generally spelled as one word in AmE, two in BrE. Second, the term is now confined to first-person uses <I daresay she’ll be late>. Third, the term is increasingly rare and formal-sounding. Fourth, daresay should not ordinarily be followed by the conjunction that—e.g.:

- “Sounds as if they’re selling anything that’s not tied down. Any chance I could pick up one of those antique phones? I daresay that [read daresay] in some houses in rural America you could still find them.” Michael Balhoff & Matthew Boyle, “Qwest Passes His Test,” Fortune, 30 Sept. 2002, at 178.

Of course, as a demonstrative pronoun or adjective, that after daresay is unobjectionable <I daresay that’s right> <I daresay that plan is doomed>.

DASHES. See punctuation (g), (h).
dastard. A. Confusion with bastard. Dastard (= coward) is commonly muddied because of the sound association with its harsher rhyme, bastard. Although H.W. Fowler insisted that dastard should be reserved for someone who avoids all personal risk (FMEU1 at 103), modern writers tend to use it as a printable euphemism for the more widely objectionable epithet—e.g.:

- “Along with heroes, villains have changed, too. My guys’ enemy was always a scheming dastard so obsessed with the bottom line that in a modern adventure film he would be the hero.” Jack Kisling, “Remakes I’d Rather Not See,” Denver Post, 26 July 1994, at B7.
- “We hate seeing our friends and countrymen beheaded by a bunch of thugs and hate the fact that our reaction to those ugly pictures is that we want to kill those dastards, no matter what the cost. But we also hate the idea of sending our brave men and women to war again so soon after the last one got so mucked up.” Brian Greenspun, “Our Nation’s Role in Striving for Goodwill Toward All Men,” Las Vegas Sun, 14 Dec. 2014, at 1.

British writers, on the other hand, have remained truer to the word’s original sense—e.g.: “Last week I moved house from London to Brighton but like a genuine spineless dastard I flatly denied its implications on personal relationships to the last.” Lynne Truss, “Au Revoir Is So Much Easier than Saying an Irrevocable Goodbye,” Times (London), 8 Feb. 1994, Features §.

Recent American dictionaries record one meaning of dastard as being “a person who acts treacherously or underhandedly.” So the new meaning should probably now be considered standard.

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dastard in the broad sense “a despicable person”: Stage 5

B. Corresponding Adjective: dastardly. Like the noun form, the adjective dastardly has been subjected to slipshod extension. Although most dictionaries define it merely as “cowardly,” it is now often used as if it meant “sneaky and underhanded; treacherous”—e.g.:

- “Like her aunts and a long line of female relatives before her, she’s a witch. A white one, which means that no matter how much havoc Sabrina may create until she gets a handle on her powers, she’s not likely to use them for anything more dastardly than cute boy-trappage.” Claire Bickley, “Sabrina Simply Enchanting,” Toronto Sun, 26 Sept. 1996, at 65.
- “Of course that project would now have to be put on hold for the time being. Another grievance against the
data (/dat-ə/- or /day-tə/) is a skunked term: whether you write data are or data is, you’re likely to make some readers raise their eyebrows. Technically a plural, data has, since the 1940s, been increasingly treated as a mass noun taking a singular verb. But in more or less formal contexts it is preferably treated as a plural—e.g.:

- “While recent U.S. Census data show that the average working woman’s pay has declined in the 90s, highly educated, high-paid women keep gaining ground.” Jeanhee Kim, “The New Way to Get Rich? Get Married!” Money, Oct. 1996, at 141.


Many writers use it as a singular, however, risking their credibility with a small minority of readers—e.g.:


- “No data is offered to suggest that women are being adversely hit by the dearth of articles.” “A Woman’s Place Is in the Law,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 24 Aug. 1993, at A14.


- “Browsing the World Wide Web these days is less like surfing than like crawling: data drips like molasses onto your computer screen, sometimes taking several minutes to create a single page of text.” Michael Krantz, “Wired for Speed,” Time, 23 Sept. 1996, at 54.

One context in which the singular use of data might be allowed is in computing and allied disciplines. See computerese.

In one particular use, data is rarely treated as a singular: when it begins a clause and is not preceded by the definite article. E.g.: “Data over the last two years suggest that the rate at which gay men get AIDS has finally begun to flatten out.” Lawrence K. Altman, “Finding out exactly how much digital data makes its way from smartphone apps or an Internet-connected PC to data brokers and digital advertisers is an uphill battle.” Deborah Todd & Chris Potter, “Privacy Takes a Hit While Digital Data Is Scoped Up, Passed Around,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 6 Sept. 2015, at A1.

- “The transfer of soil data to digital format has allowed a wide range of interpretations, but many data are still not freely available as they are held by a number of different bodies.” “Reports on General Science Findings from University of Ft. Hare Provide New Insights,” Science Letter, 21 Aug. 2015, at 534.

See COUNT NOUNS AND MASS NOUNS.

As a historian of the English language once put it, “A student with one year of Latin [knows] that data and phenomena are plural,” Albert C. Baugh, “The Gift of Style,” 34 Pa. Bar Ass’n 101, 105–06 (1962). And that’s what makes the term skunked: few people use it as a plural, yet many know that it is technically a plural. Whatever you do, if you use data in a context in which its number becomes known, you’ll bother some of your readers. Perhaps 50 years from now—maybe sooner, maybe later—the term will no longer be skunked: everybody will accept it as a collective. But not yet. See plurals (b).

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**data as a mass noun:** Stage 4

Current ratio (The data are vs. The data is): 2:1

database. One word. See spelling (d).

datable (/ˈdɑːtəbl/). So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *dateable. See mute e.

Current ratio: 11:1

data processing. Two words.

**DATES. A. ORDER.** One may unimpeachably write either May 26, 2009, or 26 May 2009. The latter—the BrE method, which is also used in the American military—is often better in prose, for it takes no commas. It appears in dates throughout this book.

Of the usual AmE method—May 26, 2009—the first editor of the OED said: “This is not logical: 19 May 1862 is. Begin at day, ascend to month, ascend to year; not begin at month, descend to day, then ascend to year.” James A.H. Murray, as quoted in Hart’s Rules for Compositors and Readers at the OUP 18 n.1 (39th ed. 1983).

It may therefore seem strange to encounter an article in The New Yorker, one of our best-edited literary magazines, in which January, 2000 and March, 2000 appear on the first page, and then five similar references appear throughout the piece. (See Scott Turow, “To Kill or Not to Kill,” New Yorker, 6 Jan. 2003, at 40–47.) This seems anomalous: almost every professional editor would immediately delete the superfluous commas. Yet seasoned readers of The New Yorker know that these little bacilli in month–year references are one of the unfortunate conventions of the journal’s house style.

C. As Adjectives. Modern writers have taken to making adjectives out of dates, just as they do out of place names—e.g.: “His July 1998 book contract resulted in a record advance.” The more traditional rendering of the sentence would be: “In his book contract of July 1998, he received a record advance.” Although occasionally using dates adjectivally is a space-saver, the device should not be overworked: it gives prose a breezy look.

And the practice is particularly clumsy when the day as well as the month is given—e.g.: “The court reconsidered its July 12, 2001 privilege order.” Stylists who use this phrasing typically omit the comma after the year in a full date, by the way, don’t address the question raised just above. They show the comma without illustrating what happens when the date functions as an adjective. In other words, they illustrate the easy cases, not the more difficult ones. That’s probably because the date-as-adjective phenomenon didn’t really come into full flower until the late 20th century. Even after the shift was well underway, most usage guides ignored the problem.

D. 2010s vs. 2010’s. When referring to decades, most professional writers today omit the apostrophe: hence, 2010s instead of 2010’s. That’s the dominant style (although The New York Times uses the apostrophe). See plurals (k) & punctuation (a). On whether a decade is singular or plural, see subject–verb agreement (l).

Current ratio (1990s vs. 1990’s): 65:1

E. Spans. Although a span of time may be denoted with an en-dash (1997–2002), the dash should not appear if the word from introduces the numbers: from 1997 to 2002 (not *from 1997–2002).

datum. See data.

daylight-saving(s) time. Although the singular form daylight-saving time is the original one, dating from the early 20th century—and is preferred by most usage critics—the plural form is now extremely common in AmE. E.g.: “When daylight savings time kicks in, a guard will be posted from 5 to 10 p.m.” Christine Bordelon, “Kenner Post Office Getting Update,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 15 Sept. 1996, at D1.

The rise of the plural form (daylight-savings time) appears to have resulted from the avoidance of a mis-cue: when saving is used, readers might momentarily puzzle over whether saving is a gerund (the saving of daylight) or a participle (the time for saving). Also, of course, we commonly speak of how to “save time” (of saving time), and this compounds the possible confusion. Using savings as the adjective—as in savings account or savings bond—makes perfect sense. But in print sources, the singular form still appears twice as often as the plural. Cf. saving(s).

Saving is commonly omitted when used with the names of time zones <Pacific Daylight Time>, and when used as a general term to distinguish from standard time <2 pm daylight time>.

Regardless of whether you use the plural or the singular, you can prevent most miscues by hyphenating the phrasal adjective: daylight-saving time or daylight-savings time.

Language-Change Index
daylight-savings time for daylight-saving time: Stage 5
Current ratio (daylight-saving time vs. daylight-savings time): 2:1
D-Day; *D-day. Originally (from about 1918) a military codeword denoting any operation, the term is most famously associated with 6 June 1944, when during World War II the Allies landed in France to begin the spread of their forces throughout Europe under the command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower. By metaphorical extension, the term is sometimes used to refer to any day when an important event is to take place.

The initial D in D-Day is simply an abbreviated form of day. The term was already in somewhat popular use before 1944—from about 1941—in BrE and AmE alike. From the beginning, it has predominantly been written with both D’s capitalized: D-Day, not *D-day.

Current ratio: 6:1

Perhaps this exception exists because dealing drugs is reprehensible; to say that one deals in contraband would sanitize it, as if it were an alternative to dealing in cosmetics or foodstuffs. Or perhaps the phrasing is a metaphorical extension: dealing drugs as one might deal cards.

Deal with is a vague phrasal verb for which there is almost always a better, more specific substitute—e.g.: “If called [in a civil case], defendants are required to testify under oath, and can be dealt with [read treated] severely by judges if they refuse.” “Son of Simpson Trial Is No Rerun,” Baltimore Sun, 20 Sept. 1996, at A2.

But when deal with is roughly equivalent to handle, it is unobjectionable: “He pointed out that since Singapore was SIA’s home base, the office dealt with a wide range of routes and services.” Rahita Elias, “SIA Expects Outbound Sales to Grow 10%,” Bus. Times, 20 Sept. 1996, at 18.

dearlly (= deeply, fondly) presents no problem when it modifies a verb <she dearly loved music>. As a modifier of an attributive past participle, it is familiar in the set phrase dearly beloved. Acting on that model, though, writers sometimes paint themselves into an unidiomatic corner—e.g.: “Zulu, owner of Zulu Tattoo in Los Angeles, says tattoos have become like lockets, those tiny trinkets of gold or silver hung from thin necklaces that held a portrait or a lock of hair of the dearly [read dear] departed.” DeNeen L. Brown, “Indelible Link: Lives Lost to Tragedy Linger in the Flesh of Those Left Behind,” Wash. Post, 31 Aug. 2008, at M1. (Really, the whole phrase should be rewritten, perhaps by making it a lock of hair of a departed loved one.)

dearth = scarcity <there was a dearth of Americans at the festival>. But the word is commonly misunderstood as meaning a complete lack or absence of something. This misunderstanding is revealed especially in the nonsensical phrase *complete dearth, which has lurked in the linguistic shadows since the early 19th century. E.g.:

• “Approximate number of calls logged by the ‘O.J. Hotline’ before it was disconnected due to a complete dearth [read the lack or the absence] of concrete leads pointing to other suspects: 250,000.” Richard Roeper, “‘The O.J. Trial . . . Again: This Time by Numbers,” Chicago Sun-Times, 4 June 1995, Show, §, at 2.
been the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike: it

goes to going

e.g.: “More pervert than poet, this character

debauched himself into the hotel dining room and suddenly there was a surge in Sharpe's popularity.” Tom Sharpe, “A Blot in My Life,” Daily Telegraph, 9 Sept. 1995, at 1.
The corresponding noun is debouchment.

debility; debilitation. Debility = weakness; feebleness. Debilitation = the act of making weak or feeble.

It is a fairly common error to misuse debilitation for debility—e.g.: “Although [Fidel Castro] could yet reappear in the halls of power in Havana, the evidence of his physical debilitation [read debility] and cognitive inconsistencies suggests that if he does return, it will be in an emeritus capacity.” Brian Latell, “Raul Castro: Confronting Fidel's Legacy in Cuba,” Wash. Q., Summer 2007, at 53.

Language-Change Index

debilitation misused for debility: Stage 1

debonair (= suave, urbane) is the standard spelling.

It’s pronounced /deb-ә-nәir/. *Debonaire is a variant spelling.

Current ratio: 23:1

deboned. See boned.

debouch. See debauoch.

debribment (= [1] the operation of cutting away dead or contaminated tissue, or [2] the enlargement of a passage for pus to flow from an abscess) is a galelism used chiefly by surgeons and dentists. It is pronounced /di-bre-ә-mәnt/—not /di-brid-mәnt/.

debis (= [1] pieces of waste material, or [2] the pieces of something left after the thing has been destroyed in an accident, explosion, etc.) is pronounced /da-bree/ in AmE and /deb-ә-ree/ or /day-bree/ in BrE. The acute accent is now normally omitted from the -e-

debtor. See bankrupt (n).

decathion. See -athlon.

decadence. n. See death.

decay, v.i., = to die. “He deceased without children.”

This verbal use of decease is even more pompous than the noun use. The straightforward die is usually better. See diseased. Cf. death.

decayed. See diseased.

decieve; defraud. To deceive is to induce someone to believe in a falsehood. The deceiver may know the statement to be false or may make it recklessly.

To defraud is to cause someone to incur some injury or loss by deceit. Defrauding leads a person to take action, whereas deceiving merely leads a person into a state of mind.

Decelerate is sometimes erroneously remade into *deaccelerate, especially in speech.

Current ratio: 357:1
decceptive; deceitful. Although both words connote “misleading,” deceptive does not necessarily indicate
dishonesty. A person or thing may mislead another with bad intent <deceptive business practice> <deceptive answer> or with no bad intent <appearances can be deceptive>. But someone or something deceitful always has an underlying intent to lie, cheat, or defraud by misleading <deceitful story> <deceitful game>.

**deceptively** (= misleadingly) can itself be a deceptive word: it is inherently ambiguous and should therefore be avoided entirely as a skunked term. When it modifies an adjective, it might indicate that something is not what it appears to be, but the nature of that discrepancy is not immediately clear. For example, what is deceptively smooth might be either (1) rough in appearance but actually smooth, or (2) smooth in appearance but actually rough—e.g.: "At a deceptively smooth spot I let off the brakes and attempted to catch up. Instantaneously, my front tire hit a huge leaf-covered rock, nearly bringing me to a standstill." Jeb Tilly, "Wild Today, Gone Tomorrow?" Wash. Post, 16 Nov. 2001, at T64.

Many writers use deceptively as if to enhance the adjective, but the resulting phrases can be even more ambiguous—e.g.: - "So sure, we need to goad our reluctant governor and state agencies and state Legislature to take the deceptively dangerous issue of waste tires more seriously." Fred Lebrun, "A Smoking Mound of Problems," Times Union (Albany), 12 Mar. 2002, at B1. (Is something here dangerous or not? And is it the issue or the tires?)
- "The building is deceptively large—12,000 square feet of potential office space—and it has an advantage that many older businesses, designed for a different time, do not: ample parking." Roger Williams, "Where We Live: Census Tract 10," News-Press (P. Myers, Fla.), 1 Sept. 2002, at G1. (Is the building larger or smaller than it looks?)
- "Until that changes, even a new interest-rate cut by the Fed could fail to stop the deceptively serious downturn." David Leonhardt, "Downturn Lasts as Fed Meets," Chattanooga Times, 24 Sept. 2002, at C1. (Is the economic downturn worse than it appears or really nothing to worry about?)

Sometimes context can clarify what deceptively means—e.g.: - "Lowhead dams are deceptively dangerous and can range from a drop-off of six inches to as much as 25 feet," said John Wisse of ODNR. "State Issues Boating Advisory for Rivers, Streams," Dayton Daily News, 16 May 2002, at D7. (The dams can be more dangerous than they look.)

The word often signals verbosity, introducing a phrase that might be distilled to a single word—e.g.: - "It’s Charlie Brown country—a deceptively easy [read an enjoyable?] place to spend a couple of hours." Evan Henrison, "Comic Genius: Schulz’s Immortal Characters Captured in ‘Charlie Brown[,]” Daily News (L.A.), 16 Aug. 2002, at U19. (The sentence appeared at the end of a glowing review.)

Sometimes simply omitting the word improves the sentence—e.g.: "I like to think I have a good sense of humor, but what is considered funny is so deceptively subjective [read subjective]." Ramsey Campbell, “Humor Is in the Mind of the Beholder, Despite British Study,” Orlando Sentinel, 13 Oct. 2002, at K10.

**decimate.** Originally this word meant “to kill one in every ten,” but this etymological sense, because it’s so uncommon, has been abandoned except in historical contexts. Now decimate generally means "to cause great loss of life; to destroy a large part of." Even allowing that extension in meaning, the word is commonly misused in two ways.

First, the word is sometimes mistakenly applied to an obliteration or utter defeat—e.g.: - "When he did reach Preston Flats the town looked not only uninhabited but deserted, as if plague had swept through and decimated it [read destroyed it or, perhaps, killed everybody].” Cormac McCarthy, Outer Dark 131 (1968).
- "Incidentally, this particular cyclamen is one of the species that had been nearly totally decimated [read obliterated] in its native Mediterranean lands by mindless digging for commercial gain.” Joan Lee Faust, “Caution: Ants at Work (Watch Your Step),” N.Y. Times, 3 Jan. 1993, N.J. §, at 6.
- "If you’ve watched American Hoggers you know boars are known to be vicious and territorial animals that breed like crazy and decimate [read destroy] land.” “Wishful Thinking for Animal Lovers,” Caledon Enterprise (Can.), 19 Aug. 2015, Opinion §, at 1.

Second, the word is misused when it is used lightly of any defeat or setback, however trivial or temporary, especially when applied to inanimate things—e.g.: - "With her slingshot she even decimates [read breaks?] their searchlight.” Jerry Tallmer, “Wartime France Turned Deadly Cute,” Record (N.J.), 30 Aug. 1996, Lifestyle §, at 39.
- "The Steelers may be decimated [read hampered or plagued] by injuries, but they possess great depth on defense.” “The Bettor’s Edge,” Boston Herald, 6 Sept. 1996, at 76.
- "House Republicans have eagerly attacked and, as of last year, effectively decimated [read wiped out] family-planning funds.” Sara Engram, “Preserving the World’s Families,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 7 Sept. 1996, at B11.

And sometimes the metaphor is simply inappropriate—e.g.: "He said he had watched lung cancer decimate [read emaciate or ravage] his sister’s body.” Phoebe Wall Howard, “Gore: Ticket Is Bridge to the Future,” Fresno Bee, 30 Aug. 1996, at A1.

In fact, though, the word might justifiably be considered a skunked term. Whether you stick to the...
original one-in-ten meaning or use the extended sense, the word is infected with ambiguity. And some of your readers will probably be puzzled or bothered.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
1. *decimate* for large-scale destruction: Stage 5
2. *decimate* for complete destruction: Stage 3
3. *decimate* for the figurative destruction of a single thing or person <*she was decimated by the news*>: Stage 4
4. *decimate* for hamper or plague: Stage 3

decision, take a. See AMERICANISMS AND CRITICISMS (c).

decisioning for *deciding* or *decision-making* is symptomatic of JARGON in two fields—banking and boxing. The term gained prominence beginning in the latter half of the 20th century. In banking, *decisioning* is the term for deciding whether to extend credit—e.g.:”

- “Officials said the system has an ‘expert decisioning’ capability, which automatically obtains access to relevant returned check data and makes the pay/no-pay decision.”
- “On-line credit verification and evaluation systems quickly and accurately assess creditworthiness without the drawbacks of manual decisioning.”
  

- “Banks can incorporate new data sources and analytics into their *decisioning* processes over time, achieving continual performance improvements and incremental cost savings and revenue gains.”
  

In boxing cant, the verb *decision* means “to defeat (an opponent) not by knockout but by a decision of the judges.” Sportswriters are much enamored of the word—e.g.:”

- “David Diaz (139) became an Olympian by *decisioning* Zabdiel Judah.”
  

- “Germany’s Ralf Rocchigiani (39–7–7) successfully defended his WBO cruiserweight title for the fourth time, *decisioning* Nigeria’s Bashiru Ali (41–14) in Essen, Germany.”
  

- “Hector Camacho looked so bad in *decisioning* Arturo Nina the other night, it makes it a lock that Sugar Ray Leonard will come back.”
  

decision-making, n., is a generic term for *deciding* and, though useful in some contexts, is much overworked in modern prose—especially in the redundant BUREAUCRATSESE *decision-making* process. The word smacks of business JARGON and is often merely a grandiloquent way of saying *deciding*; after all, when one makes decisions, one decides.

It is now frequently spelled as one word, even by the U.S. Supreme Court. One sees the same one-wordism tendency at work in the terms *policymaking* and *decisionmaking*. These compounds are too bulky to look like anything but jargonistic English; a simple hyphen does a lot.

declam; disclaim. To *declaim* is to speak formally in public (hence the adjective declaratory). To *disclaim* is to disavow, deny, or renounce (as a manufacturer sometimes does in its warranties). Both words can be transitive, but what one disclaims is one’s opinion or message, not what one is denouncing. In that context the preposition against is needed—e.g.: “Though some, including the National PTA, *declaim* [read *disclaim* against or denote] the use of children as fund-raisers, most parents recognize that the profits support necessary programs and defray costs such as travel and uniforms.”


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

declam misused for *denounce*: Stage 1

declarative; declaratory; declaratory. Both *declarative* and *declaratory* mean “having the function of declaring, setting forth, or explaining”; their differentiation lies in established uses, not in meaning. We speak of *declarative* sentences in grammar, but *declaratory* judgments in law.

*Declamatory*, which is sometimes confused with *declaratory*, means “haranguing; of, relating to, or involving declaiming oratorically.” Here it’s correctly used: “By contrast, the *declaratory* rhetoric of ‘War Scenes’—a 1969 setting of excerpts from Walt Whitman’s diaries—felt rather hectoring, marked by ungainly leaps in the vocal line and a striving after effect.”


declination; *declinature; declension*. All three words are used in denoting the act of courteously refusing, but *declination* now far outstrips the other two in frequency of use. In referring to the act of declining, *declinature* and *declension* ought to be considered NEEDLESS VARIANTS OF *declination*.

But even *declination* is open to ambiguity because it also means (1) “a downward bend or slope”; (2) “a deterioration; falling off”; or (3) “a deviation.”

*Declination* has the same problem because it may mean “a downhill slope”; (2) “a decline or decrease”; or (3) “a grammatical inflection or class of words.”

Current ratio (*declination* vs. *declinature*): 120:1

decline, v.i. & v.t. This verb has two distinct senses and yields two noun forms. *Declination* derives from *decline* in the sense “to refuse.”

*Decline*, n., derives from *decline* in the sense “to go downhill.”

décolletage, n.; décolleté, adj. *Décolletage* = (1) the top edge of a woman’s dress cut very low to show cleavage and shoulders; or (2) the full dress itself, so cut. *Décolleté* = (1) (of a woman) wearing a strapless or low-cut dress; or (2) (of a dress) having a low-cut neckline. Both words are normally not italicized but retain their DIACRITICAL MARKS.
The etymologically related verb decollate (= to behead) dates from the 15th century—but it is rarely associated with these gallicisms. Décolleté was popular in the late 18th century, but mostly in phrases such as décolleté gowns, décolleté women, etc. The noun décolletage came into the language in the late 19th century in such phrases as deep décolletage, modest décolletage, daring décolletage, and extreme décolletage.

Both words are pronounced in a French way: for décolletage, either /day-kol-ә-tahzh/ or /day-kol-tahzh/; for décolleté, either /day-kol-ә-tay/ or /day-kol-tay/.

decoration (= a method of reading by which one finds the subtext beneath the text and inverts their importance) for destruction is an odd error—e.g.: “Fire is an extremely fast and effective means of deconstruction [read destruction].” All urban fires are in some sense man-made.” Thomas Hine, “Don’t Blame Mrs. O’Leary,” N.Y. Times, 15 July 1990, § 7, at 13.

Language-Change Index
decoration misused for destruction: Stage 1
decorous (= proper; in good taste) is pronounced with the primary accent on the first syllable: /dek-ә-ras/.

decry; descry. Decry = to denounce or disparage. E.g.: “Party fund-raisers, while decrying the amounts spent this year, say both parties are caught in a financial version of an arms race.” Leslie Wayne, “Campaigns Exploiting Financial Loopholes,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 8 Sept.v 1996, at A1.

Descry = to see in the distance; discern with the eye. Today it is most often used figuratively—e.g.:• From the nine peaks of this series, we can descry and yearn to climb other peaks.” David Elliott, “Middleman Delivers the Diamond,” San Diego Union-Trib., 4 Apr. 1994, Night & Day §, at 24.
• “I was wondering if you might conceivably descry significance in the fact that it happened soon after those comets started banging into my favorite planet, Jupiter.” Daniel Seligman, “Ask Mr. Statistics,” Fortune, 5 Sept. 1994, at 113.
• “So anxious are boomers about their careers that some experts decry a whole new genre of midlife crisis.” Ronald Henkoff, “So, You Want to Change Your Job?” Fortune, 15 Jan. 1996, at 52.

Occasionally writers misuse decry for descry—e.g.: “As much as we descry [read decry or condemn] such acts, we should come to grips with some fundamental truths.” Terry Plumb, “What Did He Look Like?” Herald (Rock Hill, S.C.), 12 Feb. 2006, at E1. And in some sentences, the word descry is barely intelligible, a fancy trinket dragged in to dress up the sentence—e.g.:• “On Friday, she sported a sign decrying [read proclaiming?] ‘Fur Is Dead’ along with her mistress, whose sandwich board carried a gruesome message.” John Urs, “‘Fur Free Friday’ Brings 100 to Protest at Two S.L. Malls,” Salt Lake Trib., 26 Nov. 1994, at B2.


Language-Change Index
1. decry misused for decry: Stage 1
2. decry misused for proclaim: Stage 1
dedicated; *dedicative; *dedicatorial. The first form is standard; the other two are needless variants.
Current ratio: 857:5:1
deduce. A. And deduct. The former means “to infer,” the latter “to subtract.” Deduct is sometimes misused for deduce—e.g.: “Ideal methods in thought and research, logically observed and deducted [read deduced] for possible changes in light of different circumstances were foreign to him.” Letter of George E. Hayney, “What’s Ahead for the U.S. Supreme Court?” St. Petersburg Times, 14 July 1991, at D3. See adduce & deducible.

Language-Change Index
deduce misused for deduce: Stage 1
B. And induce. To deduce is to reason from a general principle to a specific conclusion. To induce is either (1) to reason from many specific observations to a general principle or (2) to cause (a result)—sense 1 being the one at issue in discussions of logic. As it happens, although reasoning by induction is as commonly referred to as reasoning by deduction, the verb induce is much less common than deduce. The following examples, though, show how the two verbs are sometimes contrasted:

• “The research logic is predictive; future manifestations of a phenomenon are deduced from theoretical laws and axioms or induced from historical antecedents.” Craig L. Thompson et al., “Putting Consumer Experience Back into Consumer Research,” 16 J. Consumer Research 133 (1989).
• “The answers to these questions will be induced from the level of class and national consciousness expressed through direct political intervention, not deduced from abstract economic formulas about the ‘Crises of World Capitalism.’” James Petras, “U.S. Empire-Building,” Canadian Dimension, Mar. 2003, at 9.
deducible; deductable. The former means “indefeasible.” E.g.: “Attorneys can make statements in opening and closing arguments that are reasonably deducible from allowed evidence . . . .” “Alabama,” USA Today, 15 Oct. 1992, at A8. The word is sometimes misspelled *deducable. See -able (A).

Deductible, a favorite word during the tax season, means “capable of being (usu. lawfully) subtracted”—
e.g.: “On Wednesday, for example, [Michael J. Coles] held a news conference to encourage Mr. Gingrich to call for the release of a draft report about claims that the Speaker improperly used tax-deductible donations to finance a college course he taught in 1993.” Kevin Sack, “Entrepreneur Sets His Sights on Gingrich,” N.Y. Times, 18 Sept. 1996, at A19. The word is sometimes misspelled *deductible.

deduct. See deduce (A).

deduction; induction. See deduce (B).

dee is a formal word that imparts the flavor of archaisms. It frequently replaces a more down-to-earth term such as consider, think, or judge—e.g.:


• “The authorities have in several cases used rape charges to imprison religious leaders deemed [read thought] to be a menace.” Rik Eckholm, “3 Church Leaders in China Are Sent to Prison for Life,” N.Y. Times, 11 Oct. 2002, at A10.

de-emphasize. This word is traditionally hyphenated, since the reader may at first see deem. See punctuation (f).

Current ratio (de-emphasize vs. de-emphasize): 1:1:1


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*deep-frozen for deep-frozen: Stage 1
Current ratio (deep-frozen vs. *deep-frozen): 583:1

deep-seated. So spelled. *Deep-seeded is a misbegotten metaphor, a malapropism, especially because something truly *deep-seeded probably wouldn’t be able to grow. The true metaphor derives from horseback riding (deep in the seat), not from planting seeds deep—e.g.:


• “At the Green Valley Library in Henderson, ‘the wall’ is a place where people go to post messages about deep-seed [read deep-seated] secrets, loneliness, worries, aspirations and dreams.” “Library Offers a Different Kind of Wall Post,” Las Vegas Sun, 11 Apr. 2012, at 8.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*deep-seeded for deep-seated: Stage 1
Current ratio (deep-seated vs. *deep-seeded): 144:1

defalicate. A. And peculate; embezzle. These words are broadly synonymous, all three meaning “to misappropriate money in one’s charge.” Defalicate and peculate, the latter being slightly more common today in referring to public moneys, are formal words that describe a bad action about as neutrally as possible. Embezzle is the popular word, more highly charged with negative connotations. See defalication.

B. Pronunciation. Several pronunciation guides suggest that the first syllable may be stressed: /def-әl-kayt/ or /def-al-kayt/. See, e.g., John B. Opdycke, Don’t Say It: A Cyclopedia of English Use and Abuse 236 (1939). Others suggest that the corresponding noun is pronounced /def-al-kay-shan/. See, e.g., William H. Phyle, 20,000 Words Often Mispronounced 244 (1937).

But these pronunciations have a problem. Anyone who hears them is likely to think of defecate and defecation. Therefore, if one must utter these words at all, the safest course is to use the following pronunciations, which all pronunciation guides accept as standard: defalicate /dee-fal-kayt/ or /di-fal-kayt/; defalcation /dee-fal-kay-shan/. Pronouncing the second syllable /fawl/ is not standard.

defalication may refer either to the act of embezzling or to the money embezzled, usually the former—e.g.: “The suspect’s name is not being released by First Commercial, nor are many details of the alleged defalication [i.e., the act].” Mark Anderson, “First Commercial Bank Hit with Alleged Embezzlement,” Bus. J.—Sacramento, 12 Sept. 1994, §1, at 2. See defalicate.

By slipshod extension, some writers have misused defalcation when referring merely to a nonfraudulent default. To be a defalcation, a deficiency in money matters must be fraudulent and must be the fault of someone put in trust of the money. To speak of a loan defalcation is to fall into ambiguity—e.g.: “Fairfield First Bank submitted a report to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. and the state Department of Banking (DOB), detailing the alleged losses caused by White’s ‘loan defalcations,’ according to David Tedeschi, a spokesman for the DOB.” Don Dzikowski, “Bank Sues Insurers to Recoup Lost Funds,” Fairfield County Bus. J., 12 June 1995, at 1. That sentence does not reveal just how serious the alleged wrongdoing was: it was either a criminal act or a noncriminal failure to pay on time.

defamation; libel; slander. These three terms are distinguished in law. Defamation = an attack on the reputation of another. It encompasses both libel (in permanent form, especially in writing) and slander (in transitory form, especially by spoken words). See libel.

defamatory; *defamative. Defamatory is the standard term; *defamative is a needless variant.

default, n. & vb. A default is a failure to act when an action is required, especially the failure to pay a debt—either interest or principal—as it becomes due <the account is in default>.

A default is also something that will happen unless something prevents it. It is a common term in
defeasance, referring to a preference setting that will be used unless a different setting is specified; in this sense it is usually attributive and serves as an adjective <C is the default drive>. But this usage pre-dates computers: in law, for example, a defendant who does not contest a claim may face a default judgment.

As a verb, default is ordinarily intransitive. And when used intransitively, the verb idiomatically requires the preposition on <she defaulted on the loan>. Occasionally, though, writers fall into the unidiomatic—e.g.: “Financed by Credit Lyonnais, Parretti soon defaulted to [read defaulted on] his loans.” Daniel R. Marcus, “Big Deals: Tracinda et al./MGM,” Am. Lawyer, Sept. 1996, at 116.

But transitive uses sometimes crop up <she defaulted the loan>. That usage may have arisen from the common adjectival use of defaulted, especially in computer jargon—e.g.: • “College officials said they didn’t know the dollar amount of defaulted loans.” Deborah C. Whitten, “Penn Valley Plans Loan Program Appeal,” Kansas City Star, 3 Sept. 1994, at C4.

defeasance; *defeasement. Defeasance (= an annulment or abrogation), the standard form, is much more common than *defeasement in modern print sources. E.g.:
• “He said he intended to negotiate a restructuring of FFr3bn in loans from banks to support its FFr13bn off-balance sheet ‘defeasance’ of non-performing loans hived off as part of a restructuring earlier this year.” Andrew Jack, “GAN to Prepare for Sell-Off with FFr9bn Sale,” Fin. Times, 15 Dec. 1995, at 22.
• “The county is working with bond counsel, Hassenbalg said, to determine what their options and obligations are with respect to that debt and its possible defeasance.” Katherine M. Reynolds, “N.J. County Debates Bid to Sell Hospital,” Bond Buyer, 18 Dec. 1995, at 6.
• “To sell the facilities, the city would first have to put $1.3 million into a bond defeasance escrow account to repay those who purchased the tax-free revenue bonds issued seven years ago to finance arena improvements.” Judith Davidoff, “Panel Urges Sale of Two Ice Arenas,” Capital Times (Madison), 27 Aug. 2002, at A3.

Still, *defeasement—a needless variant—sometimes appears. E.g.: ‘Defeasing’ bonds is a highly technical financial maneuver, Puig said, which is necessary in this case because the bonds have a provision that prohibits prepayment for 10 years. In a defeasement [read defeasance], the county would put the sale money in a special fund that would eventually pay off the bonds.” “Keep Knick, Coyne Writes,” Times Union (Albany), 7 June 1995, at B1.

And with all this use of the nouns, it is hardly surprising that writers have felt the need for a corresponding verb: defease. It’s a 19th-century back-formation from defeasance—e.g.:
• “The not-for-profit hospital . . . is being sold to an investor-owned chain in a deal that involved defeasing, or replacing the collateral of, the hospital’s tax-exempt bonds.” Sandy Lutz, “IRS Hikes Cost of Buying Tax-Exempts,” Modern Healthcare, 3 July 1995, at 18.
• “Last year, the city chose J.P. Morgan Securities Inc. as adviser on the hotel sale, which would involve defeasing about $28 million of outstanding debt issued by the United Nations Development Corp. to finance the hotel.” Christina Pretto, “Mayor Tells How UN Helps N.Y.C., Mum on Hotel Sale,” Bond Buyer, 25 Aug. 1995, at 5.
• “Even better, if the dollar turned around, as the Treasury was saying it would, then the U.S. government could score a profit by ‘defeasing’ the bonds—a method of calling in the debt.” James K. Glassman, “Why Buy High When Lows Are Out There?” Wash. Post, 24 Sept. 1995, at H1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*defeasement for defeasance: Stage 1
Current ratio (defeasance vs. *defeasement): 530:1

defeasible. So spelled—not *defeasable. See -ABLE (A).

defect, n. In the best usage, one refers to the defects in things and the defects of people. For the distinction between a defect and a deficiency, see **defective**.

defective; deficient; defectible. The primary difference to be noted is between defective (= faulty; imperfect; subnormal) and deficient (= insufficient; lacking in quantity). The same basic distinction holds for the nouns defect and deficiency. In the following sentence, deficiency is misused for defect: “A devastating steam explosion and fuel-core meltdown in Unit 4 was caused by operator errors and reactor design deficiencies [read defects].” William F. Miller, “Effects of Chernobyl Are Still Felt in Ukraine,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 20 July 1996, at B4.

Defectible, an extremely rare word, means “likely to fail or become defective.”

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deficiency misused for defect: Stage 1

defence. See defense.

defenestrate (= to throw out a window [lit. or fig.]) is a mid-20th-century back-formation from the noun defenestration, which dates from the early 17th century. The noun is far more common than the verb.

defense. A. Spelling. Defense is AmE; defence is BrE (or very antiquated AmE). Modern American writers who use the British spelling are likely to seem affected.

B. Pronunciation. The standard pronunciation has long been with the accent on the second syllable: /di- fen[t]s/. But primarily as a result of sports talk, some have shifted the accent to the first syllable: /dee-fen[t]s/.

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, I-6.)

If you want to sound like a general or a lawyer, use the first of these pronunciations; if you want to sound like a sports announcer or a cheerleader, use the second. Cf. offense.

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*defense* pronounced with accent on first syllable:

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**C. As a Verb.** In the mid-20th century, *defense* came into use as a sports CASUALISM in the sense “to defend against (a play, etc.) effectively.” Because the meaning is sometimes vague and a better word or phrase is available, careful speakers and writers are likely to avoid this usage (which is inarguably more economical and may well become standard)—e.g.:

- “The 49ers also can’t be encouraged by the way they’ve defended [read defended against] the pass all season.” Jeffri Chadiha, “49ers Set Sights on Freeman,” S.F. Examiner, 3 Jan. 1999, at C5.
- “He totaled 63 tackles, seven sacks, three passes defensed [read defected], four forced fumbles and one interception.” Mary Kay Cabot, “LB, DB Added to Aid Hamstrung Roster,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 17 Aug. 2015, at B2.

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*defense* as a verb: Stage 2

**defensible.** So spelled—not *defensible.* See -ABLE (A).

**defer; defer to.** *Defer* (= to postpone) yields the nouns *deferral* and *deferment.* (See *deferral.*) *Defer to* (= to give way to) yields the noun *deference.

**deferment.** See *deferral.*

**deferrable /di-fer-ә-bal/ is so spelled—not *deferable.* Cf. *inferable* & *transferable.*

Current ratio: 33:1

**deferral; deferment.** Although *deferment* is the term traditionally listed in dictionaries—and is nearly 300 years older—*deferral* (dating from the late 19th century) is now much more common in print sources from all varieties of English. It ought to be considered standard as the generic noun corresponding to *defer*—e.g.:

- “The decision on the export licence will be deferred until November 18, and the *deferral* could be extended until February 18 if a serious intention to raise funds to buy the watercolour at the recommended price emerges.” Emily Beament, “UK Buyer Sought for First Picture of Niagara Falls,” Herald (Glasgow), 20 Aug. 2015, at 9.

In this particular use, *deferment* is now a NECESSARY VARIANT.

But *deferment* does have one special use, in the sense “an official postponement of military service.” This use was common when the military draft was in effect, but it has since atrophied.

Current ratio (deferral vs. deferment): 4:1

**defer to.** See *defer.*

**deficient; deficiency.** See *defective.*

**definite.** *A. And definitive.* These words are increasingly confused. *Definite* = fixed, exact, explicit. *Defin-itive* = authoritative; conclusive; exhaustive; providing a binding answer.

The most frequent error is misuse of *definitive* for *definite*—e.g.: “He has some very definitive [read definite] views on golf-course architecture, and it's hard not to like what he says.” Michael Mayo, “New Honda Home on Solid Ground with McCumber,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 13 Mar. 1994, at C19.

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*definitive* misused for *definite*: Stage 1

**B. As Misspelled.** The word is often misspelled *define.* See SPELLING (A).

Current ratio: 6,218:1

**definitely.** So spelled. See SPELLING (A).

**deflection (= the act of making something go to one side) is the standard spelling. *Deflexion* is an archaic BrE variant.**

Current ratio: 99:1

**deforest; disafforest; *disforest.** For the act of cutting down trees, especially clear-cutting, *deforest* has predominated in AmE since the 1860s and in World English since the 1920s. *Disafforest* dominated in BrE until the mid 1980s, when *deforest* inexplicably overtook it to become much more common. The more practical *disforest* was strong in the 19th century but declined as *deforest* rose. It is now a NECESSARY VARIANT.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 49:3:1

**defraud.** See *deceive.*

**defraudation; *defraughtment.* Writers seldom need to use a noun formed from the verb *defraud,* perhaps because the noun *fraud* itself usually suffices. When they find the occasion, however, the word is *defraudation*—e.g.: “The sad reality is that the apathy you encountered when you called county officials undoubtedly would have continued after your *defraudation,* unless your loss towered above the county’s in-house limit, which might be as high as $150,000.” Fay Faron, “Retiree Was Too Wary for Scam Artist,” Dallas Morning News, 13 Sept. 1996, at C8. *Defraudment* is a NECESSARY VARIANT.

Current ratio: 3:1

**defraudulent** is a NECESSARY VARIANT of *fraudulent.* See *fraudulent.*

**defunct, in a ghastly blunder, is sometimes written *defunk*—e.g.:**
delegable is the word, not *delegatable. But many writers mistakenly use the latter form—e.g.: "The reality is that oversight simply is not delegatable [read delegetable]." Warren F. McFarlan & Richard L. Nolan, "How to Manage an IT Outsourcing Alliance," Sloan Mgmt. Rev., Jan. 1995, at 9. See -ABLE (D) & -ATABLE.

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delegetable for delegatable: Stage 1
Current ratio (delegable vs. *delegatable): 11:1

delegate. See relegate.

deliberate, adj.; deliberative. These words should be differentiated. Deliberate = (1) intentional, fully considered; or (2) unimpulsive, slow in deciding. Deliberative = of, or appointed for the purpose of, deliberation or debate (COD).
Deliberate is sometimes misused for deliberate in both sense 1 and sense 2. Misuse for sense 1: “War thus will be a deliberate [read deliberate] act, not a reflex.” “More than ‘Consult,’” Christian Science Monitor, 22 Oct. 1990, at 20. Misuse for sense 2: “DeLauro came to this decision in a deliberative [read deliberate], uncharacteristically subdued way for someone known for overly aggressive ways of making her points.”


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delimit; *delimitate. Delimit, the preferred form, is not merely a fancy variation of limit, as many seem to believe. The word means “to define; determine the boundaries of”—e.g.: “Having declared an EEZ, China will now have to delimit its disputed sea boundaries with its maritime neighbors—South Korea, Japan and Vietnam.” Mark J. Valencia, “China, and the Law of the Sea Convention,” Bus. Times, 29 June 1996, Special §, at 4.


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*delimitate for delimit: Stage 1

Current ratio (delimit vs. *delimitate): 62:1

delineate (lit., “to draw or sketch”) means figuratively “to represent in words; to describe.” It is sometimes misused for differentiate (an error on the rise since the 1950s)—e.g.: ・ “But considering the individuals involved, it’s difficult to delineate [read differentiate] between fact and fiction.” Dave Luecking, “ Bowman, Keenan 2-Man Head of Bureau of Minds,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 5 May 1996, at F1.
・ “While it’s not always easy to delineate [read differentiate] between legitimate communication to constituents and distribution of political material, taxpayers certainly have a right to be suspicious when material is distributed shortly before or during a political campaign season.” “Identify Material Publicly Funded,” State-Times/Morning Advocate (Baton Rouge), 24 Aug. 1996, at B6.
・ “In Burlington’s testimony on Monday, he said he only brought up that comment to delineate [read differentiate] between the N-word being targeted at someone and the word being discussed in a ‘journalistic context.’” Dan Spinelli, “N-Word Lawsuit Intensifies as Colleague Testifies,” Phil. Daily News, 10 June 2015, Local §, at 3.

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*delineate misused for differentiate: Stage 1
delinquent, in AmE, can apply to either things or people <delinquent taxes> <delinquent youth>. In BrE, it applies only to people.
delirium tremens. This phrase—often abbreviated as d.t.s or D.T.s—should not be used, as it sometimes is, to describe frenzied drunkenness. In fact, it denotes a mental disease characterized by violent mania, with tremors and hallucinations, usually induced by sudden abstinence from alcohol or another drug after excessive use over a prolonged period. A synonymous phrase is mania à potu.
delivery. A. And deliverance. Delivery, the more usual word, is used in reference to (1) a transfer or conveyance (of something); (2) an utterance <a stammering delivery of the speech>; or (3) a giving of birth <premature delivery>. Deliverance is a legal and religious term usually meaning “rescue, release,” although at one time it overlapped with delivery in almost every sense.

B. Cant Uses. It has become voguish in some circles to use delivery of where providing or provision for would normally appear, especially in reference to services. Like any other trendy expression, it ought to be avoided. E.g.: “It is irrational to equate the cost of total confinement with the alleged harm resulting from a change in method of the delivery of [read providing] dental services.” See VOGUE WORDS.

delphi, not *Delphos, is the place name for the location of the oracle (or shrine) belonging to the Greek god Apollo. The usual phrase is oracle of Delphi, oracle at Delphi, or Delphic oracle. But some writers get it wrong—e.g.: “Even when the all-seeing oracle of Delphos [read Delphi] pronounces her innocent, the king will not listen.” Peter Haugen, “A Play-by-Play Look at the Season,” Sacramento Bee, 3 Mar. 1996, Encore §, at 16. Delphos is the name of cities in Kansas and Ohio.

Delphic, adj., = (1) oracular; or (2) ambiguous; cryptic.

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*oracle of Delphos for oracle of Delphi: Stage 1

Current ratio (oracle of Delphi vs. *oracle of Delphos): 16:1
delphinium. Although the plural *delphinia was somewhat common before 1900, the standard plural has been delphiniums ever since then.

Current ratio (delphiniums vs. *delphinia): 644:1
deluge (= [1] an overwhelming flood, or [2] a large amount of something that one receives at the same time) is preferably pronounced /del-yooj/. The same is true of the verb <they deluged her with Twitter messages>.
delusion. See hallucination & illusion.
delusive; delusional; *delusory. Delusive = (1) tending to delude, deceptive; or (2) of the nature of a delusion. Usually sense 1 applies. Delusional is the more usual term for sense 2—e.g.: “Florence acted under a delusional perception of reality.” *Delusory is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of the other two.
deluxe. Although this adjective was originally (from the early 19th century) written as two words—de luxe—it became predominantly solidified in AmE
print sources by 1965, in World English by 1970, and in BrE by the late 1980s. Of course, the word means “outstandingly luxurious and high-quality.” The word has undergone some downgrading in sense because of hyperbolic uses—most notably in the description of some very ordinary hotel rooms as “deluxe rooms.” It is preferably pronounced /di-ˈlʌks/—not /di-ˈlʊks/, /di-ˈluks/, or /di-ˈdeɪks/.

Current ratio (deluxe vs. *de luxe): 5:1
demagogy is predominantly a noun meaning “a leader who maintains power through appeals to the mob.” *Demagog(e) is a variant form, but today it is seen in print much less frequently than the longer form—e.g.: “Most of those whom political demagogues call ‘the rich’ are simply people in the top 10 or 20 percent of the income distribution.”


When the word has been used as a verb, it has historically been intransitive, not transitive. That is, one may demagogue (= play the demagogue), or one may *demagogue on an issue (= appeal to the mob on an issue), but one doesn’t *demagogue an issue. Some writers try to make the verb transitive—e.g.: “Similarly, Rep. Rod Chandler, the Republican candidate for U.S. Senate, has demagogued [read *demagogued on] the issue,” “Unsoeld’s Sound Approach,” *Seattle Times*, 29 Sept. 1992, at A6.

Current ratio: 2:1
demagoguery; *demagogy. Demagoguery (= the practices of a political agitator who appeals to mob instincts) is more than twice as common in print as *demagogy, which (in the absence of any useful differentiation) ought to be labeled a needless variant. E.g.: “Such demagogy [read demagoguery] aside, there are good grounds to object to this particular venture.” “Skate and Hate,” *Baltimore Sun*, 26 Aug. 1994, at A16. That was not always true: *demagogy was the usual term in AmE till the early 1950s and in BrE till about 2000.

Current ratio: 75:1
demean; bemean. Formerly, authorities on usage disapproved of *demean in the sense “to lower, degrade,” holding that instead it really means “to conduct (oneself).” For example, an early-20th-century usage critic wrote that “demean signifies ‘to behave’ and does not mean degrade.” Frank H. Vizetelly, *A Desk-Book of Errors in English* 62 (1909). The meaning “to behave,” now archaic, is infrequently used in legal contexts—e.g.: “The oath of office now generally administered in all the states requires the lawyer to uphold the law; to *demean* himself, as an officer of the court, uprightly; to be faithful to his trust.” In this sense, of course, the verb corresponds to the noun *demeanor*. It is this sense that also shows up in *misdemeanor*.

Yet the other sense, which has been with us since at least 1601, is now dominant—e.g.:

- “He was not blessed with a sense of humour, and believed his wife *demeaned* herself when she played the clown.”
- “For the Government of Ontario, in turn, to make this about particular individuals (the Prime Minister or Finance Minister, for example) *demeans* the seriousness of the issue.” Lorne Sossin, “Federal–Provincial Sniping over Ontario Pension Plan Has to Stop,” *Globe & Mail* (Toronto), 10 Aug. 2015, at B4.

Meanwhile, the word with which *demean* was confused in arriving at its popular meaning—*bemean* (= to degrade)—has become obsolete.

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demean for *debase* or degrade (oneself): Stage 5
demesne (= at common law, a lord’s land held as his absolute property and not as feudal property through a superior) is pronounced either /di-ˈmēn/ or /di-ˈmeyn/. Today in AmE, unless the word appears in a historical context, it is usually either figurative (as in the first two examples) or jocular (as in the third)—e.g.:

- “Describing Heaney as ‘the greatest Irish poet since Yeats,’ critic and Harvard professor Helen Vendler said, ‘it is entirely fitting that Seamus should be in the demesne of Homer when this news arrives. He writes with equal attention to the poetic and human law.’” Patti Hartigan, “Irish Poet, Harvard Teacher Seamus Heaney Wins Nobel,” *Boston Globe*, 6 Oct. 1995, at 1. (Vendler echoes Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” which refers to a poetic realm of gold “that deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne.”)
- “On one side of the drape is the *demesne* of Western medicine . . . . On the other side of the drape, another pair of hands are at work.” George Howe Colt, “See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me, Heal Me,” *Life*, Sept. 1996, at 34.

But in BrE, the word retains its literal sense, especially in reference to land within a large estate—e.g.:

- “For sheer pathos there is nothing to equal Wanda Ryan Smolin’s article on that exquisite rural *demesne* Killua Castle in Westmeath, the onetime home of the Chapmans of Lawrence of Arabia fame.” “A Splendid Ruin Brought to Life,” *Irish Times*, 20 Jan. 1996, at 15.
• “Lavinia, Dowager Marchioness of Cholmondeley, at whose demesne the sorry incident occurred, is understood to be mortified,” Walter Ellis, “Windsor Watch,” *Sunday Times* (London), 30 June 1996, Features §.


demi-. This prefix indicates that a thing is (1) half the size or quality of another (e.g., *demitasse* = a small cup for coffee), or (2) of inferior or less than full rank, size, or status (e.g., *demigod* = a less-important deity). It’s occasionally used pejoratively to belittle someone or something—e.g.: “On and on, painting Stalin a little taller, a bit more substantial, without a withered arm and never, ever with another Party leader, those fatuous demi-tyrants who sooner or later were erased from pictures and marched to a cell.” Martin Cruz Smith, *Tatiana* 20 (2013).

demise. See death.

democracy. This term, meaning literally “government by the people,” is often employed loosely, sometimes tendentiously and sometimes disingenuously (as when the post–World War II Soviet Union was referred to as a “democracy”). Originally a Greek term, democracy was understood by the Greeks very differently from the way we understand it today: Greek democracy was an institution limited to male clan members who were citizens; a huge population of slaves and other subordinated classes were disenfranchised. The same, of course, might be said of the United States before the abolition of slavery and before women gained the right to vote. Notions of democracy change with changing notions of who “the people” are. Throughout history, this term has gradually come to be more and more inclusive. See governmental forms.

**Democrat.** A. And democrat. The capital D distinguishes the sense “a member of the Democratic Party” from the broader sense, which is denoted by a lowercase d.

B. Democrat(ic), adj. During much of the late 20th century, Republicans were fairly successful in denigrating the noun Democrat, which often appeared in such phrases as tax-and-spend Democrats and big-spending Democrats. Interestingly, though, the adjective Democratic didn’t undergo this depreciation in meaning. In the 1980s and 1990s, therefore, some Republicans preferred to refer to the *Democrat Convention* as opposed to the *Democratic Convention*. The former suggests something like a drunken party, whereas the latter suggests dignified proceedings.

The usage has continued, with typical reference to the *Democrat Party* from its GOP opponents, and occasionally in the press—e.g.:


In politics, of course, this type of semantic jockeying is a practice without end, as this columnist well knows: “Talk radio is rewriting the political language. . . . Environmentalists are wackos. The Democratic Party is the *Democrat* Party. Taxation is theft.” Tom Teepen, “Talk Radio Isn’t Just Talk,” *Chatanooga Times/Chattanooga Free Press*, 29 Nov. 2002, at B8. And if Republic could somehow be loaded with pejorative connotations, you can be sure the Democrats wouldn’t hesitate to do so.

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*Democrat Party for Democratic Party: Stage 2 Current ratio (Democratic Party vs. *Democrat Party*): 31:1

demon. See daemon.

demonic; demoniac; *demoniacal*. The two primary words are fiendishly close in meaning. *Demonic* /di-mon-ik/ = (1) of, relating to, or involving a demon <demonic beings>; (2) savagely wild and cruel <demonic cackling over the bloodshed>. *Demoniac* /demon-ik/ = as if possessed by or influenced by a demon; uncontrolled and evil <now confesses to a more or less demoniac adolescence>. In some of its uses, demoniac verges on the senses of demonic, which has grown dramatically in frequency of use since the 1930s. Before that time, demoniac was the most frequent of all the terms. *Demoniacal* is a need- less variant of demoniac; as between these two, the shorter demoniac has predominated in World English since the 18th century.

demonstrable /di-mon-strә-bal/ is the word, not *demonstratable*, a needless variant—e.g.:

• “On the issue of funding, there is a very strong, statistically demonstrable [read demonstrable] correlation between the quality of a public university and the extent to which it is supported by the state.” G.A. Clark, “Low Pay for Professors Devastates State Schools,” *Ariz. Republic/Phoenix Gaz.*, 29 Mar. 1995, Tempe Community §, at 4.


• “In some cases, she said, she gives herself a challenge. For example, can she come up with a skill-and-action game that’s fast-paced and demonstrable [read demonstrable] on TV?” Don Dodson, “Woman Creates Children’s Games,” *Courier* (Lincoln, Ill.), 25 May 2012, at 6.

See -ABLE (D) & -ATABLE.

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*demonstrable* for demonstrable: Stage 1 Current ratio (demonstrable vs. *demonstratable*): 341:1
demur; demure. Demur, v.i., = (1) to object; take exception; or (2) to hesitate or decline because of doubts. Although sense 2 is labeled archaic in W11 and the COD, it appears with great frequency in AmE—e.g.:  

- “When offered payment for this essential service, Waterhouse demurred, suggesting instead the payment be used to fund an underprivileged child’s attendance at Collier Services’ summer camp.” “Stepping Out,” Ashby Park Press (Neptune, N.J.), 1 Sept. 1996, at D6.  
- “Clarke lobbied the USTA for a 90-and-over group, and when the organization demurred he organized his own annual round-robin event.” Dyke Hendrickson, “Maine Seniors Flock to Games,” Portland Press Herald, 1 Sept. 1996, at D11.  

Demure is the adjective meaning (1) “reserved, modest;” or (2) “coy in an affected way.” Sense 1 is somewhat more usual—e.g.:  

- “A luminous beauty, both sensuous and demure, she [Ingrid Bergman] was a star for more than 40 years.” Jane Summer, “Jane Summer’s Picks & Pans,” Dallas Morning News, 25 Aug. 1996, Television §, at 43.  

The words are also confused in speech, when demure /di-ˈmyuər/ is said instead of demur /di-ˈmůr/.  

DENIZEN LABELS. What do you call someone from ——? Often that’s not an easy question to answer, whether it’s a city, state, province, or country. Anyone who lives in Columbus, Ohio—or the other Columbuses in Georgia, Indiana, and Nebraska—is called a Columbusite. But someone from the small town of Columbus, Mississippi, is called a Columbian. Those inconsistencies can be a little confusing, but at least they’re undisputed within a given locale.  

Sometimes the authorities can’t agree about a single locale. Someone from Michigan (formally or by statute) called a Michiganan—but many Michiganders prefer to be called Michiganders. Almost no Michigarians want to be called *Michiganites, but the United States Government Printing Office (which puts out a style manual) specifies *Michiganite. Best for Michiganders and others to follow the law or local preference—not what some stylesheet-writer in Washington says.  

Loose guidelines exist for naming denizens. George R. Stewart, a historian and onomastician, developed seven main guidelines—what H.L. Mencken called “Stewart’s Laws of Municipal Onomastics”—that were cited in the best up-to-date work on this subject, Paul Dickson’s Labels for Locals (1997). Here they are: (1) If the place name ends in -a or -ia, add -n <Alaska, Alaskan> <California, Californian>. (2) If the name ends in -i or a sounded -e, add -an <Hawaii, Hawaiian> <Albuquerque, Albuquerquean>. (3) If the name ends in -on, add -ian <Oregon, Oregonian>. (4) If the name ends in -y, change the -y to an -i and add -an <Albany, Albanian>. (5) If the name ends in -o, add -an <Chicago, Chica goan>. (6) If the name ends in a consonant or a silent -e, add either -ite or -er, depending on euphony <Maine, Mainier> <New Hampshire, New Hampshirite>. (7) If the name ends in -polis, change that to -opolitan <Minneapolis, Minneapolitan>.

What follows are some of the less obvious denizen labels, also known as “demonyms,” in places overriding Dickson’s preferences because additional research showed this to be necessary.

States  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Denizen Labels</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>Alabamian, *Alabaman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>Alaskan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Arizonan, *Arizonian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>Arkansan, Arkie, *Arkansayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>Californian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Coloradan, Coloradoan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Connecticut | Nutmegger, Connecticut | (USGPO)  
| Delaware    | Delawarean             |  
| Florida     | Floridian              |  
| Georgia     | Georgian               |  
| Hawaii      | Hawaiian               |  
| Idaho       | Idahoan                |  
| Illinois    | Illinoisan /il-ə-noy-an/ (pref. not *Illinoisan) |  
| Indiana     | Hoosier, Indianaan, *Indianian |  
| Iowa        | Iowan, *Iowegian      |  
| Kansas      | Kansan                 |  
| Kentucky    | Kentuckian             |  
| Louisiana   | Louisianian, *Louisian |  
| Maine       | Mainier                |  
| Maryland    | Marylander             |  
| Massachusetts| Bay Stater (by state law), Massachusettsan (USGPO) |  
| Michigan    | Michigander (by popular consensus), Michiganian (official), *Michiganite (rare, but recommended by USGPO) |  
| Minnesota   | Minnesotan             |  
| Mississippi | Mississippian          |  
| Missouri    | Missourian             |  
| Montana     | Montanan               |  
| Nebraska    | Nebraskan              |  
| Nevada      | Nevadan                |  
| New Hampshire| New Hampshirite        |  

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)  


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
New Jersey: New Jerseyan, New Jerseyite (USGPO)
New Mexico: New Mexican
New York: New Yorker
North Carolina: North Carolinian, Tarheel
North Dakota: North Dakotan
Ohio: Ohioan
Oklahoma: Oklahoman, Sooner, Okie
Oregon: Oregonian
Pennsylvania: Pennsylvanian
Rhode Island: Rhode Islander
South Carolina: South Carolinian
South Dakota: South Dakotan
Tennessee: Tennessean, *Tennesseean
Texas: Texan
Utah: Utahn (preferred), Utahan
Vermont: Vermonter
Virginia: Virginian
Washington: Washingtonian
West Virginia: West Virginian
Wisconsin: Wisconsinite
Wyoming: Wyomingite

U.S. Cities

Akron: Akronite
Albany: Albanian
Albuquerque: Albuquerquean, *Albuquerquean
Anchorage: Anchorageite, *Anchorageite
Annapolis: Annapolitan
Austin: Austinite
Baltimore: Baltimorean
Bellingham, Wash.: Bellinghamter
Boston: Bostonian
Buffalo: Buffalonian
Cambridge: Cantabrigian
Canton, Ohio: Cantonian
Chicago: Chicagoan
Cincinnati: Cincinnati
Cleveland: Clevelandan
Columbus (Ga., Ind., Neb., Ohio): Columbusite
Columbus (Miss.): Columbian
Corpus Christi: Corpus Christian (/kris-tee-an/)
Detroit: Detroiter
District of Columbia: Washingtonian
Dodge City: Dodge Citian
El Paso: El Pasoan
Fairbanks: Fairbanksan, Fairbanksian
Fort Worth: Fort Worthian, *Fort Worther
Grand Rapids: Grand Rapidian
Greensboro, N.C.: Greensburgher
Hanover, Pa.: Hanoverian
Harrisburg: Harrisburger
Honolulu: Hawaiian
Houston: Houstonian
Independence, Mo.: Independent
Indianapolis: Indianapolis
Jackson: Jacksonian
Jersey City: Jersey Cityite
Kansas City: Kansas Citian
Knoxville: Knoxvilleian
Las Cruces: Crucen (/kroo-san/)
Las Vegas: Las Vegan
Lawrence, Kan.: Lawrentian (/la-ren-shan/)
Lawrence, Mass.: Lawrencian (/la-ren-shan/)
Lebanon, Pa.: Lebanonian
Los Angeles: Angeleno, *Los Angelean
Louisville: Louisvillian
Madison: Madisonian
Manhattan (N.Y. or Kan.): Manhattanite
Mai: Maiuan
Memphis: Memphian
Miami: Miamian
Milwaukee: Milwaukeean
Minneapolis: Minneapolisian
Nashville: Nashvillian
Newark: Newarker
New York City: New Yorker
Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Citian, *Oklahoma Cityan
Omaha: Omaha
Palm Beach: Palm Beacher
Pensacola: Pensacolian
Philadelphia: Philadelphia
Phoenix: Phoenician
Pittsburgh: Pittsburgher, *Pittsburger
Pontiac: Pontiacker
Portland: Portlander
Princeton: Princetonian
Providence: Providentian
Sacramento: Sacramentoan
Saginaw: Saginawian
Salt Lake City: Salt Laker
San Antonio: San Antonian
San Diego: San Diegan
San Francisco: San Franciscoan
San Jose: San Josean
San Marino: San Marinian, *San Marinoite
Santa Fe: Santa Fean
Saratoga Springs: Saratogian
Saugus: Saugonian
Sault Sainte Marie: Sooite
Savannah: Savannahian
Schenectady: Schenectadian
Seattle: Seattleite, *Seattleite
Shreveport: Shreveporter
Spokane: Spokane
St. Louis: St. Louisian
St. Paul: St. Paulite
Tallahassee: Tallahasseean
Tampa: Tampan
Taos: Taosino
Troy: Trojan
Twin Cities: Twin Citian
Wilkes-Barre: Wilkes-Barrean
Williamsport: Williamsporter

Countries

Afghanistan: Afghan
Argentina: Argentine, *Argentinian
Azerbaijan: Azerbaijani
Bahamas: Bahamian
Belarus: Belarusan, *Belarusian
Belgium: Belgian
Cayman Islands: Caymanian, Cayman Islander
China: Chinese
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**Foreign Cities and Regions**

- Alberta, Canada
- Amsterdam, the Netherlands
- Athens, Greece
- Baghdad, Iraq
- Bangkok, Thailand
- Béarn, France
- Beijing, China

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l-li.)

- **Stage 1**: Rejected
- **Stage 2**: Widely shunned
- **Stage 3**: Widespread but . . .
- **Stage 4**: Ubiquitous but . . .
- **Stage 5**: Fully accepted

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
Belgrade, Yugoslavia Belgrader 
Berlin, Germany Berliner 
Berna, Switzerland Bernese 
Birmingham, England Brummie 
Bogotá, Colombia Bogotano 
Bologna, Italy Bolognese 
Bordeaux, France Bordelais 
British Columbia, Canada British Columbian 
Brussels, Belgium Bruxellois 
Budapest, Hungary Budapesti 
Buenos Aires, Argentina Porteño 
Cairo, Egypt Cairene 
Cambridge, England Cantabrigian 
Canton, China Cantonese 
Cheshire, England Cestrian 
Copenhagen, Denmark Copenhagener 
Cork, Ireland Corkonian 
Cornwall, England Cornish 
Devonshire, England Devonian 
Dijon, France Dijon, Dijonnais 
Dublin, Ireland Dubliner 
Dundee, Scotland Dundonian 
Edinburgh, Scotland Edinburger 
Exeter, England Exonian 
Flanders, Belgium Flemish 
Florence, Italy Florentine 
Fontainebleau, France Bellifontain 
Geneva, Switzerland Genevan, Genevese 
Genoa, Italy Genovese Genoan 
Glasgow, Scotland Glaswegian 
The Hague, Netherlands Hagaenar 
Halifax, Nova Scotia Haligonian 
Hamburg, Germany Hamburger 
Hampshire, England Hantsian 
Hanover, Germany Hanoverian 
Havana, Cuba Havan 
Helsinki, Finland Helsinkian 
Hong Kong, China Hong Konger, Hong Kong, Han 
Isle of Man, England Manx 
Isle of Wight, England Vectian 
Istanbul, Turkey Istanbulite, Istanbullu 
Jerusalem, Israel Jerusalemite 
Johannesburg, S. Africa Johannesburger 
Lima, Peru Limo 
Lisbon, Portugal Lisboan 
Liverpool, England Liverpoolian 
London, England Londoner 
Lyons, France Lyonnais 
Madrid, Spain Madrileno 
Majorca, Spain Majorcan 
Manchester, England Mancunian 
Manila, Philippines Manila 
Manitoba, Canada Manitoban 
Melbourne, Australia Melburnian 
Metz, France Messin 
Mexico City, Mexico Chilango 
Milan, Italy Milanese 
Montenegro, Muscovite 
Naples, Italy Neapolitan 
Nazareth, Israel Nazaren 
New Brunswick, Canada New Brunswicker 
Newcastle, Australia Novocastrian 
Newcastle, England Geordie 
Newfoundland, Canada Newfoundlander, Newfie 
New South Wales, Australia Niçois 
Nice, France North Anglian 
New South Welshman Northumbrian 
England Nova Scotian Nova Scotian 
Ontario, Canada Ontarian 
Oxford, England Oxonian 
Paris, France Parisian 
Prague, Czech Republic Prague 
Prince Edward Island, Canada Prince Edward Islander 
Quebec, Canada Quebecer 
Quito, Ecuador Quiteño 
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil Carioca 
Rome, Italy Roman 
Saint-Cloud, France Cloadoaldien 
Salzburg, Austria Salzburger 
San Juan, Puerto Rico Santjuanero 
Santiago, Chile Santiaguino 
Sao Paulo, Brazil Paulista 
Saskatchewan, Canada Saskatchewanian 
Serbia, Yugoslavia Serb 
Shanghai, China Shanghailander 
Shropshire, England Salopian 
Shropshire, England Cruzan 
South, China Shanghailander 
Stockholm, Sweden Stockholmer 
St. Petersburg, Russia St. Petersburger 
Stratford-on-Avon, England Stratfordian 
Sydney, Australia Sydneysid 
Tangier, Morocco Tangerine 
Tasmania, Australia Tasmanian 
Teheran, Iran Tehranian 
Tel Aviv, Israel Tel Avivian 
Tokyo, Japan Tokyoite 
Toronto, Canada Torontoian 
Tripoli, Libya Tripolitan 
Trois-Rivieres, Canada Trilluvian 
Vancouver, Canada Vancouverite 
Venice, Italy Venetian 
Verona, Italy Venetian 
Vienna, Austria Viennese 
Winnipeg, Canada Winnipegger 

**denote** (= to indicate) for **denominate** (= to assign a name) is a common error—e.g.: “Teenagers whose parents are home at what the researchers denoted ‘key times’—in the morning, after school, at dinner and at bedtime—are less likely to smoke, to drink or to use marijuana.”


For the difference between denote and connote, see connote.

**Language-Change Index**

**denote** misused for **denominate**: Stage 1

**denounce; renounce. Denounce** = (1) to condemn openly or publicly; (2) to accuse formally; or (3) to formally announce the termination of (a treaty or pact). Sense 1 is most common—e.g.:
“Jack Kemp and I will use the White House as a bully pulpit to denounce both drug use and the pushers who sell the poison.” Bob Dole, “One-on-One with the Candidates,” USA Today, 23 Sept. 1996, at A10.

“Alas, a new study (which Mr. Pa denounces) suggests that the vaccine is useless.” “Drug Firms; Limited Imagination,” Economist, 28 Sept. 1996, at 80.

Renounce = (1) to give up or relinquish, esp. by formal announcement; or (2) to reject or disown. Both senses of this word are common.


Some writers use denounce when they mean renounce—e.g.:

Language-Change Index

denounce misused for renounce: Stage 2

*denunciation. See denunciation.

dentifrice (an old-fashioned, rather fancy word for “toothpaste”) is so spelled—not (through metathesis) *dentifrice. E.g.: “In children, this condition [fluorosis] has been associated with fluoride supplements, formulas containing fluoride, and fluoride dentifices [read dentifices]!” Olga M. Sanchez, “Anticipatory Guidance in Infant Oral Health,” Am. Family Physician, 1 Jan. 2000, at 115. The word is rarely used outside medical and dental contexts.

Language-Change Index

dentifrice misspelled *dentifrice: Stage 1

Current ratio: 21:1

denunciation; *denunciation. The latter has been a needlessly variant since the 16th century.

deny (= to declare untrue; repudiate; refuse to recognize or acknowledge) is sometimes misused for refuse or decline. These words are synonymous in certain constructions, such as He was denied (or refused) this. But in modern usage refuse or decline properly precedes an infinitive, whereas with deny this construction is an archaism—e.g.: "Zimmerman moved that Harmon dismiss herself. She denied [read declined] to do so stating, among other things, that the motion should have been filed much earlier.” Deborah Tedford, "Judge Contests 'Impropriety' Finding of Appellate Court,” Houston Chron., 18 Apr. 1995, at 12.

Language-Change Index
deny misused for decline: Stage 1

depart. This is a formal word typical of airlines and officialese. In traditional idiom, one departs from a place. But today many writers ill-advisedly drop the from. That is, depart has become an ergative verb: though the word has traditionally been intransitive, writers are now making it transitive. The OED calls this usage “rare” except in the phrase depart this life. The resurgence may have begun among headline writers—e.g.: “Lane Departs City Hall,” Oregonian (Portland), 16 Oct. 2000, at E3. But it is spreading into usage more generally, especially in reference to local government—e.g.:

- “I’m wondering what 7.5 million New Yorkers will do when this strange man departs City Hall.” Joseph Dolman, “False Peace in City Hall Isn’t Good for City,” Newsday (N.Y.), 20 Sept. 2000, at A42.
- “Term limits may force them out of the City Council, but not all the members—or their staffs—will be departing city government.” Frankie Edozien, “Councilors Get New Lease on Political Life,” N.Y. Post, 20 Dec. 2001, at C14.

depend. This word typically takes on (or, less good, upon—see upon). When a clausal complement follows the verb, to omit the on is a casualism—e.g.:

- “It all depends when [read depends on when] the hardware gets delivered.” “Comcast to Offer Cable Modems,” Bus. J. (Sacramento), 26 May 2000, at 2.

In English-language print sources, the collocation depends on what is much more common than *depends what—and has steadily been more frequent since the early 18th century.

The truncated phrase that depends, without a complement, is often heard in conversation.

Language-Change Index

depend for depend on: Stage 2

Current ratio (depends on what vs. *depends what): 16:1

dependant. See dependent, n.

dependence; dependency. These variants have undergone differentiation. Dependence, more common
since the 16th century, is the general word meaning (1) "the quality or state of being dependent"; or (2) "reliance." Dependency is a geopolitical term meaning "a territory under the jurisdiction of, but not formally annexed by, a nation." (See territory.) These words are commonly misspelled *dependance* and *dependancy.*

Sometimes dependency is misused for dependence—e.g.: "Citing the Army's dependency [read dependence] on reservists, Mr. Cohen last month postponed a planned reduction of 25,000 Guard and Reservist positions, a 4 percent cut that would have saved $900 million over the next five years." Steven Lee Myers, "New Role of Guard Transforming Military," N.Y. Times, 24 Jan. 2000, at A1, A22.

Unfortunately, the distinction is not complete: dependency is the term for drug habituation as well. See addicted.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
dependency misused for dependence: Stage 2
dependent, adj. See addicted.
dependent, n.; dependant. For the noun, the older spelling is dependant. The OED notes: "from the 18th c. (like the adj.) spelt dependent, after L.; but the spelling -ant still predominates in the [noun]." W11 countenances -ent over -ant. The COD continues the Oxonian preference for -ant, noting that -ent is chiefly American. Certainly the British differentiation in spelling between the adjective and the noun is a useful one, but it remains tenuous in BrE. The AmE preference for -ent for both noun and adjective has been strong since 1950.

delep. This word, like enplane and reinplane, is characteristic of airlinese, a relatively new brand of jargon dating from the latter half of the 20th century. Careful writers and speakers stick to such time-honored expressions as get off, get on, and get on again.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
delep for get off (an airplane): Stage 4
deport; disport. Deport = (1) to behave (oneself); or (2) to banish, remove. Disport is a reflexive verb meaning (1) "to amuse (oneself)"; or (2) "to display (oneself) sportively." The two are sometimes confused—e.g.: "It is hard to believe that the same ensemble and conductor who disported [read deported or, better, comported] themselves in so perfunctory a fashion in a showcase tour are the personnel of this expansive, supple, disciplined and engrossing Sixth Symphony." Lawrence B. Johnson, "Classical Briefs," N.Y. Times, 22 Sept. 1996, § 2, at 40.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
disport misused for deport or comport: Stage 1
deportation; deport. Both derive ultimately from L. deportare (= to carry off, convey away), but to say that these words have undergone differentiation is a great understatement. Deportation = the act of removing a person to another country; the expulsion of an alien from a country <Baraca's deportation took only two months to process>. Deportment = the bearing, demeanor, or manners of a person <his deportment hardly suggests his regal lineage>.

Yet deportation is sometimes misused for deportation—e.g.: "Thurman supported measures that would . . . [m]ake it easier to deport criminal aliens after they serve their sentences and expand the number of crimes for which aliens risk deportation [read deportation]." Jim Ross, "Thurman Kept Contract with Her Constituents," St. Petersburg Times, 10 Apr. 1995, Hernando Times §, at 1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
department misused for deportation: Stage 1
depository; depository; *depositee. Most authorities have agreed through the years that depositary is the better term in reference to people with whom one leaves valuables or money for safekeeping and that depository is standard in reference to places. True, lawyers often refer to a depository bank, and this phrase has become common in legal parlance. But depository has continued to be used consistently for places—e.g.: "Cragg recounted how the central depository for stocks in India was recently robbed at gunpoint." Barry Strudwick & Chris Grant, "Investing Without Geographic Limits Leads Fund Manager to Odd Places," Daily Record, 19 Sept. 1996, at 7. Cf. repository.

*Depositee, a needless variant of depository, was popular for a time in the mid-19th century. E.g.: "Only Murrieta, at 22.7 percent, showed strong growth in bank deposits . . . Big Bear Lake was the top depositee [read depository] in San Bernardino County at $23,160." Andy McCue, "Latest Stats Reveal Facts About Region," Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 3 Sept. 2000, Bus. §, at 11.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
depositee for depository: Stage 1
Current ratio (depositaries vs. *depositees): 83:1
depot (=[1] a railway or bus station, [2] a place where buses are kept and repaired, or [3] a place where goods are stored until needed) is pronouned /dee-poh/ in AmE and /dep-oh/ in BrE.

depravity; depravation. Depravity is the condition of being corrupt or perverted—e.g.: "For much of the outside world, Barry's transition from prison inmate to Democratic mayoral nominee is fresh evidence of the depravities of life in the nation's capital." Howard Kurtz, "At the Post-Mortem, Media Examine Their Wounds," Wash. Post, 15 Sept. 1994, at C1.

The much rarer word depravation denotes the act or process of depraving or corrupting—e.g.: "In the candlelight of evening, the dirge-like chant of the book of Lamentations fills our sanctuaries, as we hear the horrors and depravations of humanity against humanity." Linda Joseph, "Tisha B'Av Recalls Calamity," Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale) (Boca Raton ed.), 12 July 2002, at 3. Cf. deprivation.
Depravation is fairly often misused where deprivation (= want; destitution) was intended—e.g.: “The painter, fond of all sorts of geometric shapes, used ladders repeatedly to represent hope and escape from social injustice and economic deprivation [read deprecation],” Ann Hicks, “Over the Line,” Greenville News (S.C.), 11 Aug. 2002, at E1. Both words denote hardships, but of a different sort.

**Language-Change Index**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>deprecate; deprecate. The first word has increasingly encroached on the figurative senses of the second, while the second has retreated into financial contexts. Deprecate means “to disapprove earnestly”—e.g.:</th>
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<td>“Well,’ he admitted, deprecatingly, ‘one can’t suppress one’s natural instincts altogether; even if one is reasoned self-interest are all the other way.’ ” Dorothy L. Sayers, Gaudy Night (1935) states that “De Quincey, Thomas (1785–1859). Although the Dictionary of National Biography (1917) states that “De Quincey himself wrote his name ‘de Quincey’ and</td>
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<td>“Ah, that was thirty-five years ago! Long before you were born, my dear!’ Herr Landauer shook his head deprecatingly, his boot-button eyes twinkling with benevolence: ‘Now I have not the time for such studies.’ ” Christopher Isherwood, The Berlin Stories 150 (1963).</td>
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<td>Depreciate, transitively, means “to belittle, disparage” ; and, intransitively, “to fall in value” (used in reference to assets or investments). The phrase self-deprecating is, literally speaking, a virtual impossibility, except perhaps for those suffering from extreme neuroses. Hence self-deprecating, with deprecate in its transitive sense, has historically been viewed as the correct phrase—e.g.:</td>
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<td>“You seem to take some special pleasure in making yourself the butt of your own peculiar sense of humor. . . . All day long the same thing. In some little way or other, everything is ironical, or self-deprecating.” Philip Roth, Portnoy’s Complaint 264 (1969).</td>
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<td>“In a characteristically self-deprecating moment, Romano says, ‘I was so nervous about my acting that I was surprised at how—I’ve got to phrase this just right—at how non-disappointed I was when I saw the pilot.’ ” James Endrst, “Everybody Loves Romano,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 15 Sept. 1996, at 4.</td>
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<td>Unfortunately, the form self-deprecating—despite its mistaken origins—is now nearly 25 times as common in print as self-deprecating. Speakers of AmE and BrE routinely use self-deprecating. However grudgingly, we must accord it to the status of standard English—e.g.:</td>
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<td>“Milken doesn’t drive himself much anymore, but he has a self-deprecating explanation for why that’s the case: He says he used to do so many things while driving that he kept having collisions.” Jeanie Russell Kasindorf, “What to Make of Mike,” Fortune, 30 Sept. 1996, at 86.</td>
</tr>
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| deprecatory; *deprecatory. Both mean either “declining in value” or “disparaging.” In both AmE and BrE, deprecatory is the predominant term—e.g.: “Try to find out what you mean—what you would go to the stake for—and put it down without frills or deprecatory gestures.” Jacques Barzun & Henry F. Graff, “Clear Sentences: Right Emphasis and Right Rhythm” (1957), in Perspectives on Style 3, 19 (Frederick Candelaria ed., 1968). *Deprecative might reasonably be labeled a needlessly variant. |
| Current ratio: 24:1 |
| deprivation; privation; *deprival. All three words mean “the action of depriving or taking away.” The words share that general sense as well as specific senses relating to the depriving of an office, position, or benefice. Deprivation is the usual word. Privation is the more literary word; its primary sense is “the lack of life’s ordinary amenities.” |
| *Deprival (noted in the OED in four 17th- and 19th-century examples) is merely a needlessly variant of deprivation. E.g.: “Confinement of investigation to physically based suffering does not . . . exclude measures such as starvation or deprival [read deprivation] of sleep.” James Heath, Torture and English Law 5 (1982). For the confusingly similar deprivation, see depravity. |

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| *deprival for deprivation: Stage 1 Current ratio (deprival vs. *deprival): 329:1 |
| depute, v.t.; deputize. To deputize is to delegate <these responsibilities she deputed to her agent>. To deputize is to make (another) one’s deputy <the sheriff then deputized four men who had offered to help in the search>. |

De Quincey, Thomas (1785–1859). Although the Dictionary of National Biography (1917) states that “De Quincey himself wrote his name ‘de Quincey’ and
would have catalogued it among the Q’s (vol. 5, at 835),
the long-established practice was to write De Quincey
and to catalogue it in the D’s. But when the revised edi-
tion was published in 2004 as the Oxford Dictionary of
National Biography, the entry appeared under Q (vol.
45, at 700) without so much as a cross-reference at
the appropriate place in D. The rewritten entry appears
under "Quincey, Thomas Penson De," and the name
throughout is written De Quincey.

de rigueur ( = proper; required by custom or etiquette)
is sometimes misspelled *de rigueur or *de riguer—e.g.:
• "If such affirmation of a transcendent order via the asser-
tion of human dignity is de rigueur [read de riguer]
for tragedy, Timon does not qualify." Rolf Soellner, Timon of
Athens 22 (1979).
• I was tired of absorbing abuse while paying premium
prices and receiving less service and courtesy than are
de riguer [read de riguer] in most small towns." Susan D.
Haas, "Surry Hosts Want Traveling Wallets, Not Real Vis-
The phrase is pronounced /dә ri-gәr/.

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de riguer misspelled *de riguer or *de riguer: Stage 2
Current ratio (de riguer vs. *de riguer): 7:1
derivative; derogatory; *derivative. Derivative = scoffing;
expressing derision. Derisory = worthy of derision or
of being scoffed at. Although derivative and derisory
at one time overlapped and were frequently synony-
mous, the differentiation is now complete, and
using the two interchangeably is a mistake. *Deris-
ible—an uncommon word appearing more often in
BrE than in AmE—is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of derisory.
derogatory; *derogative. The first is standard. The
second has been a NEEDLESS VARIANT in all phases of
Modern English.
Current ratio: 66:1
derring-do (= daring action) derives, according to the
OED, from a “chain of misunderstandings and errors.”
Originally, the term was dorryng do, a verb phrase
meaning “daring to do.” A 16th-century misprint in
the poetry of John Lydgate (ca. 1370–1450) made it
derrryng do, which Spenser (1579) misunderstood and
used as a noun phrase meaning “manhood, chivalry.”
Then Sir Walter Scott popularized the phrase in Ivan-
hoe (1820) with the spelling derring-do, and this has
been the settled spelling ever since. But because of its
historical and modern associations with daring, writ-
ers often use the erroneous spelling *daring-do—e.g.:
• “A glimpse at Waters’ 1972 ‘Pink Flamingos’ is a surpris-
ing reminder that for all their scatological daring-do [read
derring-do], the Farrelly brothers are mainstream by com-
parison.” Sid Smith, "As Shock Cinema, ‘Mary’ Is No ‘Flam-
• “Instead, it is also called ‘Flower Flange’ and has more to
do with flowers than fighting and daring-do [read derring-
do].” Joe L. Rosson, “ ‘Dewey’ Glass Water Pitcher Patri-
• “They spent hours regaling themselves with their motor-
ized daring-do [read derring-do] while lakefront resi-
dents had to close windows and doors.” Mark McGarry,

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derring-do misspelled *daring-do: Stage 1
Current ratio: 16:1
derringer (= a small pistol) is so spelled even though
the person for whom it was named was Henry
Deringer (1786–1868), with only one -r-. Today
*derringer (sorry, Henry) is only a variant spelling, and
neither form is capitalized.

desalination; salinization. Desalination is the ben-
eficial process of removing salt from seawater (or
occasionally other salty water), rendering it potable.
Salinization (or occasionally salinisation in BrE) is
the harmful impact that concentrations of mineral
salts in groundwater have on arable land, potentially
rendering it barren. Oddly enough, *desalination
and *salination are NEEDLESS VARIANTS of the two
terms. Perhaps the anomalous differences in pre-
ferred forms are attributable to the fact that the terms
developed in different fields of study (water science
vs. agriculture). For whatever reason, desalination
is nine times as common in modern print sources as
its variants, while salinization is six times as com-
mon as its variants—including the first-recorded
form of that term, *salinification, which has all
but disappeared.
Current ratio (desalination vs. *desalination): 9:1
Current ratio (salinization vs. *salination): 6:1
descendant; *descendent. A majority of American
desktop dictionaries list descendant as the predomi-
nant spelling for the noun a generation of descen-
ts> and *descendent as the corresponding adjective
*a descendent line on the map from northwest to
southwest>. In fact, though, the spelling *descendent
is quite rare in comparison with -ant—even in adject-
ival uses—whether in AmE or in BrE. It is therefore
properly classifiable as a NEEDLESS VARIANT.
Descendant is sometimes misspelled by omitting
the -s-, perhaps from confusion with decedent—e.g.:
"I could also recall the fact that after all Frau Brock-
haus was a descendant [read descendent] of Richard
Wagner's." Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Reverberations
360 (Ruth Hein trans., 1989).

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descendant misspelled *descendent: Stage 2
Current ratio (descendant vs. *descendent): 8:1
descendible. Traditionally so spelled—not *descend-
able. (See -able (A).) But this creates something of
an anomaly because ascendable has long been pre-
ferred over *ascendible. Such are the vagaries of our
language.
Current ratio (descendible vs. *descendable): 13:1
descent /di-sent/ is often mispronounced /dee-sent/.
See PRONUNCIATION (B).

descry. See decry.
desegregation; integration. Although no distinction between a requirement of integration and a requirement of desegregation is ordinarily observed in legal usage, the distinction may be important in understanding the constitutional law of race and the schools. Certainly it would be useful, in reference to public schools in the United States, if we distinguished between court-ordered desegregation (= the abrogation of policies that segregate races into different institutions and facilities) and court-ordered integration (= the incorporation of different races into existing institutions for the purpose of achieving a racial balance).

desert, vb.; abandon, vb. You can either desert or abandon a place or a person, but only abandon works for plans or efforts. E.g.: “Attempts were also made to use the shredded currency as insulation, mattress filling, and ‘drilling mud’ for oil exploration, but again the material was not suitable and those efforts were deserted [read abandoned].” Calvin Sims, “In Recyling of Greenbacks, New Meaning for Old Money,” N.Y. Times, 22 May 1994, at 1, 12.

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desert misused for abandon: Stage 1

deserts. See just deserts.

deshabille. See dishabille.

desiccate. So spelled. See spelling (A).

desiderata (= things wanted or needed) is the plural form of desideratum—e.g.:


Although the plural is more common, the singular has many appropriate uses—e.g.:

- “However it is done, efficiency often leads to loss of another desideratum—the personal touch.” Pat Guiteras, “Health Care Changes Mean Few Doctors Do Duty at Office and Hospital,” Chapel Hill Herald, 18 Sept. 1996, at 5.

Some writers misuse desiderata as a singular—e.g.:

“The British were keen to secure a desideratum [read, perhaps, desideratum—or reword] in Arabia in view of Britain’s ‘special political interests’ in the region.” Clive Schofield, “Eritrea and Yemen at Odds in the Red Sea,” Jane’s Intelligence Rev., 1 June 1996, at 264.

The pronunciation is /da-sid-ə-ray-tə/ or /da-sid-ə-rah-tə/.

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desiderata misused as a singular: Stage 1
current ratio (a desideratum vs. * a desiderata): 93:1

desiderer. Designer, an agent noun dating from the mid-17th century, has three primary senses: (1) someone who designs or plans; (2) (archaic) a plotter against Christ; and (3) someone who makes an artistic plan or design for construction—and, by extension, someone who invents and markets fashionable clothing. Sense 3 gave rise, beginning in the 1960s, to attributive uses: designer scarves, designer labels, designer jeans. And soon, even things other than garments were tagged with this label: designer cars, designer houses, even designer water. In this vogueish use, the term is simply intended to connotate status and expense. But as the former editor of the OED said a couple of decades after designer this and that became all the rage, the attributive use looks as if it will be “staying around for a while.” Robert W. Burchfield, Points of View 126 (1992).

desirable; desirous. Desirable is used in reference to things or people that are desired. Desirous is used in reference to the desirer’s emotions. What is desirable is attractive and worth seeking; a desirous person is impelled by desire.


But even when desirable is correct, it usually appears in the wordy phrase (be) desirous of, which can be shortened to desire or want—e.g.:

- “But the competition should heat up as banks, eager to find a new source of loan earnings and desirous of [read desiring or wanting] improved Community Reinvestment Act ratings, plunge into this area.” James B. Arndorfer, “Banks Extending Reach to Compete with Nonbanks,” Am. Banker, 26 Aug. 1996, at 10.
- “Obama is gambling that the dynamics of Iranian domestic politics—a young population more desirous of [read interested in] enjoying the fruits of modernity than in pursuing a revolutionary Islamist agenda—will result in Iran choosing ultimately to play a responsible and stabilizing role rather than an irresponsible and destabilizing one.” Andrew J. Bacevich, “A Deal to Reboot Mideast Policy?” L.A. Times, 7 Aug. 2015, at 15. (On Iran choosing vs. Iran’s choosing, see fused participles.)

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desirous misused for desirable: Stage 1

desist, a formal word for stop or leave off, is usually followed by the preposition from or (less commonly) in—e.g.: “Clinton told congressional leaders that he has sent a written warning to Saddam through the Iraqi

desistance—not *desistence—is the noun corresponding to desist, vb.

Des Moines (the city in Iowa) is pronounced /da ˈmoɪn/—and no other way.

despair, v.i., takes the preposition of <she despairs of his inability to drive>.

*despatch. See dispatch.

desperado (= a violent criminal not afraid of danger) predominantly forms the plural desperadoes—not *desperados. See PLURALS (d).

despite; in spite of. The two are almost always interchangeable. The compactness of despite recommends it, and it has greatly predominated in AmE and BrE print sources since the early 1950s.

despoliation; *despoilment. See spoliation.

despot (= a cruel and unfair ruler) is pronounced /ˈdespət/—preferably not /ˈdespət/.

destination. This word commonly appears in two supposed redundancies—final destination and ultimate destination. But neither phrase is necessarily redundant. If a shipment has a series of stops or transfers—i.e., a series of “immediate destinations”—it may have a final or ultimate destination. You might be on your way to Hong Kong, with a stopover in Tokyo. If someone in the airport asked about your destination, you might characterize Tokyo as the immediate destination (i.e., the destination of that particular flight) and Hong Kong as the ultimate destination (the destination of the entire trip). See REDUNDANCY.

Yet the phrase final destination or ultimate destination should not be used (as it commonly is) in contexts in which such specificity is not called for—e.g.: “Huard might have been born to be a quarterback. He might have been raised to be a quarterback. He might have dreamed of being an NFL quarterback. But it is Holmgren who can push him to that final, ultimate destination [read destination or, better, goal].” Laura Vecsey, “Huard’s Future in Talented Hands,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 19 Apr. 1999, at E1. Cf. final outcome.

*destroyable. See destructible.

destruct, vb, originated in the 17th century as a NEEDLESS VARIANT of destroy. By the early 20th century, it had largely fallen into disuse. In the 1950s, however, the word arose once again—this time as a high-tech espionage term arrived at as a BACK-FORMATION from the noun destruction. Today, it is confined mostly to the phrase self-destruct.

destructible. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *destructible. See -ABLE (A). *Destroyable is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

desuetude (/dəˈswiːtəd/) is preferably pronounced /də-swiːtəd/—not /di-s[ə]ˈtiːd/.

desultory (= done without plan or purpose) is preferably pronounced /ˈdes-əl-tər-ee/ or /ˈdez-əl-tər-ee/—not /ˈdi-ətər-əl/.

*detainment; *detainal. See detention.

detectable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *detectible. See -ABLE (A).

detector; *detecter. The former spelling is standard in AmE and BrE alike. See -ER (A).

détente /dəˈtænt/ (/= a period in which two countries with strained relations relax the tensions between them) is typically so written, with the acute accent but in roman type (not italic). See DIACRITICAL MARKS.

detention; *detainment; *detainal. Detention = holding in custody; confinement; compulsory delay. *Detainment and *detainal are NEEDLESS VARIANTS.

deterrence. See -er (a).

determinable = (1) capable of being ascertained; or (2) liable to be cut short. The first is the general sense; the second is a term of art in law.

determinacy (= the quality of having fixed rules or being definitely settled), the correct form, is sometimes incorrectly rendered *determinacy, perhaps under the influence of such words as permanency—e.g.: “Economic determinacy [read determinacy] . . . is a simplistic and reductionist approach to explaining international relations,” Burdin H. Hickock, “Foreign Policy,” Policy Rev., Winter 1982, at 3.

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determinacy misspelled *determinacy: Stage 1
Current ratio: 63:1

determinant. See determiner.

determinately; determinedly. Determinately (= conclusively, definitively) is sometimes misused for determinedly (= with firm resolve or strong willpower)—e.g.: “Amid the bloody civil war, with Luanda beleaguered by the Popular Movement’s enemies to the north and the south, Neto determinedly [read determinedly] took the oath of office as president of the first independent government of Angola in a stuffy second-floor room of Luanda’s city hall.” Caryle Murphy, “Rebel Poet-Doctor,” Wash. Post, 12 Sept. 1979, at A22.
fatalism. determinism. See determinism.

For a similar problem with *determine if*, see doubt (A).

For a similar problem with *deviant*, see deviance; *deviantly*. See deviation.

deviant; deviate. A. As Adjectives. Deviant is normal. The first edition of the OED (1933) labeled both these adjectives "obsolete" and "rare." The OED Supp. (1972) deleted the tag on deviant and cited many examples in the sense “deviating from normal social standards or behavior.” The word is common—e.g.: “He wasn’t a young rebel, deviant, troubled or neurotic, didn’t die early and wasn’t weirdly erotic.” James Warren, “America’s Love, and Need, for the Duke,” Chicago Trib., 16 Aug. 1996, Tempo §, at 3.
deviation

- “However, [the drug] does not change an abuser’s pro-
- “Only the faintest electronic hum, audible to dogs and superhumans, suggested his deviant handiwork.” Jeff Tur-

Although deviant is the predominant adjective, it has had to compete—unfortunately—with deviate. The latter, a needless variant of deviant, is common in AmE—e.g.: “Nora Mae Roberts is charged with one count of first-degree violation of a minor, involving alleged intercourse or deviate [read deviant] sex with a 17-year-old boy.” Mike Rodman, “Ex-Girls’ Basketball Coach Pleads Guilty to Sexually Violating 3 Players,” Ark. Democrat-Gaz., 15 Feb. 1995, at B1.

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**deviate** used as an adjective in place of **deviant**

**Stage 1**

**Current ratio** (deviant behavior vs. *deviate* behavior): 185:1

**B. As Nouns.** Both deviate and deviant are used as (generally pejorative) nouns meaning “a person who, or thing which, deviates, esp. from normal social standards or behavior; specif., a sexual pervert” (**OED**). Although the two forms are both common, the noun deviant, as in sexual deviant, has predominated as a matter of word frequency since about 1970. Devi-
ant has the advantage of deriving from the preferred adjective. (See FUNCTIONAL SHIFT.) All in all, deviate is best reserved for its verb function.

A few writers use *deviationist*, but that word is uncommon and ungainly enough to be labeled a need-
less variant.

**Current ratio** (sexual deviant vs. *sexual deviate): 5:1

**deviation; deviance; *deviancy.** The general term for “an act or instance of deviating” is deviation <a ship’s deviation from its voyage route <deviation from orthodox religion>. Deviation is more neutral in connotation than deviance, which means “the qual-
ity or state of deviating from established norms, esp. in social customs.” *Deviancy* is a needless variant.

**Current ratio** (deviance vs. *deviancy): 10:1

**device; devise.** Device, n., = (1) something devised; or (2) a mechanical or electronic invention. Devise is predominantly a verb meaning “to invent or innovate.”

Often, though, devise is used when device is the intended word—e.g.: “Jeremiah Wood, 6, was hurt Friday evening when he fell off the fender of a tractor driven by a relative and was struck by a brush hog, a mechanical devise [read device] used for chopping weeds.” Judith VandeWater, “Two Boys Are Injured in Separate Accidents over Weekend While Visiting,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 4 June 1996, at 1.

As a legal term, devise is sometimes used as a noun meaning “a gift of property by will.”

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**devise** misused for device: Stage 1

**Current ratio** (ingenious device vs. *ingenious devise): 749:1

deviltry; devilry. Since the early 1800s, deviltry has predominated in AmE, devilry in BrE. But both words commonly appear in both varieties. One possible dis-
tinction between the two forms is that deviltry seems to denote a less serious type of mischief—e.g.: “When it debuted during the grim depths of the war, Coward’s comedy of death and spiritualist deviltry drew some criticism as inappropriately morbid for the tough times.” Joan Bunke, “At the Guthrie,” Des Moines Reg.
ister, 28 Sept. 1997, at 5. In the interests of DIFFER-
ENTIATION, the distinction ought to be encouraged. But see daredevilry.

devisability; divisibility. The former means specifically “the capability of being given in a will”; the latter, much more common, means “the capability of being divided.”

devise. See device.

deviser; deviser; divisor. A deviser is someone who invents or contrives. A deviser is someone who dis-
poses of property (usually land) by will. Divisor is a mathematical term referring to the number by which another number is divided. All three are pronounced /di-\-vi-zer/. 

devoid, a variant of void, adj., is current only in the idiom devoid of—e.g.: 
- “If voters opt for the elected board, which was drenched in politics and devoid of educational inspiration, many of Payzant’s reforms could come undone.” “Class in Session,” Boston Globe, 29 Aug. 1996, at A24.

Because this phrase is a favorite of hyperbolists, it should be used cautiously.

To couple this adjective with the adverb totally or completely is to produce an extremely common REDUNDANCY, since devoid is an absolute adjective. (See ADJECTIVES (b).) E.g.: 
- “Bursting with excess pride, and totally devoid [read devoid] of taste or restraint, Mother Ginger harbors a legion of future narcissists who will spend their lives seeking the appreciative applause so reliably delivered by ‘Nutcracker’ audiences,” Barbara Gilford, “At the Heart of ‘The Nutcracker,’ ” N.Y. Times, 4 Dec. 1994, at 22.

devotee. See -ee.

dexterous; *dextrous; dextral. Dexterous, the preferred spelling in both AmE and BrE, means “clever, adept, skillful, artful.” The spelling *dextrous* pre-
dominated in BrE through the late 18th century but has waned drastically in print sources since about
1800. \textit{Dextral} means "on the right; right-handed." See \textit{ambidextrous}.

Current ratio (\textit{dexterous} vs. \#\textit{dextrous}): 6:1

diabetes is pronounced either /\textipa{/dt-/a-/bee-\textipa{tiee}/ or /\textipa{/dt-/a-/bee-\textipa{tiee}/.

diachronic; \textit{synchronic}. A \textit{diachronic} study is concerned with changes during a (usually specified) period of time. A \textit{synchronic} study is concerned with the state of a subject at a given time, without reference to its historical antecedents.

\textbf{Diachronic Marks}, also known as "diacritics," are orthographical marks that indicate a special phonetic quality for a given character. They occur mostly in foreign languages. But in English a fair number of imported terms have diacritical marks. Sometimes they survive indefinitely, but often they fall into disuse as terms are fully naturalized. (See \textit{Garnier's Law}.) Nobody today, for example, writes \textit{hôtel}.


Stage 1: Rejected. Stage 2: Widely shunned. Stage 3: Widespread but ... Stage 4: Ubiquitous but ... Stage 5: Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

One well-known publication, \textit{The New Yorker}, has the notable idiosyncrasy of using diacritical marks that most publications have abandoned, especially the diaeresis in place of old-fashioned hyphens (or nothing at all). While most American dictionaries recommend \textit{cooperate}, \textit{The New Yorker} insists on \textit{cooperate}—e.g.: "I think if people are open and \textit{cooperate} you get there faster." Ken Auletta, \"Beauty and the Beast,\" \textit{New Yorker}, 16 Dec. 2002, at 65, 70. Other examples of the diaeresis emerge frequently in that magazine—e.g.:

- "The postmodern enterprise was even more radical: to resist absorption or \textit{coop}tation by an all-absorbing, all-\textit{coop}ting System." Jonathan Franzen, \"Mr. Difficult,\" \textit{New Yorker}, 30 Sept. 2002, at 100, 108.
- "This was when vodka acquired its long-term \textit{doppelgänger—home brew.}" Victor Erofeev, \"The Russian God,\" \textit{New Yorker}, 16 Dec. 2002, at 56, 58.
- "Optimistic but never \textit{naivé}, she was tough and comforting at the same time." Roger Angell, \"Anna Hamburger,\" \textit{New Yorker}, 16 Dec. 2002, at 40.
- "Forget superheroes, or the \textit{re}emergence of wizards with beards down to their belts." Anthony Lane, \"Looking Back,\" \textit{New Yorker}, 16 Dec. 2002, at 106.
- "He has \textit{re}established his bona fides with the heart of the Party." Jeffrey Toobin, \"Candide,\" \textit{New Yorker}, 16 Dec. 2002, at 42, 43.

This house style is out of step with general American usage.

After fretting over when and how often to use diacritical marks, one can sympathize with the mid-20th-century views of Simeon Potter: "By great good fortune English spelling has escaped those tiresome diacritical marks placed above, beneath, before or after the letter, or inserted within it, which in a greater or less degree disfigure French, German, Italian, Spanish, Czech (solely the work of Jan Hus), Polish, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, and even modern Turkish (unadvisedly introduced by Kemal Atatürk)." \textit{Our Language} 73 (rev. ed. 1966).
diaeresis, *dieresis. Although American dictionaries can be found supporting both spellings, occurrences of diaeresis in print outnumber the competing form by a wide margin. See ae, diacritical marks & umlaut. Current ratio: 4:1

diagnose = to identify, esp. a disease or problem. Strictly speaking, it is the disease or problem that is diagnosed, e.g.: "Eichelman went to the doctor, who didn't diagnose the broken bone and told the swimmer he would be back in the pool in a few days." Jason L. Young, "Senior Is Eager to Make Up for Lost Season," Indianapolis Star, 7 Dec. 2002, at S4.

It is a common error to make the object of this verb the patient rather than the disease—e.g.: "She helped with his story to raise awareness about Chiari, especially so doctors could diagnose its victims [read diagnose it] earlier." Jennifer Berry Hawes, "Enduring Together," Post & Courier (Charleston, S.C.), 1 Dec. 2002, at G1. It is much more common to see the passive construction followed by a with-phrase—e.g.: "It took a full two weeks before Epps was diagnosed with West Nile Virus." Charity Vogel, "When a Virus Kills," Buffalo News, 2 Oct. 2002, at B1. This idiomatic syntax is too common to be called erroneous, though a careful writer will still avoid it in formal writing. It also acquires itself of logical fault by lending rhetorical punch, since the name of the disease falls at the end of the sentence. See sentence ends.

For more on the formation of this verb from the noun diagnosis, see back-formations.

diagnosis; prognosis. There is an important distinction between these words. A diagnosis is an analysis of one's present bodily condition with reference to disease or disorder. A prognosis is the projected future course of a present disease, disorder, or other disadvantageous situation. E.g.: "Mr. Yeltsin did not specify his diagnosis or the type of procedure he will undergo, making it difficult to comment about his prognosis, the American doctors said." Lawrence K. Altman, "Russia's Top-Flight Cardiology Hospital," N.Y. Times, 6 Sept. 1996, at A6. See prognosis.

The plurals are diagnoses and prognoses.

DIAGONAL. See punctuation (q).

diagram(m)er; diagram(m)ing. See program(m)er & spelling (b).

dial, vb., makes dialed and dialing in AmE, dialled and dialling in BrE. See spelling (b).

DIALECT. A. Definition. The term dialect has two main senses: (1) in the popular sense, it refers to any linguistic variety other than the standard language; (2) in the linguist's sense, it refers to any linguistic variety that is shared by a group of speakers, including the standard variety. Sense 1 tends to be a deprecatory label, since it applies chiefly to nonprestigious varieties; sense 2 tends to be neutral, since it applies to all varieties. To those who adhere to sense 1, standard dialect is an oxymoron; to those who adhere to sense 2, the phrase makes perfect sense.

Granting the utility of the dialectologist's sense 2, we have nonetheless adopted the popular sense for purposes of this book—though without denigrating the many nonstandard varieties that enrich the English language and its literature.

B. The Nature of Dialect. Dialects are mainly of two types: regional dialects and class dialects. Regional dialects result from geographic dispersion and settlement patterns. For the United States, the regional types have been carefully catalogued and charted in Frederic G. Cassidy and Joan Houston Hall's Dictionary of American Regional English. Class dialects can indicate upbringing or educational level, sometimes both. Over time, class dialects have eclipsed regional dialects in importance: "In the course of the history of the English language regional dialects have become less important as more and more speakers have learned to speak standard English, but class dialects have, for good or ill, become more important." G.L. Brook, A History of the English Language 14 (1958).

Because education typically entails the inculcation of standard language (as a result of both classroom learning and peer pressure, often more strongly the latter), what results is often a type of bidialectalism. As Otto Jespersen, one of the great linguists, put it: "People whose minds are awake and developed cannot be confined to a dialect." Mankind, Nation, and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View 71 (1946). So a person who grows up speaking dialect may later acquire standard English and be able to move comfortably into and out of the two linguistic varieties. This is known to linguists as "dialect-switching" or "code-switching."

No dialect is perfectly homogeneous, and it is difficult to separate regional from class dialects. Although regional variations exist in every social class (see class distinctions), these variations become less and less pronounced over the country as a whole toward the top of the social scale, where almost everyone speaks and writes a form of Standard English.

Dialectologists have arrived at two especially important conclusions. First, dialectal differences "arise not from mental or moral inferiority but from differences in cultural experience, and . . . the most divergent dialect, however ill-suited for middle-class conversation, has a dignity and beauty of its own." Raven I. McDavid Jr., "Dialect Differences and Social Differences," in Varieties of American English 34, 47 (Anwar S. Dil ed., 1980). Second, "anyone who cannot use the language habits in which the major affairs of the country are conducted, the language habits of the socially acceptable of most of our communities, would have a serious handicap." Charles Carpenter Fries, American English Grammar 13 (1940).

This book, of course, is principally about Standard English. So when the text says that a given usage is "erroneous" or "incorrect" or "not preferred," the judgment is expressed from the point of view of Standard
English. Dialectologists often point out that multiple negation ("I didn’t do nothin’") and similar departures from Standard English are perfectly appropriate to the dialects that are being spoken. That is true enough, but it is not particularly helpful to one who strives to learn and use Standard English. That this standard may have no intrinsic superiority to dialect is beside the point: it is the national standard and the international lingua franca. As Fries put it in 1940, with what some might today consider offensive indelicacy, it is the language used by the "socially acceptable."

Although some people regret the demise of dialects with the spread of Standard English, others are inclined to believe that this is a good thing. Otto Jespersen was among the latter: "If we think out logically and bravely what is for the good of society, our view of language will lead us to the conclusion that it is our duty to work in the direction which natural evolution has already taken, i.e. towards the diffusion of the common language at the cost of local dialects." Otto Jespersen, *Mankind, Nation, and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View* 72 (1946). On the other hand, dialects are surprisingly hardy and perennial, as other linguists have noted: "With monotonous regularity writers on dialect say that dialects are passing out of use and that it will soon be too late to record them, but if dialects are dying they are, like King Charles II, taking an unconscionable time about it." G.L. Brook, *A History of the English Language* 199 (1958).

C. Dialect Exemplified. There are several salient characteristics of dialect: mistakes with irregular verbs (see *irregular verbs*), subject–verb disagreement (see *subject–verb agreement*), misused pronouns (see *pronouns*), double negatives, nonstandard word choices, and stigmatized pronunciations (see *pronunciation*). The following examples, which can occur in the uneducated speech of virtually all ethnic groups, are a few of the many speech markers that typify dialect. Many of them are not strictly limited by geography within the United States; to determine geographic dispersion, one would have to consult any of the many linguistic atlases that pinpoint the degree of distribution.

**Mistakes with Irregular Verbs**
- **Dialect:** We haven’t drank any water yet. **Standard:** We haven’t drank any water yet.
- **Dialect:** She drug it all the way around the barn. **Standard:** She dragged it all the way around the barn.
- **Dialect:** I done it. But I shouldn’t have [or of] did it. **Standard:** I did it. But I shouldn’t have done it.
- **Dialect:** If I’d have [or I’d’ve or I’d of] been there, I’d have seen her. **Standard:** If I had been there, I’d have seen her.
- **Dialect:** I haven’t tooken anything that didn’t belong to me! **Standard:** I haven’t taken anything that didn’t belong to me!
- **Dialect:** I haven’t went there yet. **Standard:** I haven’t gone there yet.

**Subject–Verb Disagreement**
- **Dialect:** They was there because they was going home together. **Standard:** They were there because they were going home together.
- **Dialect:** She don’t know. **Standard:** She doesn’t know.
- **Dialect:** You wasn’t even there. **Standard:** You weren’t even there.

**Misused Pronouns**
- **Dialect:** Me and John are going now. **Standard:** John and I are going now.
- **Dialect:** It’s hisn. No, it’s ourn. **Standard:** It’s his. No, it’s ours.
- **Dialect:** Them books are good. **Standard:** Those books are good.

**Multiple Negation**
- **Dialect:** We don’t have no apples. **Standard:** We don’t have any apples.
- **Dialect:** He hadn’t done nothing wrong. **Standard:** He hasn’t done anything wrong.
- **Dialect:** It don’t make no never-mind. **Standard:** It doesn’t make any difference.

**Word Choice**
- **Dialect:** This here chili is too hot. **Standard:** This chili is too hot.
- **Dialect:** Where’s it at? **Standard:** Where is it?
- **Dialect:** My teacher learned me how to add. **Standard:** My teacher taught me how to add.
- **Dialect:** We don’t have no apples. **Standard:** We don’t have any apples.
- **Dialect:** Where’s it at? **Standard:** Where is it?
- **Dialect:** They was there because they was going home together. **Standard:** They were there because they were going home together.

**Pronunciations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Dialectal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>asked</td>
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<td>/ˈwɪn-dɔːr/</td>
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<tr>
<td>yellow</td>
<td>/ˈjɛl-ɔːr/</td>
<td>/ˈjɛl-ɔːr/ or /ˈjɛl-æt/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D. Bibliography. There is a rich body of literature on American, English, and other dialects. The following books make for a good starting point:
dialectal; dialectical; dialectic. These words are frequently confused. The adjective for dialect (=a regional variety of language) is dialectal (/dɪ-ə-lek-təl/). The adjective for dialectics (=the art of argument) is dialectical (/dɪ-ə-lek-ti-kəl/). Broadly speaking, dialectical means “of, relating to, or involving logical argument, historical development, or the resolution of contradictory ideas.” The term is usually confined to philosophical contexts.

The term dialectical is often misused for dialectal—e.g.:


Dialectic—a noun denoting the art of rigorously logical argumentation—is, when used as an adjective, a NEEDLESS VARIANT of dialectical.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

dialectal misused for dialectal: Stage 1
discourse; dialog; dialogue. Dialogue = (1) a conversation between two or more people; or (2) the exchange of ideas. The longer spelling is preferred. Despite the common misunderstanding, the prefix is dia- (across), not di- (two). For a comment on the potential decline of the -ue form, see -AGOG(ue). Cf. catalog(ue).

Dialogue, most commonly a theatrical term, means “a conversation between two people only.” It is often contrasted with monologue—e.g.:


When used as a verb, dialogue is a particularly gratifying VOGUE word that has risen greatly in popularity since 1960—e.g.:

- “[Karl Ludvig Reichelt] dialogue[d] [read spoke] with the monks, studied their practices, and participated in their rituals and meditations, always eager to learn.” Notto R. Thelle, “Changed by the East,” Int’l Bull. of Missionary Research, 1 July 2006, at 115.
- “The United States dialogue[d] [read spoke] with the Soviet Union, even during the most dangerous phases of the Cold War, and the USSR was a far greater threat to world peace than Iran will ever be.” Pierre Atlas, “Cease Fire. Now!” Chicago Sun-Times, 6 Aug. 2006, at B2.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
discourse as a verb, or *dialoguing as a gerund: Stage 2
diarrhoea; diarrhoea. The term denoting the physical symptom of abnormally frequent bowel movements consisting of watery stools is predominantly spelled diarrhoea in AmE and diarrhoea in BrE.

The British spelling was usual from the 18th century through the early 20th, but in AmE diarrhoea became the predominant spelling about 1915, and that spelling has become predominant today in World English.

Current ratio: 3:1
dice. In formal usage, the numbered cube used in games of chance is called a die, and two or more are dice. But the word dice is often used sloppily as a singular—e.g.:

- “Risks are calculable and can be insured against—for instance, the chance of a normal single dice [read die] throwing a six is one in six.” Samuel Brittan, "Some Ruminations on Risk," Fin. Times, 11 Apr. 1996, at 12.

Julius Caesar’s the die is cast (i.e., one of the pair of dice is thrown) is sometimes mistakenly thought to mean that a machinist’s cutting or stamping device has been cast in the foundry.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
dice as a false singular: Stage 2
dicy (= risky; unpredictable) has been so spelled in all varieties of English since the word was coined by mid-20th-century aviators. But the misspelling *dicy has begun to appear in 21st-century print sources.

Current ratio: 46:1
dicta. See dictum.
diction = (1) enunciation; distinctness of pronunciation; or (2) word choice. Often sense 2 is overlooked. This book, in large measure, addresses problems of diction in that sense.

dictum. A. Generally. Dictum = (1) an authoritative pronouncement; (2) a statement in a court decision that is of lesser authority than law because it is not part of the court’s legal ruling; or (3) a customary saying. The word can carry different connotations, as the varied senses indicate.
In sense 1, *dictum* denotes a statement that carries the weight of a rule—e.g.: “William Morris, the 19th-century British designer, offers one of the best ideals for creating a satisfying home: ‘Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.’ . . . Morris’s *dictum* is constantly reflected in the pages of glossy shelter magazines, where serene, uncluttered rooms have been arranged to perfection by a small army of decorators and stylists and captured on paper by artful photographers.” Marilyn Gardner, “As Trees Shed Leaves, People Shed ‘Stuff,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 Oct. 2002, at 14.

In sense 2, *dictum* is a shortened form of *obiter dictum* (L. “said in passing”) and denotes part of a court ruling that contains discussion and comments that are not a necessary part of the court’s ruling. In this sense, dictum is less than a rule: it may be persuasive as an argument, but it is not binding legal precedent—e.g.: “Access Now also cites a 1999 opinion by Richard Posner, the chief judge for the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago. An influential conservative, Posner said in a nonbinding *dictum* that the ADA applies to Web sites.” Matthew Haggman, “South Florida Advocacy Group for Disabled Tests Bounds of ADA with Suits Against Airlines over Web Sites,” *Broward Daily Bus. Rev.*, 2 Oct. 2002, at A1.

In sense 3, the word denotes a truism—e.g.: “However, the court’s *dicta* is redundant in that sentence.” Matthew Haggman, “South Florida Advocacy Group for Disabled Tests Bounds of ADA with Suits Against Airlines over Web Sites,” *Broward Daily Bus. Rev.*, 2 Oct. 2002, at A1. (Given this sense of *dictum*, the word is redundant in that sentence.)

**B. Singular and Plural.** The plural of *dictum* is *dicta*. *Dicta* is an uncommon variant that barely sprouted in the latter half of the 20th century. (See *English* ([b.]) *Dicta* is sometimes misused as a singular noun—e.g.: “However, the court’s *dicta*, while reporting its case research in the Farley decision, *places* [read *place*—or else *dictum* . . . *places*] Montana in support of a belief held by approximately 16 states that common minerals mined as construction materials . . . are not minerals for the purposes of conveyance in deeded mineral rights.” R. Lee Aston, “Assays from the Legal Vein,” *Engineering & Mining J.*, July 1996, at N16.

Able writers generally have no difficulty getting the number correct—e.g.: • “Of course, [Governor George] Allen is a public figure, and his public *dicta* are there for all to hear on television and radio.” Jeff E. Schapiro, “Paramilitary Group Seeks Respectability by Association,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 11 Aug. 1996, at F2.

• “All of this is delivered in a memorably laconic manner, grandfatherly *dicta* and pedantic film-buff citations sitting check by jowl.” Iain Bamforth, “Cinema Verities,” *N.Y. Times*, 1 Sept. 1996, § 7, at 11.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*dicta* misused as a singular in place of *dictum*: Stage 1

*didn’t ought to* is nonstandard for *shouldn’t*—e.g.: • “The cumbersome procedures will be a very reasonable price to pay for stopping people from doing what they *didn’t ought to* [read *shouldn’t*]!” Karl Dallas, “Gupta Technologies Inc.’s Data Base Management System,” *PC User*, 3 July 1991, at 61.

• “Council chairman Peter Randle says Kings has never been King’s, and it *didn’t ought to* [read *shouldn’t*] start now with this apostrophe nonsense.” David Newnham, “Diary: Dotty Tale of the Dot with a Curved Tail,” *Guardian*, 19 Oct. 1994, at 22 (perhaps a facetious example).

Oddly, this expression reached its zenith in frequency of occurrence during the 1920s. It has since subsided. See double modals.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*didn’t ought to* is nonstandard for *shouldn’t*: Stage 1

Current ratio (*shouldn’t* vs. *didn’t ought to*): 4,889:1

*didn’t used to*. See *used to* (b).

die, n. See *dice*.

die, vi. A *Preposition with*. *Die of* (= to die as a result of [a disease or ailment]) is the standard idiom. *Die from* is also common, especially when the death results from physical trauma <died from injuries received in a traffic accident>. *Die with* is nonstandard—e.g.: “And I felt them two years ago, holding me up and keeping me strong at the memorial service after his dad *died with* [read *died of*] cancer.” Sharon Randall, “Memories,” *Topeka Capital-J.*., 19 Sept. 2000, at C1.

Even so, *die with AIDS* is not uncommon: one doesn’t *die of* it. AIDS weakens the immune system so much that you die of something else. Yet *died of AIDS* is far more common in print than *died with AIDS*.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*die with misused for *died of*: Stage 2

Current ratio (*died of* vs. *died with*): 7:1

B. *And dye*, v.t. The verb *dye* (= tint or treat with a coloring agent) is sometimes mistakenly written *die*—e.g.: • “Berwyn’s Martinez (29–2), who *died* [read *died*] his hair bright green before the bout, scored his 16th knockout.” Larry Hamel, “Martinez Beats Nunez in TKO,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 15 Nov. 1998, Sports §, at 14.


• “He *died* [read *died*] his hair blond and has used the remarkable resemblance to get in audition doors.” Rick Bentley, “Star Potential,” *Fresno Bee*, 21 Sept. 1999, at E1.

See *dying*.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*die misused for *dye*: Stage 1

C. *Die off*. See phrasal verbs.

die is cast. See *dice & aleatory*. 
die off. See phrasal verbs.

*dieresis. See diaeresis.

dietitian (= an expert in how foods affect health) is the standard spelling in all major varieties of English. *Dietician is a variant.

Current ratio: 3:1

differ. When it comes to one's approach to a subject, to differ from a person is merely to be unlike the other. But to differ with a person is to take issue explicitly with the other. In the following passage, the meaning is a little obscure. Queenie Leavis, F.R. Leavis's wife, seems less justifiably upset if differ from is correctly used: "The trust [the F.R. Leavis Lectureship Trust] appointed a lecturer who ventured to differ from Leavis on literary matters, and whose private income aroused Queenie's envy (apparently Leavis did not dare to tell her of the appointment, which made it worse when she found out)." John Carey, "The Prose and Cons," Sunday Times (London), 6 Aug. 1995, § 7, at 3. If the lecturer had differed with Leavis, then Queenie's upset might be more understandable.

The phrasing differ from typically appears whenever two things are unalike—e.g.: "Assisted suicide differs from euthanasia, in which the doctor may take an active role in the death, such as by administering lethal injection." Bob Groves, "Doctor-Assisted Suicide Called an Obligation," Record (N.J.), 20 Sept. 1996, at A5.

difference; discrepancy; disparity. A difference—not really a discrepancy or a disparity—exists between these words, but it's largely one of connotation. Difference is the most general of the three, meaning "the quality or state of being unlike or dissimilar" (<a difference of less than $20> <a difference in the treatment of men and women>). See <a differential (a).

different. A Different from; different than; different to. Different than is often considered inferior to different from. The problem is that than should follow a comparative adjective (larger than, sooner than, etc.), and different is not comparative—though, to be sure, it is a word of contrast. Than implies a comparison, i.e., a matter of degree; but differences are ordinarily qualitative, not quantitative, and the adjective different is not strictly comparative. Hence writers should generally prefer different from—e.g.: "He performed to everything from jazz to the bossa nova to Brahms and Scarlatti, establishing a style very different from that of Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, Fred Astaire and the Nicholas Brothers." "Paul Draper," Dayton Daily News, 21 Sept. 1996, at B3.

Still, it is indisputable that different than is sometimes idiomatic, and even useful, since different from often cannot be substituted for it—e.g.: "This designer's fashions are typically quite different for men than for women."

Also, different than may sometimes usefully begin clauses if attempting to use different from would be so awkward as to require another construction—e.g.:

- "Life for Swann, who held out to sign a two-year, $7 million contract in August, is a lot different than it was for him in Lynn." Steve Conroy, "Ugly Duckling Becomes Swann," Boston Herald, 13 Sept. 1996, at 104.
- "But the Pac-10 and Big Ten might have a different goal than we do." Don Borst, "Big 12 Joins Fold for Super Alliance," News Trib. (Tacoma), 21 Sept. 1996, at C8 (quoting Bill Byrne).

When from nicely fills the slot of than, however, that is the idiom to be preferred—e.g.:

- "The spell checker it invokes is completely different than [read different from] that which the others share." Paul Bonner, "On Windows," Computer Shopper, Oct. 1996, at 564.
- "One could argue that . . . Russia is no different than [read different from] other nations." Max Jakobson, "Finland: A Nation That Dwells Alone," 19 Wash. Q. 37 (1996).

Different to is common and unobjectionable BrE—e.g.: "The trouble is that attending to the parts is quite different to surveying the whole." Rob Cowan, "Classical Review," Independent, 5 Dec. 1997, at 22.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

different than for different from: Stage 3

Current ratio (different from vs. different than): 11:1

B. Than with Adverbial Forms. With the adverb differently, the word than often follows—a usage common since the 17th century. This usage is especially common in speech, but it also appears in print—e.g.:

- "In the future, however, HARP will be handling things differently than it did in the Quick case." Marion Gammill, "Remodel Morass Has Client Seeing Red," Fresno Bee, 1 Sept. 1996, at B1.
- "But he will be going at things a bit differently than in past years." Steve Carlson, "Virginia Tech Touts Cornell Brown as Its Best Player Since Bruce Smith," Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 6 Sept. 1996, at C1.

When no independent clause immediately follows differently, though, from works well and is preferable—e.g.:

- "We found that businesspeople who have been dressing casually for five years react to salespeople's dress differently than [read differently from] those who recently have gone casual." John T. Molloy, "Car Dealer Not Sold on Adopting Clients' Casual Style," Houston Chron., 26 Sept. 1996, Fashion §, at 6.

In terms of word frequency in modern print sources, differently from is more common than differently than. The difference is less stark with the adjective different
Different. Traditionally, the noun differential had only specialized mathematical, biological, and mechanical senses. As a popularized technicality, it was extended to mean “a difference in wages or prices” (a port differential between tariff rates). E.g.: “Drivers receive only straight time for the extra day, with no pay differential.” Michael Davis, “Ryder, Union Still Troubled,” Tennessean, 15 Jan. 1998, at E1.

But the word’s intrusion into the domain of difference should stop there. The following use of differential was ill-advised: “ ‘Julie’s Unicorn’ is still another story that deserves whatever time you spend on it. I’d like to hear this one read aloud, and hang the time differential [read time difference or difference in time].” Jim Hopper, “Eccentric Orbits,” San Diego Union-Trib., 14 Dec. 1997, Books §, at 7.

B. And different. Differential, adj., = (1) of, exhibiting, or depending on a difference; or (2) constituting a specific difference. The adjective is less often misused than the noun. Sense 1 is more usual—e.g.: “Town Council President Paul Ash, who lived in Burbank—where residents get preferential treatment in their own city programs—said while he supported the differential treatment there, he doesn’t agree with it in Stevenson Ranch.” Naush Boghossian, “Is There Fair Play in Parks?” Daily News (L.A.), 8 Dec. 2002, at C1.

Differentiation is the linguistic process by which similar words, usually those having a common etymology, gradually diverge in meaning, each one taking on a distinct sense or senses. The pair beside and besides provide a good example. They’re etymologically identical (fr. OE be sidan “by the side of”). Beside has kept the original sense. But besides—once interchangeable with beside—is now restricted to the sense (1) “other than; in addition to” <we have much besides books> or (2) “beyond; apart from” <I don’t need anything besides this>. Another example: human and humane were used indiscriminately up to the 18th century. During the 1700s, humane took on the sense “merciful,” while human became the general adjective to describe Homo sapiens.

Differentiation may result from differently suffixed forms that develop distinct meanings, as with derisory and derisive. Or it may result from differently prefixed forms, as with heritable and inheritable. Many examples involve phrasal verbs that come to mean something different from the base verbs; for example, die off is distinguished from die; face up to from face; lose out from lose; and pay up from pay. Still others involve a distinction based on the choice of preposition after a verb, as with acquiesce in vs. acquiesce to (see acquiesce).

Although many by-forms undergo differentiation, many others don’t. Investigative and investigatory, for example, have never been semantically marked off.
from each other. Nor have *analytical* and *analytic*,
*channel* (vb.) and *channelize, or demagoguery* and
demagogy. When no distinction emerges, the less
common form can be labeled a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

The true stylist necessarily appreciates why differ-
tiation enriches the language. This appreciation
can lead to a continual disenchantment with the
forces—such as SLIPSHOD EXTENSION and WORD-
SWAPPING—that are constantly being exerted on
language. Richard Grant White, a 19th-century usage
critic, extolled differentiation and condemned mud-
dlement (in the heavy prose typical of the time): “The
desynonymizing tendency of language enriches it by
producing words adapted to the expression of vari-
ous delicate shades of meaning. But the promiscuous
use of two words each of which has a meaning pecu-
liar to itself, by confounding distinctions impover-
ishes language, and deprives it at once of range and
of power.” *Words and Their Uses, Past and Present*
161 (2d ed. 1872).

What follows is a list of words that, having under-
gone some degree of differentiation, are discussed in
their appropriate places in this book. The entries can
be found at the word in the left-hand column:

| acquiesce in | acquiesce to |
| alien from | alien to |
| amalgam | amalgamation |
| amicable | amiable |
| apology | apologia |
| appertain | pertain |
| architectural | architectonic |
| artist | artisan |
| ashen | ash |
| beauteous | beautiful |
| carat | karat |
| caulk | calk |
| ceremonial | ceremonious |
| champ | chomp |
| cherubs | cherubim |
| clinch | clenched |
| collegial | collegiate |
| comment | commentate |
| competence | competency |
| concision | conciseness |
| congenial | genial |
| content (n.) | contents |
| conterminous | coterminal |
| conversant in | conversant with |
| corporal (adj.) | corporal |
| declarative | declaratory |
| dependence | dependency |
| deportation | deportation |
| derisive | derisory |
| deviltry | devilish |
| disorganized | unorganized |
| dissatisfied | unsatisfied |
| divestiture | divestment |
| dower | dowry |
| earthen | earthy |
| effect (vb.) | effectuate |
| elliptic | elliptical |
| emigrant | émigré |
| enormity | enormousness |
| envision | envisage |

*diffusible. See different (D).*

differently. See different (N).

differently abled. See euphemisms.

differing. See different (A).

differing than. See different (A).

diffuse; defuse, vb. To *diffuse* something is to disperse
it from a single source. To *defuse* is to make something
threatening safe, especially a dangerous situation or a
bomb (by deactivating it).

Diffuse can have very different connotations,
depending on its context, because of how dispersal
can work. When dye is dropped into water, as it *dif-
fuses* it both increases (in apparent size) and decreases
(in concentration). Similarly, light that is *diffused*, as
through a window shade, is made softer. But when
the thing being *diffused* is not diminished by being spread—literacy or religion, for example—it grows in both size and strength. So we find a connotation of building rather than weakening in the Carnegie Foundation’s mission of promoting “the advancement and *diffusion* of knowledge and understanding.”

The notion that something *diffused* is softened like filtered light may explain why some writers misuse *diffuse* for the similar-sounding *defuse*—e.g.:

- “Leaders were hopeful last week that the agreement would *defuse* [read *defuse*] the possibility of violence at today’s march,” Joe Hallett, “Cincinnati: Has Anything Changed?” *Columbus Dispatch*, 7 Apr. 2002, at A1.
- “With almost 1 million troops stationed on both sides of the India–Pakistan border and with Pakistan having recently test-fired another round of missiles, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld were sent to the region for emergency exercises in diplomacy to try to *diffuse* [read *defuse*] tensions.” “The India–Pakistan War Machine,” *Wash. Times*, 5 June 2002, at A16.
- “Now the three-person squad has a bomb suit, X-ray systems and other sophisticated tools to *diffuse* [read *defuse*] bombs and check suspicious packages.” Michelle Sutherland, “Officer Trains for Bomb Team,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 13 June 2002, Norman Today §, at 1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

**diffuse** misused for *defuse*: Stage 1

*diffusible* (= capable of being readily scattered or spread) has been so spelled since the 18th century—not *diffusable*.

Current ratio: 21:1

**dig > dug > dug**. The inflections weren’t always so. A verse in the King James Version of the Bible reads: “And Isaac *digged* again the wells of water, which they had *dug* in the days of Abraham his father,” Genesis 26:18. And another: “He is like a man which built a house and *dug* deep, and laid the foundation on a rock.” Luke 6:48. Altogether, 35 biblical verses use *dug*. Today, however, *dug* is dialectal. See irregular verbs.

*digamy. See bigamy.*

**digestible** /di-jes-ti-bal/ is so spelled—not *digestable*. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 145:1

**digestion** (= [1] the body’s transformation of food into useful substances, or [2] the ability of one’s body to make food undergo this transformation) is preferably pronounced /di-jes-chan/—not /di-jes-chan/. And the pain known as indigestion is preferably /in-di-jes-chan/—not /in-di-jes-chan/.

The corresponding verb *digest* is preferably /di-jest/ and the adjective *digestive* /di-jes-tiv/.

Yet the noun *digest* (= an abstract or synopsis of a book, report, etc.) is pronounced /di-jest/.

digitize; digitalize. *Digitize* has led two lives. In its first, it meant “to point at” or “to manipulate with the fingers.” That sense is rare today, but the computer age has found a new use for the word: “to convert into a binary string of data.” The connection with the root word *digit* is that the binary on and off signals are represented by zeros and ones in the resulting code.

*Digitalize*, a medical term dating from the 1920s, means “to give digitalis to,” referring to the drug derived from the digitalis plant and used in treating heart conditions. Since the reincarnation of *digitize*, however, *digitalize* has been invading its territory as a variant—e.g.:

- “The upgrade also included a project to *digitalize* [read *digitize*] the station’s archives and uploading broadcast town meetings to the Internet for on-demand viewer access.” Derrick Perkins, “Salem Community TV Director Outlines Future Upgrades,” *Union Leader* (Manchester, N.H.), 24 June 2008, at B2. (In that sentence, *upload* should be to *upload* for reasons of parallelism.)

There are two problems with having the two words bear the same meaning. First, because *digitize* has a distinct (if specialized) sense of its own, keeping the words separate serves differentiation. Second, *digitize* is used more than ten times as often as *digitalize* in the binary-code sense, making the latter a needless variant.

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**digitalize** misused for *digitize*: Stage 1

Current ratio (digitized data vs. *digitalized data*): 17:1

dignity. *Dignity* is a quality one possesses. It is not a synonym for *respect*, so it’s mangled in the phrase *treat with dignity*—e.g.:

- “Whatever the parent’s limitations, Grathwol encourages caregivers to treat him or her with dignity [read respect].” Gail Rosenblum, “Losing Her Sight, but Not Her Vision,” *Star Trib.* (Minneapolis), 3 June 2006, at E3.
- “[T] hose with legitimate needs would like the pleasure of dealing with officials who treat them with dignity and respect [read respect].” Jarvis DeBerry, “When Did Every Victim Become a Criminal?” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 15 Aug. 2006, Metro §, at 7.

The undignified phrase is spreading in American print sources.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

* treat with dignity for treat with respect: Stage 1

Current ratio (treat with respect vs. *treat with dignity*): 10:1

digraph. See digraph (B).
dike; dyke. Dike (= [1] a wall or bank to keep back water and prevent flooding, or [2] a protective barrier or obstacle) is so spelled in AmE—though it is dyke in BrE. On this point as on so many others, though, BrE is moving toward the AmE spelling: finger in the dye (= a small action to prevent a catastrophe) is the vastly preponderant spelling both in AmE and in World English, and it threatens to become so in BrE.

In AmE, dyke is a dysphemism for lesbian. It is best abstained from if one seeks to avoid giving offense.

dilapidation. So spelled. *Delapidation is a common misspelling.

Current ratio: 68:1

dilation; dilatation. Both forms may mean: (1) "expansion"; (2) "in medical practice, the enlargement of a body part (as a limb, cavity, or vessel)"; or (3) "speaking or writing at length." Although dilatation might be considered etymologically superior, dilation is more common today in every sense in most varieties of English, especially AmE. E.g.:


Still, dilation often occurs, especially in BrE and in names of medical conditions—e.g.:

- "There were several areas where points that could have been made simply in a couple of sentences seemed to have suffered toxic dilation into whole paragraphs." Ian Forgacs, "Inflammatory Bowel Disease: From Bench to Bedside," Lancet, 25 June 1994, at 1623.
- "Dog bloat.—The technical term is gastric dilatation volvulus, and it's common in large dogs." "Dog-Eat-Dog World Breeds Emergencies," Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 29 July 1994, at D2.

Despite its frequency, this longer form might conventionally be labeled a needless variant, if it weren't for its prevalence in medical usage.

Strangely, a misconception is afoot that dilation of the eyes means "constriction or narrowing of the pupils," when in fact just the opposite is meant. To dilate on a subject is to expand on it, and for one's pupils to dilate (e.g., from being in the dark or from the use of certain drugs) is likewise for them to dilate.

The words are pronounced /dt-lay-shan/ and /di-lay-shan/.

Current ratio (dilation vs. dilatation): 1.2:1

dilaterality (= [1] tending to delay, or [2] tending to cause dilation) is now occasionally misused for deleterious (= harmful)—e.g.:


- "Pregnant substance-abusing women and their children have been vulnerable, not only because of the potential dilatory [read deleterious] effects of the drugs on them . . . but especially because of the blameful public attitude toward these women." David Lewis, "Pregnant Substance Abusers Need Our Help," Brown Univ. Dig. of Addiction Theory and Application, 1 Jan. 1998, at 12.

The pronunciation is /di-lay-tor-ee/.

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dilatory misused for deleterious: Stage 1

dilemma = a choice between two unpleasant or difficult alternatives. This word should not be used by slipshod extension for plight or predicament. Originally a Greek word meaning "a double assumption," the word often appears in the colorful cliché horns of a dilemma—e.g.: "News media moguls find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. They all feel they must have a presence on the Internet, but none has yet figured out how to make money there." T.R. Reid & Brit Hume, "All the News That's Fit to Pay For," Buffalo News, 20 Aug. 1996, at E8. (That situation leaves them with two bad options: be unavailable on the Internet or lose money.)

The adjective is dilettmatic—e.g.: "Naturally, working with an interior designer can get you off the dilettmatic hook—just drop a few buzzwords like 'palazzo,' 'knotty pine,' and 'Regency.'" Victoria Lautman, "Spinning the Style Dial," Chicago Trib., 22 Sept. 1996, Home Design Mag. §, at 8.

If the word is used in its original meaning, it is a dysphemism for deleterious.

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dilemma in reference to a problem or predicament not involving a clear choice between alternative courses of action: Stage 4

dilettante (= someone who just dabbles in a subject or skill and never masters it), an Italian loanword dating from 1748, primarily made the Italian plural dilettanti through the mid-20th century. By 1940 the anglicized plural dilettantes had become predominant in AmE, and by 1975 in BrE. It has been standard in World English since the mid-1950s.

Current ratio (dilettantes vs. dilettanti): 2:1

diminish (= to reduce in size, importance, etc.) may be either transitive or intransitive: something or someone diminishes something else, or the thing that gets smaller simply diminishes. But it's not idiomatic English to say that something or someone diminishes from something else: the from is superfluous. This error in idiom may result from confusion with detract from (= to diminish the desirability of)—e.g.:

• “For the past two weeks, amid the NBA free-agency frenzy, the Heat mostly have been on mute. But that doesn't diminish from [read diminish or detract from] the reality of again being a team back in the mix.” Ira Winderman, “A Quiet Summer, but Loud Expectations for Retooling Heat,” Naples Daily News (Fla.), 12 July 2015, at C3.

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*diminish from for detract from: Stage 1

DIMINUTIVES

**diminish from for detract from:** Stage 1

diminuendo (= a musical direction to become gradually quieter), an Italian loanword dating from 1775, has predominantly made the plural diminuendos from 1850 on. The Italianate plural *diminuendi is pure pretension today. See PLURALS (b).

Current ratio (diminuendos vs. *diminuendi): 5:1

diminution: *diminishment. The latter is a need-
less variant. Diminution /dim-ә-nyoo-shәn/ or /-noon-shәn/ is often mispronounced /dim-yoo-
nish-on/, by metathesis. And it is sometimes erro-
neously spelled *diminution—e.g.: “Dilution of talent rarely translates into diminution [read diminution] of interest.” Bob Verdi, “World Cup Is Great, but the Earth Didn’t Move or Angels Sing,” Chicago Trib., 6 July 1994, Sports §, at 1.

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diminution misspelled *diminution: Stage 1
Current ratio: 250:1

diminutive, meaning “small,” is pronounced /di-min-
yә-tiv/—not /di-min-ә-tiv/.

DIMINUTIVES. Many English words have suffixes (such as -elle, -ette, and -let) showing that the words connote small, petty, or inferior things. Often these things are smaller or younger than the referents of the suffixes. A puppy, for example, is a young dog, a kitten is a very young cat, and a puppy is a young puppy. So-called diminutive suffixes sometimes lead double lives. For example, -ette may denote a feminine form: a bachelorette or show that something is an imitation: a leathertette. And a diminutive suffix may appear in a word that is not a diminutive of anything (e.g., a jerk is a sleeveless jacket, not a small jerk). The most common diminutive suffixes are discussed below.

A. -aster. In Latin and Romance languages, this suf-
fix expresses a resemblance. In English it is usually—
though not always—used pejoratively to connote that something is inferior or petty. It first appeared in this sense in the late 16th century and became common in the 17th century. It is relatively rare today.

criticaster (= an inferior or minor critic)
grammaticaster (= an inferior grammarian)
medicaster (= a quack; a medical charlatan)
philologaster (= an incompetent philologist)
poetaster (= a poet who writes trash)
politicaster (= a contemptible politician)

Despite the temptation to think so when a new real-
ity show airs, the pejorative -aster is unrelated to the
-caster in broadcaster.

B. -(c)ule; -culus. The first of these came into En-
lish from Latin by way of French; the second came directly from Latin. Both suffixes connote something small. The first appeared in the late 16th century, but both became common during the 17th century. Many scientific and medical words have these endings.

animalculus (= a microscopic animal; a bacterium)
calculus (= lit., a small pebble on an abacus)
calicule; caliculus (= a small duct or canal)
capsule (= a small cylindrical container)
corpusculum (= a minute particle of matter)
floculus (= a small egg-shaped lobe of the cerebellum)
globule (= a small round particle; a drop)
granule (= a small grain; a pellet)
homunculus (= a small person or humanoid being)
molecule (= the smallest fundamental unit for a chemi-
cal reaction)
nodule (= a small swelling in the body)
sacculus (= the smaller of two fluid-filled sacs in the
inner ear)

C. -el. This French suffix traditionally denotes something small or of no great importance. It first appeared in the 13th century.

bowl (= small intestine)
chapel (= a small building for religious worship)
hovel (= a wretched dwelling)
impression (= a small flower of the primrose family)
rondel (= a small disk)
tunnel (= a narrow tube or pipe)

D. -elle; -ella. The first, older suffix is French; it
appeared in the 15th century. The second is Italian, introduced into English in the 18th century. Each connotes something short, small, or insignificant.

bagatelle (= a trifle)
boccarella (= a small opening to either side of a glass
furnace’s main opening)
brocante (= imitation brocade)
camerelle (= a small chamber)
chlorella (= a single-celled alga)
chlorella (= a single-celled alga)
novella (= a short novel)
vaccinella (= a secondary eruption after vaccination)

E. -en. This Saxon ending became part of the En-
lish language before the Norman Conquest. Attached
to nouns it connotes either “made of” <wooden> or,
especially with a living thing, youth.

chicken (= the offspring of fowl)
kitten (= a very young cat)
maid (= a girl, esp. one too young for marriage)

F. -et; -ette. In Old French, -ette was feminine and
corresponded to the masculine -et. English made
no clear distinction, which is why bassinet is some-
times spelled *bassinette (a spelling that doesn’t exist in
French—see bassinet). In the 17th century, -ette
began to predominate in forming English diminutives.

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
ballonet (= a small gas-filled compartment in an airship)  
baronet (= the lowest inheritable English title, denoting a gentleman commoner rather than a nobleman) 
cellar (= a cabinet for storing wines)  
cigarette (= a slim, short, tobacco-filled cylinder, smaller than a cigar)  
kitchenette (= a very small kitchen)  
nymph (= a sexually mature girl, esp. one near the age of consent)  
pipe (= a slender pipe used by chemists to measure small quantities of liquid)  
statuette (= a statue or figurine that is smaller than life-size)  

G. -ie; -y. These Scottish suffixes began appearing in English in the 16th century and became common during the 17th century. They were used to form diminutives of common nouns and proper names. Except in modern Scottish spellings, both are now restricted mostly to nouns and to some diminutive proper names. 

birdie (= a little bird)  
Charlie; Charley (= Charles; Charlene)  
doggy; doggie (= a puppy or small dog)  
Jeanie (= Jean, Jeanette, etc.)  
kitty (= a young cat)  
Kitty (= Catharine, Kathryn, etc.)  
mouse; mousy (= a mouse, esp. a young or very small one)  
puddy; puddy (= a cat)  
Sally; Sallie (= Sarah)  
sonny (= a boy or a young man, esp. one of inferior standing)  
Willie; Willy (= William)  

See veggie.  

H. -ing. Because this Old English suffix has many modern uses, spotting it in its diminutive function is tricky. It mostly appears in words that denote something fractional or something that is part of a larger thing.  

farthing (= a quarter-penny)  
riding (= an administrative or political subdivision)  
tithing (= a tenth part)  

I. -kin. Although commonly seen in modern English, -kin rarely connotes a diminutive anymore. It was derived from Dutch and German, but unlike those languages, English at first used the suffix only for (usually male) diminutive proper names. It survives today in surnames such as Watkins (from Walter;Wat), Dickens (Richard;Dick), and Perkinson (Peter;Perkin). Beginning in the 16th century, the suffix was attached to nouns to form diminutives.  

babykins (= an infant)  
cannikin (= lit., a small can; a canister)  
catkin (= derived fr. the Dutch for “kitten”: katteken)  
lambkin (= lit., a small or young lamb; used affectionately of young children)  
manikin (= a very small person or a human figure used by an artist)  

J. -let. This suffix, borrowed from the French -let, may denote a diminutive when appended to an ordinary noun <booklet, ringlet>. But when it is appended to the name of a body part <arm, neck>, it may refer to an ornament <armlet, necklet>. Yet in the oldest English words ending in -let (e.g., bracelet, chaplet, gauntlet, hamlet), the suffix is neither a diminutive nor an ornament. Although a few diminutives with -let appeared in the 16th century, -let wasn’t used much until the 18th and 19th centuries. Today it is the most commonly used diminutive suffix for nonce-words.  

factlet (= trivia)  
leaflet (= an informative writing on a single piece of paper)  
murrelet (= a small North Pacific auk)  
piglet (= a baby pig)  
rivulet (= a very small stream)  
roundlet (= a small circle or circular thing)  
streamlet (= a narrow river)  

K. -ling. Derived from Norse, -ling is relatively rare as a diminutive suffix in modern use. When attached to a noun, it may connote (1) ownership by or affiliation with something, usu. a superior thing or person <hiring, underling>, (2) youth <codling, duckling>, or (3) contempt <princeling, godling, moonling>. Apart from sense 2, -ling has rarely been used to connote physical smallness.  

atheling (= a prince; the eldest son of a Saxon king)  
fosterling (= a foster or adopted child, esp. one treated as inferior to other children)  
foundling (= an abandoned infant who is taken in and cared for, esp. out of charity)  
gosling (= a baby goose)  
lordling (= a petty, insignificant lord)  
sapling (= a small, very young tree)  

L. -ock. The origins of this Old English suffix are unknown. The suffix is occasionally used to form diminutive nouns, but not every noun ending in -ock is or was a diminutive. Words such as bullock (= a castrated bull; a steer) and hillock (= a small hill) are clearly diminutives. Some words, especially animal names such as haddock (= a species of north Atlantic fish) and ruddock (= a robin), may have originated as diminutives. But for other words, such as mattock (= a pickaxe-shaped agricultural tool) and warlock (= a sorcerer), the suffix may have a different origin.  

paddock (= a small pasture or enclosure for animals)  
tussock (= a small bunch or tuft, as of grass or hair)  

**diocese** = a jurisdictional subdivision, esp. of (1) a bishop or (2) a province under control of the Roman Empire after Constantine. Today the word is best pronounced /ˈdi-oʊ-sɪs/ or /ˈdi-ə-sɪs/, not /-siz/. The second pronunciation is dominant in BrE and is preferred by some AmE authorities. The third is recorded in W3 but, in the words of one commentator, “has little authority.” Charles Harrington Elster, **BBBM** at 150.  
The plural is regular in form (**dioceses**) and is pronounced with four syllables: /ˈdi-oʊ-ses-iz/ or /ˈdi-ə-sis-iz/. But some speakers (most notably newscasters) mistakenly use the three-syllable variant /ˈdi-oʊ-sez/ as a plural.  
The adjectival form is **diocesan**, pronounced /ˈdi-oʊ-sən/ or /-zən/.  

For more on the term **diocese**, see **bishops**.
diphtheria is properly pronounced /dif-thar-ee-ә/, not /dip-thar-ee-ә/. See pronunciation (b).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. diphtheria mispronounced /dip-thar-ee-ә/: Stage 4
2. diphtheria misspelled *diptheria: Stage 1
Current ratio: 50:1

diphthong. A. Spelling and Pronunciation. It's diphthong (/dif-thong/), not *dipthong (/dip-thong/). The word is often misspelled (and mispronounced)—e.g.: “He [Sir Alec Guinness] didn’t frighten Americans and colonials with cavernous and well-rounded dipthongs [read diphthongs], as John Gielgud did.” Ray Conlogue, “A Master of Wit and Subtlety,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 8 Aug. 2000, at R10. See pronunciation (d).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. diphthong mispronounced /dip-thong/ (instead of /dif-thong/): Stage 4
2. diphthong misspelled *dipthong: Stage 1
Current ratio: 37:1

B. And digraph. Strictly speaking, diphthong is a phonetic term denoting a gliding vowel sound from one simple vowel sound to another within the same syllable, as in down or join. Some people use the term loosely to denote a digraph (two letters representing a single sound, such as ph in phone or ea in lean) or ligature (two or more letters written together, such as ae or ae)—e.g.: “Use e instead of the diphthongs [read digraph] ae or oe when the spellings are coequal: archeology (but subpooena).” Robert A. Webb, The Washington Post Desk-Book on Style 146 (1978). [Note that Webb’s plural was incorrect: the or between ae and oe makes the object of use properly singular.]

diploma; degree. The traditional distinction is worth preserving. Secondary schools award diplomas to graduates. Colleges and universities award degrees to successful candidates. It’s a common hyperbole for writers to overstate the achievement of high-school grads—e.g.:
- “Evidence of the dramatic link between education and income is seen in the 75 percent gap between the average wages of college graduates and high school graduates and the 42 percent gap between those with high school degrees [read diplomas] and those without them, he said.” Patrice Hill, “Bernanke Suggests Job Skills to Combat Inequality,” Wash. Times, 7 Feb. 2007, Bus. §, at C8.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
degree misused for diploma: Stage 3

diplomat; *diplomatist. Although the longer form predominated in 19th-century usage, the shorter form had established itself as standard by 1910 in AmE and by 1930 in BrE. Hence *diplomatist is now a needless variant. But it still occasionally appears—e.g.:
- “That’s why they wanted to bump off a man who had once ruled his native land with the iron hand of a communist leader, who had the rank of a general in the interior ministry, who went on to be a respected diplomatist [read diplomat].” “Shevardnadze’s Sad Land,” Baltimore Sun, 11 Sept. 1995, at A8.

Current ratio: 8:1

DIRECTIONAL WORDS. A. The Suffix –ward(s). In AmE, the preferred practice is to use the –ward form of directional words, as in toward, forward, and westward. Words ending in –ward may be either adjectives or adverbs, whereas words ending in –wards, common in BrE, may be adverbs only. These are typical preferred AmE forms:

```
cityward  shoreward
coastward  sideward
downward  skyward
outward   sunward
rearward  toward
seaward  upward
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All these are also predominant today in BrE—except, that is, for towards. See toward (A).

A slight exception in AmE is the adverb backwards, which is frequently used (though still much less often than backward). (It’s anomalous that many people who say forward also say backwards.) When backward and forward combine in a phrase (either word coming first), be consistent about using the –s; by far the more common AmE usage is to leave it off both words. As an adjective, only backward is accepted <a backward move>. See toward (A). Cf. afterward.

B. Capitalization. The words north, south, east, and west (and compounds such as southeast) should not be capitalized when used to express directions <we went north>. They are properly capitalized when used as proper nouns denoting regions of the world or of a country <the Far East> <the Pacific Northwest>.

But when a directional word appears as an adjective before a geographic proper name, it is lowercase <eastern United States> <southern Italy> <south Florida>. If, however, the adjective is part of the proper name, it should be capitalized <North Dakota> <East Anglia>.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)
Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
C. Verbose Constructions. To use such words as easterly in phrases like in an easterly direction is prolix. In fact, the simple word for the direction (east) usually suffices in place of the word ending in either -erly or -wardly. E.g.: “In Portsmouth, when you’re going north on U.S. 17 on High Street, you’re traveling in a westerly direction” [read west].” Ida Kay Jordan, “Hurricane Escape Plan May Lead Some Down the Road to Confusion,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 5 June 1994, Portsmouth Currents §, at 2.

The one useful distinctive sense that forms such as southward and southerly convey is that the movement is more or less in the direction indicated—but not in a straight line. E.g.: “Many of the bees escaped from his lab and have moved steadily northward ever since.” “Bee Not Afraid?” Fresno Bee, 22 Sept. 1994, at B6.

D. An Infrequent Error: *northerly for north-erly, etc. Occasionally writers err by making the directional words ending in -erly into words ending in -erly—e.g.:


Though the -erly words are recorded in the OED, they’re noted as being rare or obsolete. Cf. nor’easter.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*northerly, *southerly, etc. for northerly, southerly, etc.: Stage 1
Current ratio (westerly direction vs. *westerly direction): 293:1

directly; direct, adv. Directly = (1) in a straight line; without interruption <we flew directly from Dallas to Frankfurt>; (2) immediately <they left directly after the decision>; (3) with no intervening agent <she was directly responsible>; (4) totally <directly on point>; (5) soon <they’ll be going directly>; or (6) as soon as <directly we saw him, we cheered to express our appreciation>. In sense 1, direct is interchangeable as an adverb, especially in mid-20th-century BrE <we flew direct from Dallas to Frankfurt>. Sense 5 is typical of southern AmE. Sense 6 is exclusively BrE.

Current ratio (flew directly vs. flew direct to): 6:1

directly antithetical. See antithetical.

directorial (in five syllables), not *directorial, is the adjective corresponding to director—e.g.:

• “One of the most significant directorial [read directorial] differences between this film and Zwick’s other epics is that he lets the story tell itself and relies less on musical cues.” Deborah Peterson, “Culture Behind the Camera,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 12 July 1996, at E1.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*directorial for directorial: Stage 1
Current ratio (directorial vs. *directorial): 87:1

DIRECT QUESTIONS. See questions, direct and indirect.

dis, v.t.; dis. Dis—also spelled diss—is a clipped form of disrespect, vb. (or, less likely, dismiss or disparage). This slang term came into existence in the early 1980s and into vogue in the early 1990s—e.g.:

• “In the ‘other body,’ where four GOP members are running for president, Gingrich would like senators to ponder the theoretical possibility of a President Newt before they dis the bills he sends them.” Howard Fineman, “President Newt?” Newsweek, 19 June 1995, at 34.

Of course, the inflected forms are dissed and dissing—e.g.:

• “The Lions receiver dised the victorious Alouettes in a radio interview after the game.” Lowell Ullrich, “Speeches as Stale as the Offence,” Vancouver Province, 3 Aug. 2015, at A68.

By 2008 it had already come to feel dated by most people who had earlier used it enthusiastically.

One outcome of the dis fad is that the transitive verb disrespect, which had fallen into disuse, has been called out of retirement—doubtless by writers (or their editors) who really wanted to use dis but just couldn’t bring themselves to do it. E.g.: “Hovan apparently felt disrespected by Favre, and their war of words heated up to where Favre was caught on camera giving Hovan a one-finger salute.” Rick Braun, “Several May Get Fines for Post-Game Melee,” Milwaukee J., 12 Dec. 2002, Packer Plus §, at 12.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
dis as a verb: Stage 4
Current ratio (to dis him vs. to diss him): 1:1

disability. A. And inability; liability. These words overlap only slightly but are frequently confounded; they are best keenly distinguished. Disability = (1) the condition of being disabled <his disability began after the accident in March 2002>; (2) a disabling injury, illness, or handicap <she has a disability>; (3) legal
inability <Ralph's disability disqualifies him from entering into contracts>; or (4) a restriction or disadvantage <not having a car would be a real disability>. **Inability** = the absence of ability; the lack of power or means <our inability to get there on time>. **Liability** = (1) a monetary obligation <some credits and some liabilities>; (2) a drawback—cone liability in this plan is that it would have to be approved by a supermajority of shareholders; (3) a duty or burden <liability for military service>; or (4) probability <What is the liability of having that happen?>.

B. And **disability**. **Disability** = (1) the act of disabling; the condition of being disabled; or (2) the imposition of a legal disability. Sense 1 is more usual—e.g.: "With that, the team has seen 13 players make 16 trips to the DL, surpassing the previous franchise mark of 15 **disabilities**." Nancy Gay, "Giants Deal Leiter to Expos, Lose to Cubs," S.F. Chron., 31 July 1996, at D1. See (a) for the senses of disability.

BrE sometimes uses **disability insurance** in contexts in which AmE would use **disability insurance**.

dissassociate. See deforest.

disapprobation, mostly BrE, is a **formal word meaning "disapproval"**—e.g.: "Ever since her [the Queen's] offspring reached maturity—about the time the media regressed fully into immaturity—the family that was supposed to be a model for the British nation, indeed the Commonwealth, has been exposed to ridicule and disapprobation." Elisabeth Ribbans, "London Observer," Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 28 Aug. 1996, at A17. In ordinary prose, this noun—like so many other **zombie nouns ending in -tion**—leads to top-heaviness: "The oohs and aahs of disapprobation [read disapproval or scorn] must add to the umpires' burdens and tax their objectivity." Mike Brearley, "Why Must We Play It Again on Screen?" Observer, 25 Aug. 1996, at 11. See **approbation**.

disapprove (of). Like **approve, disapprove** may be both transitive (without of) <The council disapproved the plan> and intransitive (with of) <Many readers disapproved of the editorial>. Usually, the transitive **disapprove** suggests formal rejection, while **disapprove of** suggests unfavorable sentiments. Also, **disapprove** alone tends to appear in formal, official contexts; **disapprove of** is the everyday phrasing—appearing about four times as often in print sources as the preposition-less version. Cf. **approve** (A).

disassemble. See dissemble.

**disbar**. See bar.

**disbar**. See **disembark**.

disbelief; undeniable; nonbelief; misbelief. **Disbelief** = (1) shocked incredulity; or (2) the mental rejection of something after considering its plausibility. In sense 2, **disbelief** results from active, conscious decision. **Unbelief** denotes the state of doubt, of not having made up one's mind. Thus, while an atheist's state of mind is **disbelief** (sense 2), an agnostic's state of mind is **unbelief** or **nonbelief**. (See **atheist**.) **Nonbelief**, which answers well to **nonbeliever**, might be a needless variant were it not so very common as to be uncancelable. A **misbelief** (the rarest of these words) is an erroneous or false belief.

disbursal. See **disburse**.

disburse; disperse. **Disburse**, from the Latin **bursa** "purse," is used chiefly in reference to distribution of money <the directors disbursed dividends to the stockholders>. **Disperse** is used in reference to distribution of all other things, such as crowds or diseases. In cultivated speech, these words are not homophones. The failure to distinguish them in common speech may have contributed to their confusion in print. **Disburse** sometimes appears erroneously in place of **disperse**—e.g.:

- "Sure enough, the car drew a crowd. When they **disbursed** [read dispersed], it took me a good 15 minutes to figure out how to remove [the top]." Matt Nauman, "You Might Never Even See One of These Cars!" Times Union (Albany), 3 Aug. 1995, at T8.
- "Late in the evening of 5 October, the Vojvodina leaders appealed to the collective federal presidency to order the military to **disburse** [read disperse] the crowd." Louis Sell, Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia 59 (2003).

The corresponding nouns—**disbursement** and **dispersal**—are subject to the same confusion. It is quite proper to refer to the **disbursement** (i.e., paying out) of money, but not to the **disbursal** of cards or the "**disbursement**" of crowds. E.g.:

- "Although they were quick to say that no problems are anticipated, authorities said as many as 60 deputies will undergo an eight-hour training course Thursday—learning crowd control and **disbursement** [read dispersal] techniques." Adam folk, "Officers Gear Up with Riot Training," Augusta Chron. (Ga.), 28 Oct. 2008, at A3.

Nor is it correct to use the nonword **dispersal** when **dispersal** is intended—e.g.: "What concerns Fresno State coach Jerry Tarkanian is the Bulldogs'
potential to be off-balance defensively, at least in the dispersement [read dispersal] of players on the floor.” Andy Katz, “‘Dogs Will Be Going to Work on Mistsakes,” Fresno Bee, 13 Nov. 1996, at D4. However, it is also used when referring to a lack of completion.

Nor, finally, is it right to use that same nonword when disbursement is the intended word—e.g.:

- “Other than the change of venue, the other major question facing the Presidents Cup will be the disbursement [read disbursment] of funds.” Barker Davis, “Where Does the Presidents Cup Go from Here?” Wash. Times, 11 Sept. 1996, at B1. Completion of the plan was slowed by disagreements among day-care providers over money disbursement [read disbursement].” Doris Sue Wong, “Day-Care Centers Say Subsidy Hikes Promised in June Still Haven’t Arrived,” Boston Globe, 23 Oct. 1996, at D9.

- “[Jay] Goldstone pointed out that the impact on the city’s general fund was negligible, because the single dispersement [read dispersment]—$914,000 in police and firefighter overtime—was largely reimbursed.” Eleanor Yang Su & Brent Schrottenboer, “Counting the Cost of Staging U.S. Open,” San Diego Union-Trib., 24 Nov. 2008, at A1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. disburse misused for dispense: Stage 1
   - Current ratio (disperse the crowd vs. *disburse the crowd*): 107:1
   - *disperse* for dispersal: Stage 1
   - Current ratio (dispersal vs. *dispersal*): 407:1
2. *dispersement* for dispersal: Stage 1

**disc.** See disk (A).

**discard,** vb. More frequently than might be imagined, this verb is erroneously made *discard, perhaps because the -c- is often pronounced as if it were -g-, and perhaps also from the influence of disregard. Of course, discard began as a card-playing term, but now it appears more often in figurative senses—e.g.:

- “Only 10 percent answered correctly that [the amount of] motor oil discarded [read discarded] in the United States is 10 times greater than the amount of oil spilled in Alaska.” Casey Bukro, “Americans Fail Quiz on Pollution,” Chicago Trib., 8 Nov. 1991, at C12.
- “Because the economy is now in recession, however, some housing experts are questioning the wisdom of discarding [read discarding] the old 28/36 rule of thumb.” Marilyn Kennedy Melia, “How Much of a Stretch Will You Make for a Mortgage?” Chicago Trib., 9 Dec. 2001, Real Est. §, at 2.
- “If you’re wondering what became of El Guapo’s discarded [read discarded], tent-like duds, he advised they have all been put to good use. Harrison took the bags to the nearest Goodwill Industries outlet.” Steve Buckley, “Red Sox Hurler Rich Garces Has Been Growing Along Nicely,” Boston Herald, 3 Mar. 2002, at B20. The error appears to be as common in British as in American publications—e.g. “For every new card-buster, there are bound to be a million half-finished fragments which are discarded [read discarded] after a few chords.” “Root,” Times (London), 10 Oct. 1998, at 4.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*discard for discard: Stage 1

**discernible.** So spelled—not *discernable. See -ABLE (A).**

**disciplinary; *disciplinary. Disciplinary = (1) related to discipline <disciplinary rules>; or (2) carrying out punishment <disciplinary measures>. *Disciplinary has long been a NEEDLESS VARIANT.**

Current ratio: 36,968:1

**disc jockey** has been the standard spelling since the phrase emerged in the mid-20th century. *Disk jockey* is a variant.

Current ratio: 6:1

**disclaim. See declaim.**

**discomfit,** vb. A. Meanings and Inference. Discomfit = (1) to thwart or frustrate, or (2) to convert; to put into a state of unease and embarrassment. Sense 2 is relatively new, a result of confusion of discomfit and discomfit (see (c)). Once considered a usage error, this extension is now the most common usage and is accepted as standard.

Discomfit makes the past tense discomfitted, not *discomfitted—e.g. “Matilde Dembowski . . . obviously had no intention of admitting him to intimacy and . . . was in some ways discomfitted [read discomfitted] by his attentions.” Robert Alter, A Lion for Love 146 (1979) (biography of Stendhal).**

**B. And discomfiture. The preferred noun is discomfiture. Ill-trained writers use phrases such as *much to his discomfit, in which either discomfit or discomfiture is intended.**

**C. And discomfiture. Discomfit is preferably a noun, not a verb. Writers sometimes use it when they seem really to mean discomfit in its newer sense (to convert)—e.g.:

- “Not only has it embraced what amounts to a social crusade—something that some journalists find discomfiting [read discomfiting]—but it has set a goal it almost certainly will not meet.” Ellis Cose, “A City Room of Many Colors,” Newsweek, 4 Oct. 1993, at 82.
- “Sometimes his access was discomfiting [read discomfiting] to the men at the top.” Seymour M. Hersh, “The Wild East,” Atlantic Monthly, June 1994, at 61, 62.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

discomfit misused for discomfit: Stage 2

Current ratio (discomfitted vs. *discomfitted*): 7:1

**D. *Discomfort. *Discomforture is a NONWORD for either discomfort or discomfiture—e.g. “The stubbornness of the owners in repeating their rhetoric in the past made it even harder to believe that they aren’t on their way to re-experiencing their discomfortures in [read discomfort of or discomfortures of] the past.” Murray Kempton, “Schott Tries Patience of the Owners,” Newsday (N.Y.), 15 Sept. 1994, at 8.

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*discomfort for discomfort or discomfiture: Stage 1
**discommend** is the opposite of **recommend**, not of **condemn**. E.g.: “I read in Wednesday morning’s edition of The Press-Enterprise that they still discommend eating bacon.” Letter of F.D. Richardson, “Riverside Bring on the Eggs,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 17 Nov. 1995, at A10. The verb was much more widely used in the 18th century than it is today.

**disconcertion; *disconcertment; *disconcertation.** The first is the preferred noun corresponding to the verb **disconcert**. The others are **NEEDLESS VARIANTS**.

Current ratio: 27:17:1

**disconnect**, n., (= disconnection) is a **VOGUE WORD** that arose in the 1980s and became seemingly ubiquitous after about 1995. It is primarily used to label (1) a clash between what is expected and what happens <a disconnect between our mission statement and our admissions policy>; or (2) more mundanely, the failure of a connection such as the Internet, telephone, or utility <I didn’t hang up—we just had a disconnect>. *Disconnect* typifies a popular trend in **CASUALSIMS**, by which an established noun is truncated to form a new noun that looks the same as the corresponding verb but differs in pronunciation. The new noun has the accent on the first syllable (/dis-ka-nekt/), while the verb has the accent on the last (/dis-ka-nekt/). This pronunciation scheme follows the pattern of many standard verb–noun pairs, such as **contest** and **progress**.

Other vogue words that have gone through the same process include **consult** and **invite**. The new forms are generally inappropriate in formal writing.

**discontinuance; discontinuation; discontinuity.** See **continuance**.

**discount**, vb., meaning “to make a deduction; reduce;” is sometimes used as if it meant “to disregard entirely,” especially in the hyperbolist’s phrase *wholly discount <the board wholly discounted her version of events>*. But this makes a hash of the word’s fundamental sense. The wording is stronger without the **WEASEL WORD** *wholly*—e.g.:

- “He had wholly discounted [read discounted or minimized] his wife’s genius.” Stefan Kanfer, “Anecdotes of Scheherazade,” Time, 15 Nov. 1982, at 90. (In a less malevolent reading, the phrase in that sentence might mean “never noticed.”)
- “But that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t ask many of the right questions, or that the answers he suggests can be wholly discounted [read disregarded].” John Gross, “Blunt’s Treasure: How, How Much, How Long?” N.Y. Times, 21 Oct. 1988, § C, at 33.

**discover; invent.** To **discover** is (1) to recognize for the first time something that exists, such as electricity or a law of nature, or has come into existence, such as a new species, or (2) to devise a new use for or application of something already known, such as synthetic silk. To **invent** is usually to consciously create something that did not previously exist and that has not been thought of by anyone else. For example, in creating a new chemical compound, a person may **invent** it by planning its creation (studying the properties of various chemicals and their known interactions and deducing how they will work together). On the other hand, one may accidentally combine chemicals in an unintended amount or manner, and then notice an interesting product, thus **discovering** a new compound.

**discrepancy.** For the distinctions between **discrepancy, difference, and disparity**, see **difference**.

**discrete; discreet.** Although the two words ultimately have the same Latin origin, the spelling **discrete** came into English through French. Today the two spellings are treated as different words. **Discrete** means “separate, distinct” <three discrete land masses>; **discreet** means “cautious, judicious” <a discreet confidant>. **Discret** is most commonly used in reference to behavior, especially speaking or writing. Until about 1950, **discreet** was the more common word, but today instances of **discrete** outnumber those of **discreet** by a 4-to-1 margin.

The usual error is to misuse **discreet** for **discrete**—e.g.:

- “It was decided to break down the system into more **discreet** [read **discrete**] sections, as dictated by conditions on the pipeline.” Philip J. Dusek, “Pipeline Integrity Program Helps Optimize Resources,” Pipeline & Gas J., Mar. 1994, at 36.

Sometimes, though, the opposite blunder appears—e.g.:

- “Mr. Bradshaw said almost everything the group did locally was **discrete** [read **discreet**].” Peter Applebome, “Bloody Sunday’s Roots in Deep Religious Soil,” N.Y. Times, 2 Mar. 1993, at A8.

See **indiscreet**.

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1. **discreet** misused for **discrete**: Stage 1
   Current ratio (**discrete units** vs. *discreet units*): 43:1

2. **discrete** misused for **discreet**: Stage 2
   Current ratio (**discrete distance** vs. *discreet distance*): 8:1
Although in your discretion was more common through most of the 19th century, at your discretion became the top choice in the 20th century. Since about 1950 it has predominated, and it’s about four times as common today. Remember, though, that in the choice of preposition, you have full discretion.

*discriminant, adj. See discriminatory.

discriminate, v.i., = (1) to make a clear distinction; or (2) to make an unfavorable or unfair distinction. In sense 1, the preposition between is quite common—e.g.: “Plosser and others warned that interest rate cuts are blunt instruments that do not discriminate against investment and consumption.” Peter G. Gosselin, “Fed Trims Rates in Bold Move to Avoid Recession Economy,” L.A. Times, 19 Apr. 2001, at A1. In sense 2, the verb takes the preposition against—e.g.:

- “In their suit, the condo residents claim they are being discriminated against because single family homes receive curbside pickup.” Theresa Walton, “Goffstown and Condo Owners Ironing Out Compromise on Suit,” Union Leader (Manchester, N.H.), 6 Aug. 1994, at 12.

In sense 2, it cannot properly be used transitively—e.g.:

- “Men are not being discriminated [read discriminated against] at the University of Illinois, the swimmers are,” said Ellen Varygas, senior counsel for the Women’s Law Center.” Mike Dame, “Men Fight Backlash of Title IX,” Orlando Sentinel, 21 Aug. 1994, at C6.
- “Some believe even that the only one being discriminated [read discriminated against] today is the white male, and that a return to ‘equality’ (i.e. status quo) is in order.” “Race Relations Solutions Offered,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 2 Sept. 1996, at B6.

The same error, by implication, crops up in the past-participle adjective <an illegally discriminated employee>. In this loose usage, which dates from the mid-20th century, discriminated is equivalent to downtrodden, oppressed, or persecuted—e.g.:

- “Long after they have left their status as discriminated minority [read oppressed minority], Jews alone among American immigrant groups retain a loyalty to political liberalism, to governments of compassion and justice.” Marlene A. Marks, “Government Need Not Be the Enemy,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 7 Feb. 1995, at A16.
- “Mr. Say was born in Japan of a father who was Korean, a much discriminated minority [read oppressed minority] in the country, and a Japanese mother who was born in San Francisco.” James Sterngold, “No Place Like Home, Sometimes,” N.Y. Times, 22 Nov. 2000, at E1.
severed from the torso—e.g.：“Having said all that, did we really need to see the disembodied [read severed] heads? In a word: yuck. We got the idea with the hack-saw and the meat cleaver, thanks.” Bill Goodykoontz, “Heading for a Shock,” Ariz. Republic, 21 Nov. 2002, at E6.

Dismembered = (1) (of bodily limbs) cut from the torso; or (2) (of a torso) characterized by limbs’ having been cut off. This term does not work well with heads—e.g.: “In a flurry of recent TV appearances promoting his new book on families, the former vice president has been seen . . . floating as a disembodied [read detached] head in a jar on the Fox cartoon show ‘Futurama,’ where he’s dubbed ‘the inventor of the environment.’” Liz Marlanites, ‘A ‘New’ Al Gore Returns,’ Christian Science Monitor, 19 Nov. 2002, at 1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

dismember misused for sever or detach: Stage 1

disenfranchise; disfranchise. Though disfranchise was long favored—from the 18th century to the mid-20th—disenfranchise is now much more common in print. It’s the standard term meaning “to deprive of the right to exercise a franchise or privilege, esp. to vote.” E.g.: “Part of this holding back was the result of white men, the persons in power, being unwilling or unable to reach out and bring in persons who traditionally had been disenfranchised.” Jai Ghorpade, “California Civil Rights Initiative,” San Diego Union-Trib., 22 Sept. 1996, at G3.

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disenfranchise for disfranchise: Stage 5

Current ratio (disenfranchised vs. disfranchised): 5:1

*disenfranchise. See disfranchise.

disenfranchise. See disenfranchise.

*disfunctional. See dysfunctional.

dishabille /dis-ə-beel/ (= a state of careless or partial dress) is so spelled in AmE—though beginning in 20th-century BrE; the usual spelling has been deshabile. The word was anglicized in the 17th century and in fairly widespread use through the late 19th century. There was little cause for reverting to the gallowage deshabille in the 20th century, even toward the end of that period when more and more people were dressing in a casual and even careless way. To keep things tidy, dishabille should be printed in roman type (not italic) and without diaritical marks.

Current ratio (dishabille vs. deshabile): 1:2:1

**disincentive; nonincentive.** The former provides an incentive not to do something; the latter is no incentive at all.

*disincentivize is jargon for discourage or deter. It became popular in the mid-1980s and remains so—e.g.: “We’re competing with Los Angeles and New York firms for talent,” Bochner said. ‘We don’t want to disincentivize people from coming here because there are huge gaps in salary.’” Jessica Guynn, “Wilson Son-sini Opens Its Purse for Associates: $5,000 Raises,” S.F. Daily J., 12 Oct. 1995, at 2. See **incentivize**.

**disinformation; misinformation.** These words are not synonyms. Disinformation = deliberately false information <Soviet disinformation>. Misinformation = incorrect information <widespread misinformation about HIV and how it is transmitted>. Sometimes the more pejorative word (disinformation) is misused for the less pejorative—e.g.: “Not surprisingly, the low level of scrutiny she was thought to deserve accounts for a significant amount of disinformation [read misinformation] in reference works.” Susan Staves, “Traces of a Lost Woman,” Profession, 1995, at 36 (in an article charging not deliberate lies but oversights).

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

disinformation misused for misinformation: Stage 1

disingenuous. See ingenuous.

disintegrative; *disintegratory. The latter is a need-less variant.

Current ratio: 193:1

**disinterest; uninterest.** Disinterest = (1) impartiality or freedom from bias or from chance of financial benefit <the judge showed disinterest in the way that every judge should>; or (2) lack of concern or attention <the team members suffered from the disinterest of their traditional supporters>. Leading writers and editors almost unanimously reject sense 2, in which uninterest (recorded fr. 1890) is the better term because it is unambiguous—e.g.:

- “Canadian converts to Islam risk social and religious isolation because of rejection by their families and uninterest from inhospitable mosque communities, a new ground-breaking study is revealing.” Chris Cobb, “Islamic Converts Face Rough Road, New Study Says,” Ottawa Citizen, 27 July 2015, at A5.

But disinterest still predominates in this sense—e.g.: “Nancy Aldera, a Precinct 39 poll worker who had little to do in last Tuesday’s school board election because only 24 people voted, said she doesn’t know why there is so much disinterest in voting.” Jonathan
disinterested

Roos, "You Can Lead Them to the Polls," Des Moines Register, 15 Sept. 1996, at 1. Reserving uninterest for this use would be tidier, but because uninterest remains comparatively rare, differentiation seems unlikely to take hold on a broad scale.

disinterested; uninterested. Given the overlapping nouns (see disinterest), writers have found it difficult to keep the past-participial adjectives entirely separate, and many have given up the fight to preserve the distinction between them.

But the distinction is still best recognized and followed because disinterested captures a nuance that no other word quite does. Many influential writers have urged the preservation of its traditional sense. The typically understated A.R. Orage rhapsodized over "The culture. "

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Yet disinterested is frequently used (or, in traditionalists' eyes, misused) for uninterested—e.g.:


"Sales at many chains will look good because they were so poor last year because of the unusually hot weather and disinterested [read uninterested] shoppers." "Back-to-School Shopping Gets Good Grades," Tampa Trib., 3 Sept. 1996, Bus. & Fin. §, at 6.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

disinterested misused for uninterested: Stage 4
Current ratio (uninterested children vs. *disinterested children): 1:1
disinvestment = (1) consumption of capital; or (2) the withdrawal of investments, esp. for political reasons. Although sense 1 is the traditional one, sense 2 is more common today—e.g.:

About half of the 200 American companies in Kenya have disinvested and unemployment is growing." Andrew Hogg, "Frightened Moi Vows He Will Cull Democratic 'Rats," Sunday Times (London), 8 July 1990, at 120.


For a word similar in meaning—divestment—see divestiture.

disk. A. And disc. Disk is the more usual spelling. Disc is the spelling used in four senses: (1) a phonograph record; (2) an optical disk (as an audio compact disc or videodisc); (3) a tool making up part of a plow; and (4) a component of a brake system. Otherwise, disk is the preferred spelling for general reference to thin circular objects, intervertebral disks, celestial bodies, and computer disks.

B. And diskette. Both diskette and disk may refer to computer-data storage media. Disk may mean (1) the computer's permanently installed hard drive, (2) a compact disc that contains a program, data, or music (though this is better known as a CD), or (3) the small, flat, portable magnetic medium. Diskette always bears this last sense, and unsurprisingly it has been on the wane since about 1990: thumb drives and wireless technology have superseded diskettes. (The synonym floppy disk is also rapidly declining in use—probably because the cases that held disks were floppy only for a short period in the 1980s.) Disk is commoner and shorter, but neither form can be fairly criticized.

*disk jockey. See disc jockey.

dislodgment; dislodgement. The first spelling predominates in AmE (and historically in English generally, from about 1800); the second has predominated in BrE since about 1950.

dismembered. See disembodied.

dismissal; *dismission. The much older word *dismission (1547) has given way almost completely to the upstart dismissal (1778), considered a mere variant in the early 19th century. Today, *dismission is the needless variant.

Current ratio: 66:1

disable. So spelled—preferably not *dismissible. See -able (A).

Current ratio: 3:1

*dismission. See dismissal.
disorganized; unorganized. The first, the more frequently used term today, means “in confusion or disarray; broken up.” The second means “not having been organized;” but in a less pejorative sense.


Language-Change Index  
*disorientate for disorient: Stage 2  
Current ratio: 8:1

disparaging (= slighting, insulting) for **discourting or discouraging is a MALAPROPISM. E.g.: “The report found several disparaging [read discouraging] statistics for the revitalization area, which includes privately owned homes from Ninth to Fourteenth avenues $, and 23rd to 28th streets. [For example, 66% of the residents] live below the poverty level.” Sabrina Miller, “Neighborhood Shapes Its Future,” St. Petersburg Times, 9 Aug. 1995, City Times $, at 1.

Language-Change Index  
disparaging misused for discourting or discouraging: Stage 1  
Current ratio (discouraging circumstances vs. *disparaging circumstances): 79:1

disparate /dis-pә-rit/ = (1) markedly different <an expert in such disparate fields as economics and literary criticism>; or (2) unequal <before Brown v. Board of Education, blacks were subjected to radically disparate treatment in American schools>.

disparity. See difference.

dispasionate. See impassionate.

dispatch; *despatch. Although these two remain in a tight linguistic race, the former spelling is editorially preferred in both AmE and BrE.

Current ratio: 2:1


Current ratio: 186:1

disperse; dispersal. See disburse.

disport. See deport.

disposal; disposition. Both mean generally “a getting rid of,” but disposal more often has to do with trash or inconsequential items, whereas disposition is used in reference to things that are arranged, settled, or otherwise managed. Disposition connotes a preconceived plan and an orderly arrangement. Disposal, by contrast, bears negative connotations—more so in AmE than in BrE.

Disposition also—and primarily—means “mood; temperament; inclination.”

dispose for dispose of is jargonistic phrasing among waste-handlers—e.g.:  
• “But Ms. Graves says the numbers are a little skewed because the figures include all the waste disposed [read disposed of] by a county.” Jeff Selingo, “Lawmakers Relax Rules on Cutting Landfill Trash,” Morning Star (Wilmington, N.C.), 21 June 1996, at B1.

For the use of this verb in diametrically opposed senses, see CONTRYNOYS.

Language-Change Index  
dispose misused for dispose of: Stage 1

disposition. See disposal.

disproportionate; disproportional. See proportional.

disprove > disproved > disproved. So inflected consistently since the 18th century. *Disproven is a variant past participle that has never been standard in any variety of English. See proved.

Current ratio (had disproved vs. *had disproven): 18:1

dispute; disputation. These words should be differentiated. Dispute = controversy <goods in dispute>; disputation = formal argument or debate <effective disputation involves debunking the major counterarguments>.

disqualified; unqualified. These words have quite different senses. Disqualified = disabled; debarred. Unqualified = not meeting the requirements. An unqualified applicant doesn’t have the skills or training that the job requires. A disqualified applicant, even one with the skills and training, can’t be considered because of some rule, such as a policy against nepotism.

disquiet; *disquieten. The standard verb is disquiet (= to bother or disturb). The form *disquieten—not recorded in many dictionaries—is a NEEDLESS VARIANT. It is somewhat more common in BrE than in AmE—e.g.: “What will Europe consist of, and who will decide about the future shape and destiny of that suddenly and dramatically disquieted [read disquieted] continent?” George Weidenfeld, “What Europe Can Do, What Europe Must Do,” Independent, 8 July 1991, at 19.

Language-Change Index  
*disquieten for disquiet: Stage 1  
Current ratio (disquieted vs. *disquietened): 444:1

*disremember (="to forget," dating from 1815 in the OED, has long been considered a dialectal term. See dialect. Cf. misremember.

Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)  
Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
disrespect, vb. See dis.

*diss, v.t. See dis.

dissatisfied; unsatisfied. Some differentiation exists between these words. To be dissatisfied is to be positively bothered by the lack of satisfaction, whereas to be unsatisfied is to be less than completely satisfied. So a person whose accounts are in arrears has debts that are unsatisfied—and creditors who are dissatisfied.

disassemble; disassembly. Dissemble, meaning “to present a false appearance; to conceal the truth,” was a fairly common word through about 1900. It has since become rare, but it does still appear—e.g.:

• “The boy answered [my questions] simply, directly and honestly, unlike most adults, who dissemble, ramble or tell you everything but the answer to the question.” Judith S. Johnessee, “The Day a Boy Lost His Cat and Became a Man,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 15 Dec. 1994, at E9.

• “The problem is that the Pentagon’s credibility is shot. And as it has dissembled, it has only increased the confusion and suffering for those who fought the war.” “As Vets Suffer, Pentagon Blows Gulf Investigation,” USA Today, 13 Dec. 1996, at A14.

By contrast, the word disassemble (= to take apart) didn’t flourish until the mid-20th century. Yet it is now the more frequent word—e.g.:


Unfortunately, some writers use dissemble when they mean disassemble—e.g.:

• “Rushakoff said that he had to spend a lot of money learning how to use the right tools and the right procedures to dissemble [read disassemble] computers.” Myra Pinkham, “Obsolete Machines Yield New Fortunes,” Am. Metal Market, 24 Jan. 1996, at 5.


• “In the Sikorsky case, the 148-Mbyte assembly was disassembled [read disassembled] into its 250 component files, which were translated independently and then reassembled.” “Comanche Helicopter Blends CAD Models from 14 Suppliers,” Design News, 3 Sept. 2001, at 31.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
dissemble misused for disassemble: Stage 2

disseminate. So spelled—not *disseminate.

Current ratio: 6,482:1

dissent, n.; dissension; *dissention. Dissent refers to a difference of opinion, whether it is citizens dissenting from the decision of a governmental body or a judge dissenting from a majority opinion. A dissent, as opposed to dissent as a mass noun, refers to a dissenting judicial opinion—e.g.: “Judge Dennis wrote a brazenly activist dissent.” Thomas L. Jipping, “President Clinton’s Judicial Legacy,” Wash. Times, 17 Sept. 1996, at A19.

Dissent refers to contentious or partisan arguing—e.g.: “Dr. Mazzullo, who declined to comment about the dissent surrounding his contract renewal, has been a lightning rod for some residents’ discontent.” Merri Rosenberg, “Greenburgh Passes School Budget,” N.Y. Times, 22 Sept. 1996, § 13, at 4.

*Dissention is a mistaken form of dissension—e.g.: “Their prime-time speeches . . . could help forge the unity that propels the first black man into the presidency. Or they could highlight the splits and dissention [read dissension] that provide John McCain the opening he needs to win the White House.” Christy Hoppe, “On Obama Ticket, Biden Fills In Blanks,” Dallas Morning News, 24 Aug. 2008, at A1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*dissention for dissension: Stage 1

Current ratio (dissention vs. *dissention): 11:1

dissent, vi. Idiomatically, this verb takes from or (much less commonly) against, preferably not to or with—e.g.:

• “The court also ordered the county to pay White’s legal expenses, although Justice Paul E. Fleifer disented from that part of the ruling.” James Bradshaw, “Counties Told to Keep Full Records,” Columbus Dispatch, 22 Aug. 1996, at D1.

• “Three justices who dissented from the majority opinion in the Kiryas Joel case said they would uphold the initial legislation.” “New Law, New Hope in Kiryas Joel Battle,” N.Y. Times, 7 Sept. 1996, § 1, at 20.

• “She dissented against seven of eight Federal Open Market Committee decisions last year and will vote again on policy in 2016.” Jeff Kearns, “Fed Heads Hint Again of Looming Rate Hike,” Nat’l Post (Can.), 22 Aug. 2014, at 3.

dissernter; dissentient, n. Dissenter is standard in AmE for “someone who withholds assent, or does not approve or agree.” E.g.: “Reports suggest that one of the three dissenters [on the jury] was ‘scared to death’ of precisely the kind of retaliation that put Nee in his grave.” Peter Gelzinis, “Townies Know What Judge’s Bias Refuses to Let Her See,” Boston Herald, 8 Sept. 1996, at 10.

Dissentent is somewhat more frequent in BrE, probably because the term dissent (usually with an initial capital) has a special religious and social meaning in British history (i.e., someone who dissent from or refuses to conform—specifically, from the 17th century on—to the tenets and practices of the Church of England).

dissenting; dissentient, adj.; dissentious. Dissentient is sometimes used in BrE where dissenting would ordinarily appear in AmE. E.g.:

• “One and all admire that I had got hold of a good thing. Not a dissentient voice.” P.G. Wodehouse, Right Ho, Jeeves 28 (1934; repr. 1986).
• “The issue of foreign policy decision making may also be tackled because the Community will remain ineffective in this area unless the present unanimity rule is modified somewhat even if only to the extent of permitting decisions on foreign policy to be taken despite one dissentent [read, in AmE, dissenting] voice.” Garret Fitzgerald, “Presidency Offers Chance to Keep Goodwill of EU States,” Irish Times, 4 May 1996, at 12.

One ambiguity in dissentient is that readers might interpret it as a derogatory opposite of sentient; the true opposite of sentient (= feeling), however, is insentient. Dissentious (= given to dissension; quarrelsome) is a word that rarely appears.

*dissent. See dissent, n.

dissentious. See dissenting.

dissimilar. See dissenting.

dissimilar to. E.g.: “In the ‘60s, the blue-collar neighborhoods were dominated by gangs of youths not at all dissimilar from [read dissimilar to] the warring clans of ‘Braveheart’ and ‘Rob Roy,’” Gary Dretzka, “‘Small Faces’ Is Another Grim Picture of Scottish Life,” Chicago Trib., 3 Sept. 1996, at C3.

LANGUAGE-CCHANGE INDEX
*dissimilar from to: Stage 2
Current ratio (dissimilar to vs. *dissimilar from): 3:1

dissociate; *dissociate. Dissociate is the preferred term; *dissociate is a needless variant. Dissociate takes the preposition from.

• “To dissociate himself from such impairments, Dole released the medical summary of his exam last month.” “What’s Really Up, Doc?” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 26 July 1996, at B10.

• “It is worse to see supposed liberals, such as President Boris Yeltsin’s chief of staff Anatoly Chubais, dissociating themselves from the deal.” “Beyond Chechnya’s Cease-Fire,” Wash. Post, 5 Sept. 1996, at A22.

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*dissociate for dissociate: Stage 3
Current ratio: 3:1

dissolution of marriage. See divorce (n).

dissolvable; dissoluble. The word meaning “capable of being dissolved” was traditionally dissoluble (dating from the early 16th century). But since the late 1980s in AmE and the late 1990s in BrE, dissolvable has become the predominant form. It seems here to stay.

Current ratio: 1.2:1

dissyllable (= a word of two syllables) has been predominantly so spelled in all varieties of English since the 18th century. Beginning in the 1970s, there was a concerted effort among philologists to use disyllable—“the better spelling,” according to Robert W. Burchfield (FMEU3 at 221)—but the gallicism-like spelling with the -ss- has persisted and predominated.

Current ratio: 2:1

distensible (= capable of being distended) has been the standard form since the 18th century—*distendable and *distendible being needless variants.

Current ratio (distensible vs. *distendable vs. *distendible): 201:3:1

distention; distension. For the noun corresponding to the verb distend (= to become swollen and fully extended), these spellings are close competitors throughout the English-speaking world. AmE tends to prefer distention, BrE distension.

distill; distil. The spelling distill is standard in AmE, distil in BrE.

distinct; distinctive; distinguished. The first means “well defined, discernibly separate” <distinct speech>, and the second means “serving to distinguish, set off by appearance” <a distinctive red bow tie>. Distinct speech is well enunciated, whereas distinctive speech is idiosyncratically accented, different from that of surrounding speakers. Distinctive is sometimes misused for distinguished (= notable; famous)—e.g.: “Festivities begin Friday night at a Commonwealth Club/Inforum event, where a distinctive [read distinguished] group of authors will discuss the question ‘Dystopia/Utopia? Can the Bay Area Uphold a New Generation of Writers?’” Heidi Benson, “Litquake a Big One for S.F.,” S.F. Chron., 10 Oct. 2002, at D1.

Language-Change Index
distinctive misused for distinguished: Stage 1

distract. See detract.

distraight; *distraste; distrasted. Distrast, a word borrowed from French and pronounced /di-stray/, means “distracted or preoccupied, esp. because of anxiety.” Although the word typically refers to a person, it sometimes refers to personified things—e.g.: “As it looks to the start of the 21st century and the end of 14 years under Socialist President Francois Mitterrand, the world’s fifth largest military power and fourth biggest economy is distrast and irresolute.” Thomas Sancton, “If at First You Don’t Succeed,” Time, 24 Apr. 1995, at 46.

*Distraight (pronounced /di-stray/) is the feminine version of distrast. For English-language purposes, it is a needless variant not listed in most dictionaries, and it might be considered objectionable partly on grounds of sexism—e.g.: “In New Zealand, my father’s first posting as a young first secretary, there was the delightfully distraight [read distrast] Lady Cumming-Bruce.” Katie Hickman, “The Dutiful and the Damned,” Sunday Telegraph, 9 Oct. 1994, at 1.

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Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i–ii.)
Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
distrustful; mistrustful.

• “She is slightly distraire [read distrait] in manner, drily amused by life, not easily impressed, and unnervingly sexy,” “Small, Pure and Sexy,” Sunday Telegraph, 14 July 1996, at 9.


Both words, though, can typically be replaced by an ordinary term such as distracted, preoccupied, or absent-minded—or, if the anxiety level is high enough, by distraught, which means either “deeply agitated” or “insane.” E.g.: “Lucy had still been all but bedridden when her neighbor died. And she’d been distraught when the news was brought to her that he was dead.” Kathy Lynn Emerson, Face Down Under the Wych Elm 8 (2000).

Language-Change Index
*distraire for distort: Stage 2
Current ratio (distrait vs. *distrataire): 6:1

distrustful; mistrustful. The difference here is subtle because both terms mean “having or showing doubt; lacking confidence.” But distrustful implies suspicion or wariness based on an informed judgment, whereas mistrustful suggests uncertainty or uneasiness. So one might be distrustful of a used-car dealer’s puffing, yet mistrustful of a stranger’s advice. Note that both adjectives take the preposition of.

disyllable. See disyllable.

dive > dived > dived; dive > dove > dived. Although dove is fairly common in AmE (on the analogy of drove), dived has long been considered the preferable past-tense form. But times are changing: since 1986, the frequency of he dove into in AmE has surpassed that of he dived into (not true of BrE). So it is time to declare dive > dove > dived standard AmE alongside the older forms. E.g.:

• “A 23-year-old Severna Park man was in critical condition at Maryland Shock Trauma Center in Baltimore yesterday after he dove into a pool and suffered a cervical fracture to his neck, Anne Arundel County fire officials reported.” “Man Is Critically Injured in Dive into Pool During Bachelor Party,” Baltimore Sun, 16 July 2001, at B5.


• “After intermission, the four musicians dove into Ravel’s only contribution to the quartet repertoire.” Edward Reichel, “Something Old, Something New, Played Masterfully,” Deseret News (Salt Lake City), 9 Oct. 2002, at C9. (On the use of masterfully in the title of that article, see masterful.)

Language-Change Index
dove for dived as a past tense: Stage 5
Current ratio (she dove vs. she dived): 1.2:1

divergence; *dergency. The latter is a needless variant.

diverse; divers. Diverse implies difference, whereas divers implies severally. Diverse /di-vərs/ means “differing widely; unlike; varied”—e.g.:

• “As Chicago’s religious community becomes even more diverse—recent surveys show that there are more Muslims in the Chicago area than Jews, more Thai Buddhists than Episcopalians—the potential for strife increases.” Cathleen Falsani, “2 Suburbs, 12 Faiths Under One Umbrella,” Chicago Trib., 13 Sept. 1996, at 12.


Divers (= various, sundry)—pronounced /dɪ-vɜːrs/—remains a part of AmE only as a curiosity. Formerly it meant not only “various,” but “several” as well. For example, in The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare referred to “divers [i.e., ‘several’] of Antonio’s creditors” (3.1.113); in As You Like It, he wrote that “time travels in divers [i.e., ‘various’] paces with divers [again, ‘various’] persons” (3.2.308–09).

Today divers is an archaism, and its only accepted meaning is “various,” as in the following examples:

• “The possible perils are precluded by the filing of the notice of pendency which thereafter binds anyone subsequently obtaining an interest in the property, be they fee owners, mortgagees, grantees, tenants or divers others.” Bruce J. Bergman, “Who’s Hiding in the House,” N.Y.L.J., 25 Jan. 1995, at 5.


divestiture; *divesture; divestment. The standard noun corresponding to the verb divest is divestiture. E.g.:


• “The forecast improvement over last year is primarily due to divestiture of the crop insurance business and growth in the average credit portfolio.” Jennifer DeWitt, “Deere by Division,” Quad-City Times (Davenport, Iowa), 22 Aug. 2015, at 8.

*Divesture is a needless variant—e.g.: “Without the divesture [read divestiture], Otten would have controlled eight of the largest ski resorts serving skiers in...

Divestment, not at all uncommon, might seem to be another needless variant. Yet it appears in a number of legal phrases, such as vested interest subject to divestment. And it appears in many other contexts, usually involving the release of assets—e.g.: “In a few cases, the losers are Japanese companies, part of a multibillion-dollar divestment of their American assets.” Verne G. Kopytoff, “Asian Investment Is on the Rise in Los Angeles,” N.Y. Times, 22 Sept. 1996, § 9, at 7. To the extent that divestment deals more particularly with assets than divestiture (a more general word), using it in these contexts serves the cause of differentiation. At this stage, though, the difference is incipient only. Cf. disinvestment.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*divestiture for divestiture: Stage 1
Current ratio (divestiture vs. *divestiture): 49:1

*dividable. See divisible.

divide up. See phrasal verbs.

divisibility. See devisability.

divisible /di-viz-a-bal/ is so spelled—not *divisable. (See -ABLE (A.)) *Dividable is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 1,165:1

divisive (= causing a lot of disagreement between people) is preferably pronounced /di-vih-siv/, not /di-vih-siv/.

divisor. See devisor.

divorce. A. And annulment. A divorce recognizes the existence of a valid marriage, whereas an annulment treats the marriage as if it had never existed. Even so, in most jurisdictions the “nonexistence” of the marriage is not considered absolute: any children conceived before the annulment are considered legitimate.

B. And dissolution of marriage. In the 1970s, the word divorce was struck from many statutes and replaced by the euphemism dissolution of marriage.

C. And legal separation. A legal separation is “an arrangement whereby a husband and wife live apart from each other while remaining married, either by mutual consent (often in a written agreement) or by judicial decree” (Black’s Law Dictionary 1572 [10th ed. 2014]).

divorcée; divorcé. The usual word—divorcée—properly refers only to a woman. The masculine form is divorcé, which has been AmE usage since the late 19th century. But some writers have tried to create male divorcées—e.g.: • “Parents were lulled into security by Martin’s plausible manner and his implied message that, as an ex-police officer, he was a man to be trusted. Gregarious divorcée [read divorcé] Martin was a familiar figure in Manchester in his open-top sports cars.” Ex-Policeman Brainwashed Schoolgirls with Drugs,” Herald (Glasgow), 13 Sept. 1996, at 3. (On the use of gregarious divorcée as a “title” in that sentence, see titulat...
dock, n. Since the late 19th century, usage commentators have occasionally criticized the landlubber’s use of 
dock for wharf or pier. But this sense has been common since that time. In fact, nautically speaking, dock has
 two senses: (1) “a large structure or excavated basin for receiving ships, equipped with gates to keep water in
 or out”; and (2) “a landing pier; wharf” (WNWCD). Although Theodore Bernstein and Wilson Follett both
disapproved of sense 2, most commentators today accept it. It should be considered standard.

doctrinal; doctrinaire; *doctrinary. Doctrinal (/dəktrə-nəl/ or /dək-trə nal/) is the neutral term, meaning
“of, relating to, or involving a doctrine.” E.g.: “To both
Protestants and Catholics, Moon is guilty of grievous
doctrinal heresies—by preaching, as he does,
that Christ’s mother, Mary, was not a virgin, and by
arguing that he and his wife, the ‘True Parents,’ are
on earth to finish the job Jesus failed to do.” Michael
S. Serrill, “Moon Beams into Brazil,” Time, 23 Sept.

Doctrinaire (/dəktrə-nər/) = slavishly or imprac-
tically adhering to dogma; highly dogmatic. “Sad to
say, these selections will be made not by the police
officers’ benefactor but by a doctrinaire liberal whose
largest campaign contributions from a professional
group come from (for God’s sake!) trial lawyers.” Don
Feder, “Crimefighter Bill Much Overrated,” Boston
Herald, 25 Sept. 1996, at 31. *Doctrinaire is a need-
less variant of doctrinaire.

Doctrinaire is sometimes misspelled *doctrinaire,
on the apparent analogy of questionnaire—e.g.:

• “It does indicate a willingness on the part of the House
leadership to negotiate along less conservative doctrin-
naire [read doctrinaire] lines.” “‘Endangered’ Moderates,”
• “In doctrinaire [read doctrinaire] terms the decree
stated the fundamentals of the Communist doctrine.”
Malbone W. Graham, New Governments of Central
Europe 229 (2007).

Cf. millionaire & questionnaire.

Documentary; *documental. The latter is a need-
less variant.

Current ratio: 117:1

Document Design. Traditionally, writers have been
relatively unconcerned with the look of their docu-
ments. This lack of concern didn’t have many horrible
consequences in the days of typewriters, when the
primary design choices were the width of the margins
and the amount of underlining and capitals.

But with the advent of word processing, document
design has become much more important as writers
are presented with all kinds of new formatting and
printing options. Failing to knowledgeably use these
options puts the writer at a disadvantage because most
readers have become accustomed to well-designed
documents. In short, it has become essential to know
something about typography and design.

In this space, of course, it’s impossible to offer any
more than the simplest primer on the subject. But a
few particularly important points deserve mention.

A. Readable Typeface. For text, a readable type-
face probably means a serif typeface, such as the one
used throughout this book, as opposed to a sans-serif
(/sæn-sɛrˈɪf/) typeface made up of only straight lines.

Serifs are short strokes that project from the ends of
the main strokes that make up a character.

This is a serif typeface: Times New Roman.

This is a sans-serif typeface: Univers.

Although sans-serif typefaces often work well in head-
ings and the like, they can be difficult to read in text.

Among the better serif typefaces are Bookman, Caslon,
Garamond, Palatino, and Times New Roman. One type-
face long predominated in American business: Courier.

Avoid it at all costs. Courier is an eyesore.

B. White Space. Ample white space makes a page
more inviting. The primary ways to create white space
on the page are to use generous margins (for example,
margins greater than one inch for letters and other
business documents), to supply headings and sub-
headings, and to enumerate items in separate para-
graphs, subparagraphs, or bulleted lists.

C. Headings and Subheadings. Artfully employed,
headings and subheadings make a document much eas-
er to follow. Not only do they serve as navigational aids
for readers, they also help writers organize thoughts
more logically than they might otherwise. See widow.

D. Avoiding All Caps. See capitalization (e).

E. Avoiding Underlines. Generally, italicizing is
preferable to underlining, which was traditionally (on
a typewriter) nothing more than a poor substitute for
italics. The effect of underlining is to take up white
space between lines, thereby making the lines harder
to read.

F. Listing. Enumerate items by breaking down lists
into paragraphs and subparagraphs. Using a tabulated
list allows the writer not only to display the points bet-
ter but also to improve the sentence structure. Make
sure that the list falls at the end of the sentence—not
at the beginning or in the middle. See enumerations.
G. Bullets. On this extremely useful device, see Punctuation (b).

H. Hanging Indents. In most text, when you indent an item to be listed—whether it’s a bulleted item or an entire paragraph—don’t begin the second line of the item at the left margin. Instead, begin it just below the first line, with the enumerating signal hanging to the left. Examples appear throughout this book in bulleted lists.

I. Ragged Right Margin. Many readability specialists insist that unjustified right margins make text more readable than justified ones do. In letters, contracts, and the like, an unjustified right margin is often desirable.

J. Citations in Footnotes. Citations tend to clutter the text; you can easily minimize this cluttering by moving citations to footnotes (and avoiding footnotes for discussion purposes). See Footnotes.

K. Characters per Line. Ideally, a line of type should accommodate 45 to 70 characters, but the “fine print” that characterizes so many legal documents often spans 150 characters to the line. In text of that kind, the reader’s eye tends to get lost in midline or in moving from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. One way to improve a document with a large block of text—and, typically, small margins on each side—is to use a double-column format. That design can be extremely helpful, for example, in consumer contracts such as residential leases.

L. Select Bibliography. For more on this subject, see Philip Brady, Using Type Right (1988); Robert Bringhurst, The Elements of Typographic Style (1992); and Words into Type (3d ed. 1974).

dogged. As a past-tense or past-participial verb, dogged is pronounced /dawgd/ or /dogd/ <they were dogged by problems>. But as an adjective, the word is pronounced /dawgd/ or /dogd/ <they were dogged victims of an inexorable fate>.

doggerel (= bad, often silly poetry) is the standard spelling. It is pronounced with three syllables (/ˈdɔɡərəl/). *Doggrel is a variant form that predominated in BrE until about 1880. It has since become nonstandard.

Current ratio: 12:1

doggy; doggie. Oddly, AmE prefers doggy in all uses except the phrase doggie bag (attested from 1958). BrE is consistent with doggy for all uses of the word.

dogma. Pl. dogmas (/ˈdɔɡməz/) or *dogmata (/ˈdɔɡmə-tə/). The simple plural is preferred over the Greek *dogmata—e.g.:

• “If The Union doesn’t subscribe to the unisex dogmatas of our frumpy homogenizers—and I sometimes wonder—such distinctions should be borne in mind.” Letter of R.R. Dalling, “Valley Center Churlish Caricature,” San Diego Union-Trib., 17 Apr. 1985, at B7.

• “Neither of them sat through the gobbledygook that passes for education courses, nor absorbed the dogmas of the day that pass for thinking.” Thomas Sowell, “Hardly the Last Word on Education Reform,” Tampa Trib., 20 Sept. 1996, at 17. (The mispaired Neither . . . nor in that sentence will cause a miscue for many readers. See neither . . . nor (c).) See plurals (b).

doldrums, always plural, denotes a state of low energy, boredom, depression, or lifelessness—e.g.: “The annual Spring Flower Show chases away the winter doldrums from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. daily until May 10.” “3 Things We Love About Lincoln Park,” Chicago Sun-Times, 9 Feb. 2009, News §, at 3. The word is thought to derive from the Old English dol (= dull) and is related to the word dolt. The suffix appears to have been influenced by tantrum, and it has no thing to do with the percussion instrument. Hence anyone who thinks the word alludes to “dull drums” is engaging in folk etymology. (See etymology (d).)

Substituting dull for dol makes for a natural if overused pun—e.g.: “Hope for Summer Movie Dulldrums.” Headline, L.A. Times, 1 May 2008, at E1. But sometimes it’s clear error—e.g.:

• “In their continuing effort to snap Shawn Green out of his doldrums [read doldrums] at the plate, the Dodgers battered their cleanup hitter second vs. the Brewers.” “Baseball Log,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 26 May 2004, at B5.

• “Marlow also pulled Weston out of its doldrums [read doldrums] after Dracut (12–8–2) took the initial lead.” Bruce Lerch, “Savio Shakes Off Rust, Tips Salem,” Boston Herald, 6 Mar. 2007, Sports §, at 50.

When capitalized, the term denotes an equatorial zone of light winds where sailing ships are prone to becalming—e.g.: “Days blend into another. We cross the Doldrums, the vast belt of low pressure and light wind that girdles the equator.” Matthew Power, “Sailing Toward Paradise,” N.Y. Times, 23 Dec. 2007, Travel §, at 1. The OED speculates that this sense comes from a misunderstanding of the idiom in the doldrums as referring to a physical location.

dollars. When the dollar sign appears with a numeral, using the word dollars is redundant—e.g.: “By October this year, Mr. Bradley had raised nearly $20 million dollars [read $20 million].” James Dao, “Seeking Upset, Bradley Enlists Unlikely Model,” N.Y. Times, 27 Dec. 1999, at A1, A12. See redundancy.

dollhouse; doll’s house; *dolls’ house. The BrE preference today is for the oldest form, dating from the 18th century: doll’s house. The strong AmE preference (since about 1970) is for the 19th-century solid form dollhouse. The plural possessive *dolls’ house is a variant that has predominance nowhere in World English.
domestic; domesticated. A domestic animal is a pet, such as a cat or dog, that lives with the family. A domesticated animal is a formerly wild animal that has long been bred for human use (common examples being cattle, pigs, and sheep).

domesticate. See domiciliate.

domesticated. See domestic.

*domicize. See domiciliate.

domicile; *domicil. Domicile /dom-ә-sil/ is spelled both with and without the final -e, but the better and more common spelling today is with it. The incomplete-looking *domicil predominated in AmE for most of the 18th century. See citizenship.

domiciliate; domesticate; *domesticize. Domiciliate = to establish a domicile or home. Domesticate = (1) to make domestic; (2) to make a member of the household; or (3) to tame (wild animals) or cultivate (wild plants) for human use. *Domesticize is a need-less variant of domesticate. See -ize.

dominance; domination. Dominance = the fact or position of being dominant. Domination = the act of dominating; the exercise of ruling power.

dominant, adj. Just as predominant is sometimes ill-advisedly written predominate (preferably a verb, not an adjective), so dominant is sometimes wrongly written dominate (as if it were pronounced /dәm-i-nәt/ or /dәm-i-nәt/) —e.g.:

- “They will encourage the silent members and try to hold back the verbose, dominate [read dominant] members.” Charles Lessard & Joseph Lessard, Project Management for Engineering 3 (2007).

Dominate (/dәm-ә-nәt/) is a verb, not an adjective—or at least no dictionaries have yet recorded an adjectival use.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

dominate misused as an adjective in place of dominant: Stage 1
Current ratio (dominant role vs. *dominate role): 312:1

dominate. See predominate, vb.

domination. See dominance.

dominatrix. Although most dictionaries record dominatrix as the plural, dominatrixes is more common in print and should be accepted as standard. See sexism (d).

Current ratio: 1.3:1

domino. A Plural Form. Since the mid-19th century, the standard form has been dominoes, not *dominos. See plurals (d).

Current ratio: 4:1

B. Dominos is. When referring to the game—not to the individual pieces used in the game—the word dominoes takes a singular verb <dominoes is a game with long-lasting appeal>.

C. Dominos are. When referring to costumes—hooded robes with eye masks, or the masks themselves—dominoes are is correct <the dominoes that most revelers wear with their Venetian carnival costumes are now unavailable in local stores>.

donate, a back-formation from donation, was once considered a vulgar substitute for give. Today, however, it is a slightly formal word that is unexceptionable.

done (= finished), when used as an adjective, is sometimes criticized, but the word has been so used since the 15th century <call me when you're done>. Many stylists prefer through <call me when you're through>.

don't. See contractions.

don't think. This phrasing has sometimes been criticized as illogical. After all, you do think: you simply think something negative. But the phrasing is perfectly idiomatic and centuries old —e.g.:

- “I'd always wondered where I'd be when we found the aliens, but I don't think I ever imagined I'd see them on my computer screen.” Wayne Rash Jr., “Rash's Judgment,” Communications Week, 12 Aug. 1996, at 82.
- “There are a number of countries that are friends and allies of the United States. With our power and friends,
A similar error occurs when compromise is confused with comprise, which itself is often misused for compose or constitute. In strict usage, the parts compose the whole; the whole comprises the parts; the whole is composed of the parts; the parts are comprised in the whole. Hence the phrase *is comprised of is always poor and should be replaced by is composed of, is made up of, or comprises. See comprise (a).

Sometimes, however, the writer wanting the incorrect comprise seizes upon a doubly incorrect word, compromise—e.g.:

- “Women compromise [read make up] 60 percent of the 400,000 California adults estimated to have been seriously mentally ill in 1989.” Nancy Weaver, “Mentally Ill Women Bear Brunt of State Cuts in Care, Report Says,” Sacramento Bee, 8 Mar. 1995, at A1.

One more example. There’s a difference between the words forebear (= an ancestor) and forbear (= to refrain). To choose the latter in place of the former, in a noun sense, would be a single bobble. But to morph the word into *forbearer is a double bobble:

- “We have inherited the animal characteristics of our forbearers [read forebears]. They in turn inherited the animal characteristics of their forbearers [read forebears], who also inherited the animal characteristics of their forbearers [read forebears].” Richard Townsend, The Evolution of the Mind 41 (2003).
- “When we academics honor our greatest intellectual forbearers [read forebears], we presumably carry the highest obligation of fidelity to their ideas.” Lief H. Carter, Law and Politics as Play, 83 Chi.-Kent L. Rev. 1333, 1334 (2008).

All the misuses discussed here are so spectacularly wrong that they merit their own special name: hence “double bobbles.” For other examples, see euphuism, *had have & reek.

Double Comparisons. See comparatives and superlatives (d).

double entendre; *double entente. The English phrase—sometimes thought to be pseudo-French, but actually 17th-century French—is double entendre. The modern French form, *double entente, is an affectation—e.g.:

- “Martin Booth writes the scripts, funny in a conventional way, with rather more double entente [read double enten-

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

| Stage 1: | Rejected. |
| Stage 2: | Widely shunned. |
| Stage 3: | Widespread but . . . |
| Stage 4: | Ubiquitous but . . . |
| Stage 5: | Fully accepted. |

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
**Double Genitives**

- “If the Elizabethan herbal doubles ententes [read double entendres] were still in vogue, Ophelia’s mad scene would provoke even more blushes.” Stan Kelly-Bootle, “Let No Man Steal Your Time,” *Computer Language*, June 1989, at 83.


**Double entendre** originally referred to any ambiguity (usually a pun) giving rise to more than one meaning, but now connotes that one of those meanings is indecent or risqué—e.g.:

- “Sex in an upscale cabaret is never explicit, but double entendre is always a welcome visitor.” Michael Barnes, “It’s Cabaret in Austin, Darling!” *Austin Am.-Statesman*, 15 July 1996, at E1.

- “The company has an owl logo, but it ‘acknowledges that its name is considered a slang term for a portion of the female anatomy,’ according to company literature, and the six businessmen who founded Hooters were aware of the double entendre when they chose the name.” William Conroy, “A Hooters Near You,” *Asbury Park Press* (Tune, N.J.), 18 July 1996, at C1.


The best pronunciation is /dәb-әl ahn-tahn-dәb-әl ahn-tahn/.  

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**  
*double entente for double entendre: Stage 1*  
Current ratio (double entendre vs. *double entente*): 45:1

**Double Genitives.** See possessives (d).

**Double Modals.** In grammar, a modal (short for modal auxiliary) is a verb such as can, could, may, might, must, ought, shall, should, used, will, or would. A modal is used with another verb to express grammatical mood—that is, to indicate the speaker’s attitude toward the factuality or likelihood of what is being said: (1) the indicative expresses objective fact <Sam can play the piano>; (2) the imperative expresses a command or request <play it again, Sam>; and (3) the subjunctive expresses something hypothetical or contrary to fact <if Sam were up to it, he would play>. (See subjunctives.)

Modal auxiliaries are distinguished from the primary auxiliaries: am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been, do, does, did, have, has, had. Primary auxiliaries often team up to indicate tense in a verb phrase <are being stubborn> <have been patient>. Sometimes they team up with modal auxiliaries for the same purpose <will have arrived>.

But in **STANDARD ENGLISH**, only one modal appears in a verb phrase. A double modal, as the name implies, is a combination of two modals in such nonstandard expressions as these:

- *can might*  
- *could might*  
- *can may*  
- *may might*  
- *may must*  
- *must may*  
- *may should*  
- *should may*  
- *may might have*  
- *might have may*  
- *may might do*  
- *might do may*  
- *may might have done*  
- *might have done may*  
- *may might have been*  
- *might have been may*

- *had ought*  
- *ought had*  
- *might should*  
- *should might*  
- *may ought*  
- *ought may*  
- *may be*  
- *be may*  
- *may be might*  
- *might be may*

These phrases are not uncommon in regional **DIACLECT**—especially in the South—but they do not belong in **STANDARD ENGLISH** and rarely appear in print. E.g.: “Although I have only spent one day on the water at Lay Lake, and interviewed perhaps 20 percent of the field, I still believe *I might can [read might] get pretty close.” Steve Bowman, “Expect the Unexpected When Classic Title on Line,” *Ark. Democrat-Gaz.*, 8 Aug. 1996, at C4.

The problem with most double modals, of course, is that only one of the verbs is needed. In the most common double modal, *might could*, the word might can usually be dropped without a change in meaning. So unless you’re recording dialect or creating fictional dialogue—or mimicking regional speech for comic effect—don’t use double modals. Cf. *might should have.*

**Double Negatives.** See negatives (b).

**Double Passives.** See passive voice (b).

**Double Possessives.** See possessives (d).

**Doublespeak**, the language of disinformation, is a subset of **EUPHEMISM**. In the words of a leading text on the subject:

Doublespeak is language that pretends to communicate but really doesn’t. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable. Doublespeak is language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language that conceals or prevents thought; rather than extending thought, doublespeak limits it.


In the language of doublespeak, poor people are fiscal underachievers; hobos or “street people” are non-goal-oriented members of society; prostitutes are sexual workers or sexual service providers; graffiti sprayers are wall artists; and students whose grades are borderline are emerging students.

Although doublespeak is commonly associated with George Orwell’s 1984, the term he used in that book was Newspeak. But the idea is the same.

Apart from a few words and phrases that have become very common—for example, exceptional used in reference to children with severe learning disabilities or subnormal intelligence (see exceptional (n)) and only purposely misplaced (see only (b))—doublespeak is not generally the subject of this book. For good treatments, see Lutz’s work cited above and several earlier works: Mario Pei, *Words in
Sheep's Clothing (1969); Mario Pei, Double-Speak in America (1973); Mario Pei, Weasel Words: The Art of Saying What You Don't Mean (1978); William Lambdin, Doublespeak Dictionary (1979); and Hugh Rawson, A Dictionary of Euphemisms & Other Doubletalk (1981).

**DOUBLE SUBJECTS.** Linguists term it "pronominal apposition"—the use of a dependent pronoun in a sentence such as *My brother he's the president*. Of course, the *he* is unnecessary there, and its use marks the speaker as a speaker of DIALECT.

Interestingly, though, the difference between this substandard usage and standard usage is slight—though quite perceptible. William Labov explains the kinship between the double subject in standard and in nonstandard speech:

> ([I]t is not always realized that the "nonstandard" aspect is merely a slight difference in intonation. A standard speaker frequently says the same thing, with a slight break after the subject: *My oldest sister—she works at the bank, and she finds it very profitable*. There are many ways in which a greater awareness of the standard colloquial forms would help teachers interpret nonstandard forms. Not only do standard speakers use pronominal apposition with the break noted above, but in casual speech they can also bring object noun phrases to the front, "foregrounding" them. For example, one can say

*My oldest sister—she worked at the Citizens Bank in Passaic last year.*

*The Citizens Bank, in Passaic—my oldest sister worked there last year.*

*Passaic—my oldest sister worked at the Citizens Bank there last year.*

> Note that if the foregrounded noun phrase represents a locative—the "place where"—then its position is held by *there*, just as the persons are represented by pronouns. If we are dealing with a time element, it can be foregrounded without replacement in any dialect: *Last year, my oldest sister worked at the Citizens Bank in Passaic.*


Labov’s final examples—with the "foregrounding"—are quite informal, even if they are standard. Some journalists habitually use that type of sentence.

There is, of course, the more formal, oratorical type of double subject, as in *We the people of the United States . . . . See appositives.***

**Doubling of Final Consonants.** See spelling (b).

**doubt. A. Doubt that; doubt whether; *doubt if*. The phrasing *doubt that* (the most common of the three) is used primarily in negative sentences, statements of skepticism, and questions—e.g.:

- "Consider Ronald Reagan: he was widely considered an amiable, affable fellow—but no one doubted that he could be aggressive if he needed to be." William F. Allman, "The Serotonin Candidate," *Forbes*, 23 Sept. 1996, at 134.

**Doubt whether** is used primarily in affirmative statements (again, though, of skepticism)—e.g.:

- "But even if the rules can survive legal challenge, they doubted whether David Kessler, the Food and Drug Administration’s chief, can reach his goal of cutting youth smoking in half within seven years." "White House Expected to Attempt to Regulate Tobacco as Drug," *Tampa Trib.*, 22 Aug. 1996, at 11.

**Doubt if** is less sound because it suggests a conditional statement. The phrase *doubt that* will usually replace *doubt if*—e.g.: "Dr. Hughes doubted if [read *doubted that*] it would be used to screen all women as the test was not 100 per cent accurate." Bryan Christie, "Premature Births Targeted by New Test," *Scotsman*, 3 Sept. 1996, at 3. This usage appears most commonly in BrE. Cf. *I’m not sure that & determine whether.*

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

* *doubt if* for *doubt that*: Stage 3

Current ratio (*doubt that* vs. *doubt if*): 11:1

**B. Followed by a Negative.** Doubt can be confusing when followed by a negative—e.g.: "I doubt whether the company will not take the further step when necessary.” This sentence merely states that the writer thinks the company will take the further step.

**C. And *misdoubt*.** See *misdoubt*.

* *doubt if*. See *doubt (A).*

**doubtlessly** is a *nonword* for *doubtless* (a mild expression of certainty), no *doubt* (a stronger expression of certainty), or *undoubtedly* (the strongest of these three expressions of certainty). The word *doubtless* is itself an adverb <the Framers doubtless feared the executive’s assertion of an independent military authority unchecked by the people>. The form *doubtlessly* is therefore unnecessary—e.g.:

- "Lebed, who has made no secret of his longing to be Russia’s defense minister, *doubtlessly* will *read will doubtless* take great personal satisfaction from [read in] being courted by Yeltsin." James P. Gallagher, "Russians Lift Yeltsin Into Runoff," *Chicago Trib.*, 17 June 1996, at N1.
  (On the position of the adverb within the verb phrase, see *Adverbs (A).* )

- "[Brett Favre’s] protracted divorce from the Packers *doubtlessly* [read *undoubtedly*] has him determined to prove they should have welcomed him back." Bob DiCesare,
doubt (a). See

• common—e.g.: But the opposite error, Rick Wilber, “Scotland’s Ancient Stones Teach Stu-
toward the circle like a
dousing [read
of stones, picks up a stick that lies nearby, holds it out
ground by “divining” for it, as with a divining
dowse
water>. To
dr, is more
time wrongly made either

• dowse
—e.g.: “She
dowse
a 

do-nut—should be reserved for eatery names and advertising.

Current ratio: 1.5:1
dour, in the best speech, rhymes with lure. But many
people say it as if it rhymed with sour.
douse; dowse. These words are best kept separate. To
douse (/dowz/) is to soak with liquid, as by immersing
or drenching <she immediately doused the flame with
water>. To dowse (/dowz/) is to try to find something
underground by “divining” for it, as with a divining
rod that is supposed to help in locating water, oil, or
buried treasure <with nothing more than a twig, they
went dowsing for gold>.

Douse is sometimes misused for dowse—e.g.: “She
walks over to a tree that stands at the edge of one circle
of stones, picks up a stick that lies nearby, holds it out
toward the circle like a

dousing [read
dousing] rod,”
Rick Wilber, “Scotland’s Ancient Stones Teach
But the opposite error, dowse for douse, is more
common—e.g.:

• “[T]he next year quickly
dowsed [read
doused] his spirits.”
• “So firefighters use tankers to shuttle water to portable
tanks, which are filled with water that firefighters draw
on to
douse
[read
douse]
fires.” John C. Kuehner, “Pond
Solves Firefighting Problem,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland),
• “Derry firefighters, assisted by departments from four
towns,
dowsed [read
doused] five or six burning cars with
foam last night at the same junkyard where more than 100
vehicles burned five months ago.” Correction: Stacked

Current ratio (dowsing rod vs. *dousing rod): 13:1
2. dowse misused for douse: Stage 1

Current ratio (dousing the fire vs. *dousing the fire): 14:1
dove. See dive.

dovecote (= a small house for pigeons) is the stan-
dard spelling. *Dovecote is a variant. The word is pro-
nounced /dav-koh/ when spelled -cote or /dav-kot/
when spelled -cot.

Current ratio: 2:1
dower; dowry. These waning terms are related ety-
omologically (fr. L. dot-, dos “gift, marriage portion”) but are best kept distinct in modern usage. Dower =
the widow’s legal share during her lifetime of the real
estate owned by her deceased husband. E.g.: “Even
though [a wife] wasn’t recorded as an owner, the fact
that she was married to the owner would give her an
interest in the property upon his death. It’s known as the
‘dower.’” Joe Blundo, “A Question (or Several) of
Title,” Columbus Dispatch, 6 Nov. 1994, at J1.

Dowry is occasionally used as a synonym of dower,
but doing so muddles the differentiation between the
words. In the best usage, dowry denotes the money,
goods, or real estate that a woman brings to her hus-
band in marriage. E.g.:

• “The bishop would sneak into the nobleman’s home at

night and leave little bags of gold for the girls’ dowries.”
Nancy Marlowe, “Why Does Santa Claus Come Down the
• “And these Catholic nuns provide dowries so these girls
can have Hindu weddings to Hindu husbands.” Patrick
Travel §, at T1.
• “The
dowry
Raylyn brought to her marriage was her mom
and dad, the best mother-in-law and father-in-law a guy
could ever hope to have.” “Raylyn Lucille Stadler” (obit.),
Siskiyou Daily News (Yreka, Cal.), 19 Aug. 2015, at 5.

Because the cultural practice of giving dowries is
obsolescent in the West, the word itself took on an
archaic flavor in the second half of the 20th century.
For more on this term, see brideprice.
down payment. Two words, not one.

Current ratio: 18:1
downday (= to de-emphasize), dating from the 1950s,
became a VOGUE WORD after about 1985 and remains
so. If a casualism is desired, the PHRASAL VERB play
down generally suffices—e.g.: “Theiss also
downdayed [read played down] the importance of police groups
altogether, saying many of them are ‘vintage labor
unions’ that typically back Democrats.” Marc Lacey,
“Sherman Endorsed by Police Groups,” L.A. Times,

Current ratio (downday vs. *play down): Stage 4

Current ratio: 3:1
downstairs, adj., as in downstairs bathroom, is some-
times wrongly made either *downstair or *downstair’s.

Cf. upstairs.

Current ratio (downstairs rooms vs. *downstair rooms): 51:1

Down syndrome, named after the British physician
J.R.H. Down (1828–1896), has been predominantly
so written in AmE since the late 1980s and in BrE
since the late 1990s. Before that, the usual form was *Down's syndrome* (the second word is never capitalized in any standard format). From 1900 to the early 1970s, *mongolism* was the standard term, but that term came increasingly to be seen as highly offensive because it named a chromosomal disorder after a race of Asian people thought to resemble those afflicted with the disease. In 1868, Down wrote the essay “The Ethnic Classification of Idiots,” in which he likened various congenital conditions to ethnicities. In the end, it would take more than a century to dislodge *mongoloid, mongolism,* and *Mongolian idiocy* from the vocabulary of intellectual disabilities. In 1961, four scientists wrote to the British medical journal *The Lancet* objecting to the M-terms and proposing four alternatives. The editor selected *Down syndrome* (well, the possessive form of it, originally), and the rest is history.

Current ratio (*Down syndrome* vs. *Down's syndrome*): 3:1

dowry. See *dower*.

dowse. See *douse*.

doyen; doyenne. *Doyen* (/ˈdoʊ.ən/ or /ˈdoʊ.ən/) = (1) a knowledgeable person with vast experience; the senior member of a group; or (2) one of the oldest examples of something in a given category. Sense 1: “The prose style of John Kenneth Galbraith, doyen of the American left, is instantly recognisable both for its idiosyncratic construction, crying to be read aloud in its author’s basso profondo, and for its sweeping compression of facts and ideas.” Martin Vander Weyer, “The Apostle of Wel

*down*ward(s). See *directional words* (a).

dowry makes two plural forms: *dozens* and *dozen.* The first is used when the number is inexact or unspecified

draft; draught. Since the late 19th century, *draft* has been standard AmE in all meanings of the word. In BrE, *draught* is the usual spelling in all but the following three senses: (1) "a bank's payment order"; (2) "the compulsory enlistment of people into military service"; and (3) "an initial or preliminary version." American writers who use *draught* are likely to seem pretentious or pedantic. The BrE form is susceptible to a strange misspelling—e.g.: “Sharee took a quick *draught* [read *draught*] of the water, using it sparingly since we had no idea how long we would be making our way underground, or how long the water supplies we found along the way would hold out.” Peter David, *The Woad to Wrin* 112 (2002). (The error is not a typo—it appears repeatedly in the book.)
The past-tense and past-participle *drag* is a dialectal form common in the southern United States—e.g.: “Mazur said his father lipped the fish and *drag* it well back up on the bank so it couldn't get away.” Mike Leggett, “1 Fish, 2 Fish, Red Fish, Big Fish,” *Austin Am.-Statesman*, 16 Jan. 1994, at D12.

The linguistic authorities have had some negative things to say. W2 (1934), the last of the great prescriptive dictionaries, called *drug* “dialectal” and “illiterate.” More recent dictionaries, such as RH2, call it, more chastely, “nonstandard.” The *OED* calls it obsolete except in dialect.

A Southerner named Charles Allen Lloyd, the well-informed author of an interesting book called *We Who Speak English* (1938), might be expected to defend the expression. But he doesn’t:

In the formation of the past tense of irregular verbs have already been discussed, but not mentioned at that time was the fairly common use of “*drag*” for “dragged,” for which I can find no shadow of an authority even in those dictionaries that record “*dove*” as a colloquial possibility for the past tense of “*dive*.” Yet I recall a young man who had been an instructor of English in a small college narrate his experiences in the World War and tell how he “*drag*” a wounded foot for a mile to the dressing-station. The foot, I am glad to say, had made an excellent recovery, but his English seemed to be still suffering. *Ibid.* at 182.

A word now about the nature of this issue. The question, to a traditional grammarian, is whether *drag* is a regular or an irregular verb. (See *irregular verbs.*) No existing grammars list *drag* among the irregular verbs.

Even the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (1991), in volume 2, lists the form *dragged* as “usual,” adding that *drug* is “also frequent.” One of the chief resources for that dictionary—*Dialect Notes*, a publication of the American Dialect Society—provides rich information on how the form is distributed. One writer listed *drug* as a “frequent” past tense in Nebraska, and also Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Illinois, Kansas, and Tennessee. See Louise Pound, “Word-List from Nebraska (III),” 4 *Dialect Notes* 271, 274 (1913–1917). It was said to be “very common” in East Alabama and common in Kentucky, Louisiana, New Jersey, and—surprisingly—New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland. Not so surprisingly, it was said to be “rare” in New York City. See B.S. Monroe & Clark S. Northup, “Some Lumber and Other Words,” 2 *Dialect Notes* 394, 396 (1900–1904).

As a matter of distribution, perhaps the best summarizing-up is that of E. Bagby Atwood, the Texas linguist, in 1953: “*Dragged* . . . predominates among cultured informants everywhere, but it predominates among the other types only in N.Y., n. Pa., e. Va., S.C., and Ga. Elsewhere in these [noncultured] types it is more or less narrowly limited by the competing form *drug*.” *Survey of Verb Forms* 9 (1953) (as quoted in the *Dictionary of American Regional English*). Whether President Bill Clinton would rank as a “cultured informant” might be a disputable point, but when he was debating Bob Dole on 16 Oct. 1996, he said: “‘Then we took comments as we always do. And there were tens of thousands of comments about how we ought to do it. That’s what *drug* [read *dragged*] it out.”” *Transcript of Second Televised Debate Between Clinton and Dole,* *N.Y. Times*, 17 Oct. 1996, at B10.

**Language-Change Index**

*drag* as past tense and past participle of *drug*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Current ratio (<em>dragged it out</em> vs. <em>drag it out</em>): 33:1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**dragman** (= an interpreter or guide in the Near East or Middle East) has formed the standard plural *dragomans* since the mid-19th century—not *dragomen*.

Current ratio: 3:1

**dramatic; drastic.** Each word is sometimes misused for the other. *Dramatic* = (1) of or like a drama; or (2) filled with action or emotion. *Drastic* = extreme in effect; severe; harsh. Sense 2 of *dramatic*, of course, is allied with the sense of *drastic*, but the two words idiomatically work with different types of subjects. Measures that a person takes—or things that a person does to remedy a serious problem—are *drastic*. If those measures work, and especially if they work well, the results may be *dramatic*.

*Dramatic* sometimes displaces *drastic*, especially in reference to a person’s doing something dramatic to correct a bad situation—e.g.:

- “And have college administrators do one more smart thing. Let them do something *dramatic* [read *drastic*] to level the playing field so that all schools can cope with the emancipation, to wit: spread the windfalls and bonanzas around.” John Underwood, “Reading, Writing and Remuneration,” *N.Y. Times* 8, at 13.
- “Embattled late night host Stephen Colbert went to much more *dramatic* [read *drastic*] measures to blow up the Twitter account that sparked last week’s #CancelColbert social media movement.” “Forget Simply Pressing Delete,” *Pitt. Post-Gaz.*, 2 Apr. 2014, at C7.

*Drastic*, likewise, displaces *dramatic* when the reference is to *dramatic* results—e.g.:

- “Obviously many Democrats had feared more *dramatic* [read *drastic*] results and heaved a sigh of relief that no greater losses had occurred.” L. Douglas Wilder, “Politics in ’96 Will Be a Roller-Coaster Ride,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 4 Feb. 1996, at F1.

See word-swapping.

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1. *dramatic* misused for *drastic*:
   - Stage 1
   - Current ratio (*dramatic* measures vs. *dramatic* measures): 33:1

2. *dramatic* misused for *drastic*:
   - Stage 1
   - Current ratio (*dramatic* improvement vs. *dramatic* improvement): 10:1
dramaturge; dramaturg; *dramaturgist. Dramaturge (= [1] a playwright; or [2] a theatrical adviser) is the traditional term, the others being needless variants. Although dramaturge is sometimes exactly the word needed, it’s fustian when used merely as the name for an avid reader of plays. And even in sense 2, it’s a euphemism that makes the position sound more grandiose—e.g.: “A dramaturge [read dramaturge] deals with the literary side of the theater by reading plays, researching their background and communicating their meaning to artists and audiences. Though the tradition developed in Europe, it has become increasingly fashionable for theaters in the United States to hire a staff dramaturg [read dramaturge].” Lawson Taitte, “What’s a Dramaturg [read Dramaturge]?” Dallas Morning News, 25 Apr. 1993, at C1.

The spelling is that of the French etymon: dramaturge. Since about 1980, the -e-less spelling dramaturg (also, oddly, pronounced /drah-mah-tarj/) has been in draught. See drastic. See dramatic.

draught. See draft.

draw. For the use of this verb in diametrically opposed senses, see contronyms.

draw on. See phrasal verbs.

dreadnought (= [1] a thick wool coat; or [2] a heavily armored battleship) is the standard spelling. *Dreadnaught is a variant. See naught.

dream has the past-tense and past-participial forms dreamed and dreamt. For both past forms, dreamed is more common in AmE and BrE alike.

dreck (= worthless filth) is preferably so spelled. The form *drek, though closer to the original Yiddish spelling, is a mere variant in AmE.


See dry.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. dryer misused as a comparative adjective (for drier): Stage 2
   Current ratio (drier climate vs. *dryer climate): 9:1
2. drier misused for the noun dryer: Stage 3
   Current ratio (clothes-dryer vs. *clothes-drier): 4:1

drift. For the use of this word in opposite senses, see contronyms.

drink > drank > drunk. So inflected. The past participle surprises some people because they associate drunk with “inebriated.” And for this reason, no doubt, drank has encroached on the past-participial drank—e.g.: • “Jabil Circuit offered free cab rides home to any of its employees who might have drank [read drunk] too many toasts.” Teresa Burney, “Spoils of the Holiday Season,” St. Petersburg Times, 21 Dec. 1997, at H1.
• “On Good Friday the popular nightclub’s image was scarred as Luther Casteel of Elgin, who had drank [read drunk] at the bar earlier wearing a suit, returned sporting a mohawk, wearing camouflage and toting four guns, according to the police.” Terri Tabor, “J&B’s Owner Pledges Reopen,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 21 Apr. 2001, at 9.

See irregular verbs & dialect.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. drank as past participle of drink: Stage 2
   Current ratio (has drank vs. *has drunk): 12:1
2. drunk as simple past of drink: Stage 1
   Current ratio (he drank vs. *he drunk): 32:1

drink-driving. See drunk driving.

drive. A. Inflected Forms: drive > drove > driven.

Drive (for drove) seems to have become standard in some sports terms. In baseball, phrasal verbs made from nouns that are in turn derived from strong verbs are often weakened to -ed forms, as when fly out becomes flied out—the only instance in which fled (instead of flew) is correctly used as a past tense. And the same thing has happened with line-drive (which has invaded the lingo of other sports). For many writers and editors, some other phrasing is usually preferable—e.g.: • “Skates crushed across the ThunderDome ice. Pucks line-driven [read ricocheted] off the fence.” Hubert Mizell, “Strike Looms but Passion to Play Burns,” St. Petersburg Times, 22 Sept. 1994, at C1.

• “A second remained when Zendejas line-driven it [read kicked a line drive] at Spellman, who came up the middle and didn’t even need to jump.” “Bits ’n’ Pieces,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 19 Dec. 1994, at D6.

Though uncommon, the word driven as an ordinary past-tense verb—a mistake for drove—is not unheard of: “Only Chaffin, who also driven [read drove] a 1995 Ford Thunderbird, and Buford, have won the Late Model events in the fifth week of running,” Charles Searcy, “Buford Wins in His Return,” Tennesseean, 30 Apr. 1995, at C3.

More common is the erroneous *drived as a past participle displacing driven—e.g.:


• “At the Fallowfield Road intersection the van hit the vehicle driven [read driven] by Joshua’s grandmother, moments after it narrowly avoided colliding with another vehicle which was forced off the road.” Mark Richardson, “Teen Pleads Guilty in Boy’s Crash Death,” Ottawa Citizen, 5 Oct. 1994, at B1.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. *drived for the simple-past drove: Stage 1
   Current ratio (drove a vs. *drived a): 21,809:1

2. *drived for the past-participle driven: Stage 1
   Current ratio (droved by vs. *drived by): 15,905:1

B. Dialectal Variants. There are two dialectal past-tense forms—*driv (surviving in the southern U.S. and New England) and *druv (occurring mostly in Kentucky). It would surely be no loss if they were driven into extinction.

driveld, vb., makes droveled and driveling in AmE, drivelled and drivelling in BrE. See SPELLING (B).

driver’s license. So written (or driver’s licence in BrE)—not *drivers license, *drivers license, or *driver license, no matter what the card in your wallet may tell you. The predominant plural is driver’s licenses, not *drivers’ licenses.

droll (= amusing; humorous; whimsical) is so spelled, even though the French word it comes from is drôle. That spelling better matched the word’s pronunciation (/drol/, not to rhyme with doll), but the word has been spelled droll in English since the early 17th century. Today *drole (in English) can be regarded only as a misspelling. E.g.: “Finally, Gail Collins’s drole [read droll] prediction about the same contest: ‘It looks now as if the race will be won by the candidate with the largest immediate family.’” Richard Goldstein, “Primary Rib,” Village Voice, 20 Sept. 1994, at 9.

The word always means “funny” in one sense or another. Most commonly, it means “witty, esp. in an offbeat way”—e.g.: “A diminutive Southerner with droll wit and a childlike voice, Capote was the toast of the New York society party circuit in the 1960s even while becoming one of America’s most famous writers.” Eric Harrison, “Infamous, Indeed,” Houston Chron., 15 Oct. 2006, Zest §, at 14.

Far less often, it’s used to mean unintentionally funny, even ludicrous—e.g.: “How droll and obtuse that conservatives think the Constitution should remain anchored against the tides of change while those currents bring with them torrents of newfangled iPods and ever-changing gusts of news; one day about Britney Spears, the next day Paris Hilton.” Jonah Goldberg, “Living Constitution’s Double Standard,” Chicago Trib., 25 Aug. 2006, Commentary §, at 27.

Perhaps because the words look and sound a bit similar, droll is sometimes misused as a synonym for dull. The result is a startling malapropism—e.g.: “The local recruiting firm Accounting One created the stand-up comedy contest last year to try to show a lighter side to the profession saddled with a droll [read dull] image.” Mike Tierney, “Bottom Line: It’s OK to Laugh at Accountants,” Atlanta J.-Const., 15 Oct. 2006, Bus. §, at C3.

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droll misused for dull: Stage 1

drone; drudge. Drone = (1) a male bee; (2) an idler living off others’ work; (3) an unmanned aircraft or watercraft; or (4) a monotonous tone or buzzing. Drudge = (1) one whose work is menial or boring; or (2) drudgery. Surprisingly (since a drone bee does no work), drone is increasingly used as a synonym of drudge—e.g.: “The first act chronicles dystopian rebel Winston Smith’s witheringly dull life as a drone [read drudge] in a government records office, where the drudgery involves creating a historical reality based on the whims of the ruling party.” Peter Marks, “1984,” Wash. Post, 5 Sept. 2008, Weekend §, at WE41. This trend is worth resisting because it may create a contronym—that is, this use of drone is a near-antonym of the traditional sense 2.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

drone in the sense “drudge”: Stage 2

drought; *drouth; *drouit. Drought has been the predominant, standard form of the word in all phases of Modern English. *Drouth is archaic in BrE but still occasionally appears in AmE texts. Even so, drought (pronounced /drout/, not /drouth/ or /drowt/) is the preferred form in both linguistic communities. The simplified spelling *drouit, though toyed with in the mid-20th century, never took hold.

Misusing drought for flood is perhaps just an odd mental glitch triggered by drown—e.g.: “Spring is a time of heightened concern about drought [read flooding]. In a typical year, melting snowpacks can
conspire with increased rainfall to send rivers over their banks. Sometimes in northern areas, ice jams exacerbate the floods on swollen rivers. This year, spring flooding is less likely than normal.” “Weather Report,” N.Y. Times, 15 Mar. 1995, at A9. For another misuse—drought for the BrE draught—see draft.

Language-Change Index
drought misused for flooding: Stage 1
Current ratio (drought vs. *drouth vs. *drout): 7,423:112:1

drove, vb. See drive.

drown. A. Drowned and *drownded. The past-tense form is drowned, not *drownded—the latter being dialectal. E.g.: “True, [the flooding] helped duck populations, but it also drowned millions of other living creatures who weren’t favored targets.” “Hunters Are Not Really a Tool of Nature,” Buffalo News, 14 Feb. 1993, at 8. (See irregular verbs (d).) The dialectal form appears in the speech of uneducated characters in the works of Dickens, Kipling, and Twain.

Sometimes the correct form is made to establish a more severe, unsympathetic character, as here: “The Drowned Uncles, the children called them. ‘Drowned,’ Marion corrected. Marion was forever improving anyone who could be improved. ‘The Drowned Uncles of Skipper Sid,’ the kids would say anyway. ‘The Drowned Brothers of Skipper Sid,’ Marion would correct them again. Drowned, she meant, not drowned. They were mixing her up.” Dawn Rae Downton, Seldom: A Memoir 132 (2002).

Language-Change Index
*drownded as past tense of drown: Stage 1
Current ratio (drowned vs. *drownded): 106:1

B. Drowned; was drowned. In the best usage, if somebody drowned it was an accident, but if somebody was drowned foul play was involved.

drudge. See drone.

drug, vb. See drag.

drunk, adj.; drunken. Traditionally, drunk has been an adjective appearing in the predicate <he was drunk>, whereas drunken has preceded the noun <a drunken sailor>. Today, the words mostly bear distinct senses. Drunk = intoxicated, inebriated. Drunken = given to drink; morbidly alcoholic.

So drunken usually denotes a habitual state—e.g.: “Molly Ringwald stars as a waitress with a drunken buffalo of a father and a churchgoing mother she calls ‘Ma.’” Ginia Bellafante, “New (and Not) for ’96,” Time, 23 Sept. 1996, at 70. This nuance is slightly counterintuitive, given that a drunk refers to someone who is habitually drunk. Although drunken sometimes means merely “exhibiting intoxication,” the better term for this meaning is drunk—e.g.: “A confidential computer disk containing the names of 4,000 AIDS patients was mailed anonymously to a newspaper after a drunken [read drunk] public health worker showed it to friends and dropped it outside a bar.” “Briefly,” Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 20 Sept. 1996, at A2.

Drunken also frequently describes not a person or group of people, but their brawl, orgy, or party, through hypallage—e.g.: “She agreed not to speak ill of Astra, which has been embroiled in a scandal since tawdry tales of drunken company parties and fraternity-party behavior were made public earlier this year.” Beth Healy, “Judge Deals Setback to Ex-Astra Worker,” Boston Herald, 21 Sept. 1996, at 15.

drunk driving; *drunken driving; drink-driving. The first is the predominant phrase in both AmE and BrE. The second was the usual phrase from the 1920s to about 1980; it fell out of use perhaps primarily because drunken connotes a greater level of intoxication than drunk, and by the 1980s methods were being developed to determine with greater precision a person’s blood alcohol content. The standard term today—drunk driving—exemplifies hypallage because it is the driver, not the driving, that is drunk. To American eyes, though, the BrE variant, drink-driving, looks extremely odd—e.g.: “A London public health watchdog yesterday demanded a cut in the drink-driving limit as they revealed the £20bn a year cost of accidents in the capital.” James Meikle, “Drink-Drive Limit Must Be Cut,” Guardian, 11 Oct. 2002, at 14.

The phrase driving drunk is a convenient and universal equivalent, in which drunk functions as an adverb (in place of whatever adverbial phrase the local statutes use, e.g., driving while intoxicated or driving under the influence). When the verb drive becomes a gerund <he was arrested for driving drunk> and therefore requires an adjective rather than an adverb, drunk driving provides a neat shorthand.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 7:2:1

Drunk. See drunk.

dry, adj., makes drier and driest—not *dryer and *dryest. Oddly, however, dryly is preferred over *driely. See drier.

Current ratio (driest vs. *dryest): 12:1
Current ratio (dryly vs. *driely): 3:1

drier. See drier.

dual (= double; twofold) is sometimes misspelled duel—e.g.:

- “The refinements . . . include a modified cam and carburetor, higher compression ratio, larger valves and duel
...dubious


Of course, duel is a noun that originally meant “a formal combat between two people, fought with weapons, under an accepted code of procedure, and in the presence of witnesses.” Today, however, because the practice that it denotes has fallen into disuse, the term duel has extended its sense to refer to any contest between two opponents.

Language-Change Index duel misused for dual: Stage 1 Current ratio (dual nature vs. *duel nature): 259:1 dubious = (1) causing uncertainty <his credentials were dubious>; or (2) doubting <we are dubious about whether we’ll be able to attend>. Although sense 2 has occasionally been criticized, it is now in good use.

dubious distinction has the dubious distinction of being one of our most overworked expressions.

Dubya. The quintessentially Texas pronunciation of the letter W took on national and international significance in 2001, when the son of the 41st U.S. president took the oath of office as the 43rd. The problem was that both men’s names are confusingly similar: George Herbert Walker Bush, the father, and George Walker Bush, the son. Since their names are not identical, they are not technically Sr. and Jr. (see names (p.).) Elder and younger has precedent (the two Plinys and the two U.S. Supreme Court Justices Harlan), but it’s awkward. Within their family, father and son have been known to go by 41 and 43. Popularly, and in the press, they came to be distinguished as George Bush and George W. Bush.

That convention had a historical antecedent: the country’s second president was John Adams and its sixth was Adams’s son, John Quincy Adams. The latter was always distinguished from the former by his middle name.

In the end, though, it was a nickname based on the son’s middle initial that served to distinguish the son. That was appropriate, since the affable George W. had a knack for giving other people nicknames. So he became Dubya. Both the idiosyncratic pronunciation and the spelling became standard quickly. Not only was it a convenient way to distinguish the two presidents, but it was also acceptable to Dubya’s friends and foes alike. To supporters it connoted Bush’s down-home personality; to opponents it ridiculed his Texas roots and (through its association with dialect) a perceived lack of intelligence.

The term has always been favored more by Bush’s opponents than by his supporters. For example, it appears in the title of the left-wing British satire The Madness of George Dubya (2003), taking off, of course, on the title of the play The Madness of George III. And there was the unflattering 2008 movie Dubya.

Dictionaries vary greatly about what pronunciations of the letter W they sanction. W2 and the NOAD, for example, give only one: /dәb-/you/ (like double you). W3 also recognizes /dәb-/lyor/ and, “in rapid speech,” /dәb-a[yo]/ or even /dә-bye/. Dubya is mostly Southern dialect and is especially common in Bush’s home state of Texas.

duct tape. So spelled—not *duck tape, whether that was its original name or not.

On 10 February 2003, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security declared a “level-orange” terrorism alert and advised people to stock up on plastic sheeting and duct tape. Soon after, William Safire of The New York Times firmly declared that *duck tape was the original form, dating from World War II when Johnson & Johnson developed the material for the U.S. Army to waterproof ammunition cases. He cited two wartime ads, one for Venetian blinds “in cream with duct tape or white with duck tape,” and another for surplus “cotton duck tape.”

Phoey! fired back Jan Freeman of The Boston Globe the following week. First, who uses duct tape on Venetian blinds? Second, cotton duck tape is more likely cotton duck fabric in tape form. Third, why hasn’t Paul Dickson, author of War Slang, ever heard soldiers mention *duck tape? For that matter, why do Tim Nyberg and Jim Berg—who have written five books on the tape’s many uses and have been promoting the Army *duck tape story for years—call themselves “the Duct Tape Guys”?

The fact is that duct tape is over 60 times as common in print as *duck tape, and that is unquestionably the standard spelling.

One writer explains the origin of the misuse: “Duct tape is so seldom used on heating ducts that most people mispronounce it ‘duck tape’ as they use it to mend parkas and sheath short cables. I came close to using it on a duct once.” Ed Quillen, “It Even Works for Hanging Pipes,” Denver Post, 20 Feb. 1994, at E3. But the fact that people don’t really associate the tape with ducts does not explain the error (after all, who associates the tape with ducks, either?). Instead, it is the side-by-side t sounds that are to blame: it’s unnatural to separate them in speech, and it’s a natural error to spell the phrase as it sounds. And the misuse is common—e.g.:

• “Their tactic is then to put the metal back in place with duct tape [read duct tape], and disguise the cut with paint.” John Dillin, “Two U.S. Approaches to Mexico?” Christian Science Monitor, 18 Oct. 1993, at 4.

• “With all the technology available these days in motorsports, rubber hammers and duck tape [read duct tape] did as much as anything to piece Gordon’s car back together,” David Scott, “Jeff Gordon Suffers His Worst Day at Indy,” Charlotte Observer, 26 July 2015, at 347.

One company, Henkel Consumer Adhesives, owns the trademark on “Duck Tape,” and that brand name surely aggravates the confusion. As Safire pointed out, the Times article reporting the Homeland Security alert was accompanied by a picture of two rolls of “Duck Tape.” The difference is that duct tape is the generic name for the material—a common noun that is always lowercase. Duck Tape is a mildly fanciful brand name—a proper noun that is always capitalized and properly used only as an adjective, as in “Duck Tape brand duct tape” (or, more likely, “Duck Tape brand adhesive”). Keeping the terms distinct is vital to maintaining trademark protection, so even on the company’s website one will find the accepted generic spelling: “Tell us your duct tape Real Story!” <www.ducktapeclub.com>.

Keeping the terms distinct is vital to maintaining trademark protection, so even on the company’s website one will find the accepted generic spelling: “Tell us your duct tape Real Story!” <www.ducktapeclub.com>.

**Language-Change Index**
*duck tape for duct tape: Stage 2 Current ratio (duct tape vs. *duck tape): 66:1

dudgeon (= anger, resentment, indignation) is sometimes confused with dungeon—e.g.:


Although the term appears most often after the adjective high, it does sometimes appear without it—e.g.:

• “Because they are nursing their dudgeon and savouring their victories rather than thinking with care, anti-smokers believe themselves to be upholding liberal social principles when in fact they are traducing them.” Blowing Smoke,” Economist, 20 Dec. 1997, at 59.

• “From the media’s spluttering dudgeon, an innocent bystander would have thought Blumenthal was the rein- carnation of William Allen White.” Jeff Jacoby, “Sid Blumenthal, the Reporter’s Friend?” Boston Globe, 3 Mar. 1998, at A11.

**Language-Change Index**
*high dungeon for high dungeon: Stage 1 Current ratio (high dungeon vs. *high dungeon): 81:1

duel, vb., makes dueled and dueling in AmE, duelled and duelling in BrE. Likewise duelist predominates in AmE, duellist in BrE. See spelling (b) & dual.

due to. The traditional view is that due to should be restricted to adjectival uses in the sense “attributable to,” usually following the verb to be (sometimes understood in context). But the stylist may wish to avoid even correct uses of the phrase, which one writer calls a “graceless phrase, even when used correctly,” adding, “Avoid it altogether.” Lucile V. Payne, *The Lively Art of Writing* 148 (1965). Under that view, due to is a skunked term.

Despite the traditional view that the adjectival use is best (due being equivalent to attributable), the phrase is commonly used as a preposition or conjunctive adverb meaning because of, owing to, caused by, or on grounds of—e.g.:

• “Due to [read Because of] a mistake in Lincoln-Mercru- ry’s press material, which we didn’t notice until we read Nissan’s press material, the maximum cargo room listed for the Villager in our 1992 review was incorrect.” Tom Incantalupo, “Road Test: Nissan Quest,” *Newsday* (N.Y.), 16 Sept. 1994, at A63.

• “Viewers were supposed to care about characters they knew little about and, due to [read owing to] expense and logistics, the adventures were limited to gimmicks and dialogue on the sub’s bridge.” Paul Lomartire, “Seaquest Charts Course to Florida,” Palm Beach Post, 17 Sept. 1994, at D1. See owing to.


Two studies reported in 1962 found that as a matter of word frequency in edited text, because of appeared 62% of the time, due to 30%, and owing to 8%. See Margaret M. Bryant, *Current English Usage* 81 (1962). Sometimes the examples of due to are somewhat comical—e.g.:

• “Only the likes of Trigger and C’Lock can expect to compete with the big boys due to superi- rior graphical interfaces and good quality, unique content.” “Your Friendly Global Medium,” *New Media Age*, 19 Sept. 1996, at 6. We all know what babies are due to. But what are big boys due to? The reader might momentarily wonder. New media age indeed!

In the following examples, the phrase is used in the traditionally preferred way. But as Payne notes, the sentences might be improved by eliminating it—e.g.:

• “Trend reports show that pants are expected to be at the core of women’s fall wardrobes. This shift is due to increasingly casual office dress codes.” “A Leg Up,” *Sunday Advocate* (Baton Rouge), 11 Sept. 1994, People §, at 4. (A possible revision: This shift has resulted from increasingly casual office dress codes. Or: Why? Office dress codes have become increasingly casual.)

• “The widening of the gap was due largely to the increase in black-female-headed families.” “Black Families Now Earn Even Less than Whites, Census Says,” *Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk), 16 Sept. 1994, at A12. (A possible revision: The gap has widened largely because of the increase in the number of families headed by black females.)

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**Language-Change Index** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l-li.)

due to the fact that

- “One key reason that rigs are still running at all in the United States is due to the resilience of the service sector.” Don Briggs, “Current Downturn May Be New Normal,” Alexandria Daily Town Talk (La.), 22 Aug, 2015, at A4. (A possible revision: The U.S. rigs’ continued operation is due in large part to the resilience of the service sector. Or: The service sector’s resilience is partly responsible for U.S. rigs’ continued operation.)

Due followed by an infinitive is not a form of the phrase due to, although it looks deceptively similar. E.g.:

- “Polk commissioners are due to reconvene this morning to narrow the field of eight finalists who were interviewed Wednesday and Thursday,” Jerry Fallstrom, “Wahl Waits for Word from Polk,” Orlando Sentinel, 16 Sept. 1994, at 1.
- “The 49-year-old was due to marry his fiancée Hana Chochrunova on March 9 this year,” Joanne Sweeney, “The Co Antrim Man Walking 900 Miles in 30 Days in Memory of the Beloved Uncle He Lost to Cancer,” Belfast Telegraph, 22 Aug. 2015, at 17.

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due to misused for because of or owing to: Stage 4
due to the fact that, common in speech, can almost always be boiled down to because—e.g.:

- “They don’t work, in no small part due to the fact that [read because] Sara appears to have abandoned acting and is content merely to look pretty.” John Scalzi, “Van Damme’s New Film Kicks,” Fresno Bee, 16 Sept. 1994, at F3.
- “Even if theory and data were perfect, there might be less than a perfect correlation due to the fact that [read because] exogenous variables can always intervene.” Llewellyn D. Howell & Brad Chaddick, “Models of Political Risk for Foreign Investment and Trade,” 29 Columbia J. World Bus. 70 (1994).
- “Some exhibitors are not increasing the size of their booths, due partly to the fact that [read partly because] several other regional and international travel markets are being held between next month and November.” Agnes Wee, “Interactive Kiosks for Asia Travel Market,” Bus. Times, 30 Aug. 1996, at 4.

For more about this phrase, see because (d).

duﬀel, the preferred spelling for the bag, is an eponymous term deriving from the city of Duffel, Belgium. But because the -el spelling departs from analogous terms spelled -le—such as muffle, scufﬂe, shufe, and also those such as baffle, hassle, tussle—the word is frequently misspelled *duﬀle. (Mussels, the crustaceans, are exceptional.)

From the 1930s (when the bag ﬁrst became popular) to the 1970s, the two spellings vied closely for predominance. Not until about 1980 was duﬀel bag unquestionably standard. The less usual spelling, which is about 20% as common as duﬀel in modern print sources, still occurs in some well-edited newspapers—e.g.:


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

duﬀel misspelled *duﬀle: Stage 3

Current ratio: 3:1

du jour (= of the day) is a gallowicism that has been used with menu items since the late 1960s <soup du jour>. Now it has become voguish in the sense “voguish.” It is the phrase du jour—e.g.:

- “Drugs will always be a problem, city vice squad boss John McCormick said in the 1970s, when smack was the scourge du jour [read of the day].” Bill Foley, “Drug War Proves to Be No Walkover,” Fla. Times-Union, 11 Nov. 1996, at A5.
- “Into this category fall the other stories du jour [read trendy stories] that command our attention and disdain simultaneously, and in equal measure: Paula Jones, Kelly Flynn, Whitewater, campaign finance and, as ever, anything about the Kennedys.” Asta Bowen, “As Consumers of Information, We’d Rather Be Titillated than Satisﬁed,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 17 July 1997, at A13.
- “Yesterday’s top news may disappear into a black hole as the media spotlight rushes to the next topic du jour [read hot topic].” “Loyalty and Realpolitik,” Christian Science Monitor, 30 Mar. 1998, at 12.

Even if those uses are borderline, there can be no doubt that coupling du jour with today is over the line—e.g.:

- “The issue du jour today [read of the day] was welfare, which meant that Mr. Alexander added a few paragraphs on the subject to his standard speech.” David E. Rosenbaum, “New England Finds G.O.P. Trying Out New Tactics,” N.Y. Times, 15 Feb. 1996, at B15. This redundant phrasing seems to have begun in American restaurants, where it is not uncommon to hear servers say, “Our soup du jour today [or even our soup du jour of the day!] is chicken noodle.” See REDUNDANCY.

The phrase is often mistakenly written *de jour—e.g.:


*De jour could become the great misspelling of our day.

In French, by the way, du is a sort of contraction for de le in the same way that au is for a le. Du and au are used only with masculine nouns such as jour.

So although it’s possible that the mistaken *de jour results from rusty knowledge of French grammar,
more likely it results from Americans’ general ignorance of foreign tongues.

**Language-Change Index**

**Dullness; *dulness.** Although *dulness* predominated in print (both AmE and BrE) from the 18th century through the early 20th, *dullness* experienced an exciting surge in the first two decades of the 20th century and had established itself as the standard form by the 1920s. The usage of the word is usually unnecessary in the expression *duly authorized.* Likewise, *duly* is almost always redundant in phrases such as *duly signed.*

**Dumb = (1) unable to speak; or (2) stupid.** Although sense 1, the traditional usage, has long been considered preferable (e.g., “deaf and dumb”), sense 2 has predominated in such a way as to make the term a disparaging one. Today, *mute* is the generally preferred term for someone who cannot speak. The origin of using *dumb* to mean “stupid” is invidious. In law, a person who was mute (and usually deaf, too) was automatically deemed an idiot (not my word—it can be found in scholarly texts). The usage is centuries old.

**Dumbfounded** is the standard spelling. *Dumfounded* is a variant that enjoyed some popularity in AmE about 1890 to 1910, but that has waned. The word is pronounce either /doo-oh-dee-nam/ or /doo-wod-ә-nәm/.

**Duologue.** See dialogue.

**Duplex (= a house divided into two parts so that it has two separate homes in it) forms the plural *duplexes.*

**Duplicate, adj.; duplicative; *duplicatory; duplicitous.** Duplicate = (1) being identical to another <duplicate copies>; or (2) existing in identical or corresponding parts or versions <duplicate receipts>. *Duplicative* = unnecessarily doubled or repeated. (*Duplicacy* is a needlessly variant of *duplicative.*) *Duplicitious* (= marked by duplicity) is a late-19th-century coinage generally understood to denote the two-faced taking of inconsistent positions, and therefore carries the meaning “deceitful.”

American and British legal writers have latched onto the word *duplicitious* in the sense of doubleness, from the old legal meaning of *duplicity* (= double pleading). A nonlawyer might be confused by the following uses of the word—as suggested, in the last two examples, by quotation marks around *duplicitious* (mistranslated in the next-to-last example):

- “An information charging a conspiracy to commit burglary is not *duplicitious* because it alleges that the conspiracy was to commit two or more different burglaries.” *Hamilton v. People,* 51 P. 425, 425 syl. 4 (Colo. 1897). (The specimen just quoted antedates the earliest known use [1928] given in *W.U.)*
- “The State Court of Appeals ruled that the indictment used to obtain his 1986 conviction was *‘duplicitious,’* or not specific enough.” “Prosecutor Won’t Seek New Abuse Charges,” *N.Y. Times,* 21 Sept. 1989, at B11.

**Dullness** is the generally preferred term for someone who cannot speak. The origin of using *dumb* to mean “stupid” is invidious. In law, a person who was mute (and usually deaf, too) was automatically deemed an idiot (not my word—it can be found in scholarly texts). The usage is centuries old.

**Duteous.** The usual term is *dutiful.* Although formerly in good use, *duteous* is an archaic needless variant.

**During such time as** is verbose for *while.* The phrase typifies legalese.

**During the course of** is almost always verbose for *during.*

**Durst.** See dare (e).

**Dust.** For the use of this verb in opposite senses, see contronyms.

**Dutch.** See Netherlands (A).

**Dutiful; *duteous.** The usual term is *dutiful.* Although formerly in good use, *duteous* is an archaic needless variant.

**Current ratio** (duplicative vs. *duplicatory*): 162:1

**During such time as** is verbose for *while.* The phrase typifies legalese.

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**Current ratio** (duplicative vs. *duplicatory*): 162:1

**DVD.** When this advancement in optical-disc technology hit the market in 1997, the letters stood for *digital video disc* as surely as CD stood for *compact disc.* It was originally called that because the discs were primarily used for playing movies. But the medium soon proved to have so many other uses—such as games, computer software, and data storage—that the industry soon retrofitted the *DVD* abbreviation with a new name, *digital versatile disc.* That was so obviously contrived that today industry insiders agree that the industry stand for nothing. The public, on the other hand, still clings to the original name as well as its contrived offspring—e.g.:

- “Using DVDs for personal use is tricky because the powers-that-be are battling to make their versions of the *digital versatile disc* the universal standard.” Chris Seper, “Picking the Best: DVD Format,” *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 9 Dec. 2002, at E2.
- “Agents on Monday seized 35,000 compact discs, 10,000 digital video discs (DVDs) and 156 CD burners with the capacity to copy compact discs 40 times faster than the standard CD burners available on personal computers.”

**Language-Change Index** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

dwarf. Pl. dwarfs. The form *dwarves, a variant form, occasionally appears—e.g.:  


- “In this case, Alvio Renzini, of the European Southern Observatory, and a team of eight colleagues have investigated white dwarves [read dwarfs] (old stars in which nuclear fusion is at an end) in a globular cluster of stars.” John Gribbin, “The Universe’s Age Will Have Us Seeing Stars,” Guardian, 1 Aug. 1996, at 8.  

When he released his famous movie in 1938, Walt Disney got it right: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. See plurals (c). Cf. wharf.

**Language-Change Index**

*dwarves for dwarfs: Stage 3  
Current ratio (dwarfs vs. *dwarves): 3:1

dwell has two past-tense forms, dwelt and dwelled. The former has always appeared more frequently in print sources from the 17th century on—e.g.:  


The two forms may be undergoing differentiation: dwelled tends to refer to the physical act, while dwelt (upon) takes as its object an idea or other abstract concept.  

Current ratio (dwelt upon vs. dwelled upon): 21:1

dybbuk (= a dead person’s wandering soul that comes to inhabit the body of a living person) is the standard spelling. *Dibbuk is a variant. The word is pronounced /dib-ok/. Pl. dybbuks or (less good) *dybukkan.

Current ratio (dybbuk vs. *dibbuk): 16:1

dying, dyeing. Dying corresponds to the verb die (= to expire), dyeing to the verb dye (= to color with a dye).

Dyeing is often mistakenly written dying—e.g.:  

- “From Fountain Valley, the water could be distributed by the Orange County Water District to golf courses, a carpet-dying [read carpet-dyeing] firm and other reclaimed-water users.” Jonathan Volzke, “Another Plan for Treated Sewage?” Orange County Register, 14 July 1996, at B1.  


See die (b).

**Language-Change Index**  
dying misused for dyeing: Stage 1  

dyke. See dike.

dynamic, as a noun, is a vogue word that sprang to currency in the latter half of the 20th century. E.g.:  

- “In the first case, a mediation is stipulated. In the second, the dynamic leads almost inevitably in that direction.” (A possible revision: In the second, it is almost inevitable.) But dynamics does have some good uses in expressions such as group dynamics and interpersonal dynamics.

dynamo (= [1] a power generator, or [2] an inexhaustibly energetic and forceful person) forms the plural dynamos—not *dynamoes. The metaphorical extension from sense 1 to sense 2 occurred in the late 1940s. See plurals (d).

Current ratio (dynamos vs. *dynamoes): 320:1

dysfunctional (= functioning abnormally) is occasionally misspelled *disfunctional—e.g.:  


- “Have these intellectual irresolutions who have broken up yet another family come from dysfunctional [read dysfunctional] homes where morality and discipline are unknowns?” “Appraising Responsible Parenting,” Virginia Pilot (Norfolk), 30 July 1996, at A14.  


**Language-Change Index**  
dysfunctional misspelled *disfunctional: Stage 1  
Current ratio: 456:1

**Dysphemism** (/dis-fa-miz-əm/) = (1) the substitution of a disagreeable word or phrase for a neutral or even positive one; or (2) a word or phrase so substituted. Dysphemism is the opposite of euphemism. Examples usually fall into the realm of slang—e.g.:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ordinary Term</th>
<th>Dysphemism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accountant</td>
<td>bean-counter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>athlete</td>
<td>(dumb) jock</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
each. A. Number. The word *each* raises problems of number. Does it take a singular or plural verb, regardless of the construction? Must a pronoun referring to it be singular, or is *they* acceptable?

As for the first question, *each* traditionally takes a singular verb, and the best practice is to write *each* . . . *is* regardless of whether a plural noun intervenes (*each of the members is*)—e.g.:

- *"Each of the main senses of the word are [read *is*] then further subdivided semantically."* Reinhard Hartmann, "Handy, if Slightly Heavy," 10 *English Today* 53, 53 (1994).
- *"Sapienza knows that each of the players are [read *is*] very gifted."* J. Mikel Ellcessor, "One of the Guys," *Pitt. Post-Gaz.,* 25 July 1997, at 16.
- *"Each of the finalists have [read *has*] already been guaranteed $5,000 for the nonprofit of their choice."* Linda Charlton, "There's a Lot Going on at B B Brown's Gardens," *Daily Commercial* (Leesburg, Fla.), 27 Aug. 2015, at N23. (On the use of *their* in that sentence, see CONCORD (b).)

The exception occurs when *each* acts in apposition to a plural subject but does not constitute the subject itself *<they each have a dollar*>*. When that is so, *each* functions adverbially and the verb should be plural—e.g.:

- *"JR’s four Tokyo commuter lines *each* has its own color."* Peter McGill, *The American Express Pocket Guide to Tokyo* 13 (1988). (Two possible revisions: [1] JR’s four Tokyo commuter lines *each* have their own color. [2] Each of JR’s four Tokyo commuter lines it has its own color.)
- *"The athletes *each* are seeking more than $50,000 in compensation and Carver and Miller are seeking reinstatement and damages in excess of $1 million."* Lisa Magenheimer, "Interim Coach Hopes to Overcome Instability," *Tampa Trib.,* 7 Mar. 1996, Pasco §, at 6. See APPOSITIES.

As for the second question, pronouns having *each* as an antecedent are traditionally (and most formally) singular. E.g.: *"Each of them got into *their* [read *his* or *her*, depending on context] car and drove off."* But the word *they* has come to take on a singular sense in informal constructions of this type, as the generic masculine pronoun continues to decline in use. (See sexism (b).) The better practice, though, is to change the reference to a plural: *"Both of them got into their cars."* Or: *"All of them got into their cars."*

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *each* with a plural verb *<each have chores to do>*: Stage 2
   - Current ratio (*each of them is* vs. *<each of them are>*): 12:1
   - 2. *each* followed by a plural *or they* *<each did their share>*: Stage 4
   - 3. *they each have*: Stage 5

**B. *Each . . . apiece.* This construction is a redundancy—e.g.:

- *"The 33 largest American plantations *each* receive more than $1 million *apiece* [delete *apiece*] in higher sales prices."* Stephen Moore, "Corporate Welfare for Select Few Hurting Others," *Houston Chron.,* 6 Apr. 1995, at A33.

**C. Between each.** See between (f).
each and every. This emphatic (and trite) phrase, like each or every alone, requires a singular verb—e.g.: “Each and every one of them are [read is] devoted.” Robert D. Signoracci, “Outgoing Mayor Thanks Cohoes,” Times Union (Albany), 26 Dec. 1999, at B4.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*each and every one are for each and every one is: Stage 1
Current ratio: 14:1

each other. **A. And one another.** Usage authorities have traditionally suggested that each other should refer to two people or entities <John and Bob helped each other>, one another to more than two <all of them loved one another>. Yet this 19th-century rule has often been undermined in the literature on usage—e.g.:

- “A distinction is set up in the schools between each other and one another, according as the reference is to two or to more than two persons; and yet scarcely a good author can be found who does not use the two forms interchangeably.” Adams Sherman Hill, Our English 33 (1888).
- “It has been maintained that each other should be used where only two are concerned, and one another where there are more than two; but the distinction is not necessary. The expressions are interchangeable.” John F. Genung, Outlines of Rhetoric 311–12 (1893).
- “Failure to observe the distinction [between each other and one another] may be a technical fault, but it is not a serious offence.” Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work 283 (1940).
- “Purists make a distinction between them, using each other for two things or persons only, and one another for more than two things or persons. In spite of Fowler’s rather perverse repudiation of it, this distinction is a conventional one, though so often ignored as not to have any real validity.” G.H. Vallins, Better English 48 (4th ed. 1957).

Careful writers and editors will doubtless continue to observe the distinction, but no one else will notice.

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each other for one another (i.e., for more than two items): Stage 4

**B. Possessive Forms: each other’s and one another’s.** The possessive forms are each other’s and one another’s. The noun that follows is typically plural <each other’s car> <they praised each other’s preparations>, but the more logical construction is singular <each other’s car> <they praised each other’s presentation>. Whether the phrase is each other’s or one another’s, it’s fairly common to see the apostrophe drift waywardly (and mistakenly) to the end of the phrase, perhaps because the idea of reciprocity gets overshadowed by the sense of plurality—e.g.:

- “They can look back in time to see the field being planted, view closeups of insect damage to the corn, or read one another’s [read each other’s] comments.” Laurent Belsie, “More Fun than Watching Paint Dry,” Christian Science Monitor, 26 July 2001, at 1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *each other’s* for each other’s: Stage 1
Current ratio (each other’s vs. *each other’s*): 15:1
2. *one another’s* for one another’s: Stage 1
Current ratio (one another’s vs. *one another’s*): 190:1

*early beginnings* is a redundancy that was especially common during the mid-20th century. By the 1990s it had fallen in frequency but still occurred—e.g.: “One of the nation’s most skilled neurosurgeons, Dr. Carson candidly recalls his early beginnings [read beginnings or early days] in poverty.” Joy Bennett Kinnon, “10 Who Beat Welfare;” Ebony, Nov. 1996, at 166.

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early on in the sense “at an early stage”: Stage 5

*earnestness. This word, as a synonym of earnestness, is listed in the OED with only two citations—from 1572 and 1591. One might have thought it to be long obsolete, but it still sometimes appears. Since it doesn’t really fill any gap in the language, writers and editors would be wise to stick to the established earnestness—e.g.:

- “She spoke often and extemporaneously about winning, losing, overcoming, focusing and so forth with a matter-of-fact earnestness [read earnestness] that suggested she believed it all fervently.” Sara Corbett, Venus to the Hoop 52 (1997).
- “If all Semisonic has going for it is earnestness [read earnestness] and poignancy, well, that’s a lot more than most other bands.” Malcolm Mayhew, “Semisonic Concert at Deep Ellum Strangely Irresistible,” Ft. Worth Star-Telegram, 31 Jan. 1999, at 14.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*earnestness for earnestness: Stage 1
Current ratio (earnestness vs. *earnestness*): 6,412:1

earth. In reference to the planet we live on, earth is usually preceded by the and is not capitalized. The sun and the moon are treated the same way <a full moon occurs when the sun and moon are on opposite sides of the earth>. But the proper names of those celestial
bodies (Sol and Luna), though used rarely, are capitalized with no article preceding them. Likewise, when Earth is referred to as a proper noun, it is capitalized and usually stands alone—e.g.: "They’ve named it Quoaar, pronounced KWA-oh-war, after a California Indian creation deity. It’s about one-tenth the size of Earth and orbits the sun every 288 years." Faye Flam, “Quoaar’s Discovery Puts Pluto on Edge of Demotion,” Advocate (Baton Rouge), 8 Oct. 2002, at A2.

In reference to the stuff that the planet is made of, Roy Cooperud states that lowercase “earth without the means soil” (the excavation left a large pile of earth) (American Usage and Style: The Consensus 117 [1980]).

earthen; earthly; earthy. Although these terms have historically overlapped, some degree of differentiation has emerged. Earthen = made from earth (as soil or clay) <earthen pottery>. (The word can be pronounced /әr-thәn/ or /әr-thәnt/.) Earthly = of, relating to, or involving the earth as opposed to the heavens; terrestrial <earthly delights>. The word distinguishes not only the temporal from the heavenly, but also the mortal <earthly remains> from an afterlife. Earthy = (1) simple; plain; practical <earthly farm folk>; or (2) coarse; gross; unrefined <earthly sense of humor>.

easier is the comparative form both of the adjective easy and of the adverb easily. In the latter use, it’s a casualism equivalent to more easily—e.g.:

- “Although most people are still taking the postal route to employment, finding professional work is now being accomplished much quicker and easier [read, perhaps, much more quickly and easily] thanks to personal computers, modems and the Internet,” Dean Golemis, “Making Connections,” Chicago Trib., 26 Jan. 1996, at C1.
- “They’ll cook faster and the middles will get done easier [or more easily],” “Hamburger Helper,” Palm Beach Post, 15 Aug. 1996, Food §, at 1.

In modern print sources, the collocation done more easily is much more common than done easier. See easy.

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easier used adverbially for more easily: Stage 4

Currently ratio (done more easily vs. done easier): 4:1

easily. See easy.

east; easterly; eastward(s). See directional words.

Easter Sunday. Though technically redundant, this phrase is unobjectionable. In fact, the redundancy is understandable: in many contexts, Easter refers to the holiday period beginning late Friday and ending Sunday—e.g.: “We’re going to New York for Easter weekend.” That example can be shortened, with no change in meaning, to “We’re going to New York for Easter.” So Easter Sunday is more specific than Easter as popularly used. Historically, in fact, Easter could apply to the whole week that begins with Easter Sunday. The phrase Easter Sunday has been common in print sources since the 18th century.

eastwardly. See directional words (c).

eastward(s). See directional words.

easy; easily. The word easy, generally an adjective, functions arguably as an adverb in some set phrases: go easy (on me, etc.), easy does it, and take it easy. But because the verbs can be understood as elliptical linking verbs, the word easy can quite appropriately be considered an adjective. Wherever an adverb is needed, of course, easily is the right word. See easier.

eat > ate > eaten. The dialectal past-tense forms et and eat occur mostly in uneducated speech in New England and along the Atlantic Coast, as well as in the Midwest. The pronunciation /et/ for ate is traditional in BrE but fading.

eatable. See edible.

eat your cake and have it too. See you can’t eat your cake and have it too.

eaves. This noun, meaning “the overhanging lower edge of a roof,” is—despite its appearance—historically singular. But since the 19th century, eaves has been misinterpreted as a plural form, and so the misbegotten singular eave was born (as a back-formation). Today it can hardly be criticized as nonstandard—e.g.:

- “Paper wasps . . . build those familiar, often large papery nests either suspended from a branch or eave, or fitted inside an abandoned animal burrow,” Allen M. Young, “In Praise of Wasps,” Chicago Trib. (Mag.), 25 Aug. 1996, at 32.

ebullient (/ә-b-yәl-yәnt/ or /ә-bәl-/) is frequently mispronounced /әb-yәl-lәnt/. See pronunciation (b).

The corresponding noun is either ebullience (/ә-b-yәl-әns/) or—more traditionally—ebullition (/әb-a-lish-әn/).

ebullit. See back-formations.

echo. Pl. echoes—not *echos. See plurals (d).

ecological; ecologic. See -ic.

ecology. When it originated in the late 19th century, this word referred to the biological study of organisms and their environment <ecological; ecologic.>

By natural extension during the mid-20th century, the word came to refer to the interaction itself, as opposed to its study <the ecology of Church Street>. By still
further extension—a sliphshod extension—the word sometimes takes on the sense of the environment itself. When that is true, environment is a better word—e.g.:

- “Hundreds of Puerto Ricans demanded an end to bomb- ing exercises that they say are harming the island’s ecology [read environment] and its residents’ health.” Andrew Jacobs, “Protests Intensify in Puerto Rico as Navy Resumes Bombing Drills,” N.Y. Times, 28 Apr. 2001, at A1.
- “Winning scant mention during Saturday’s ceremonies was the concern that foreign organisms that attached to the bottom of the new dry dock during its journey from China could damage Maine’s coastal ecology [read environment].” Ted Cohen, “BIW Unveils Its New, $240 Million Dry Dock,” Maine Sunday Telegram, 6 May 2001, at B1.

Ecology was formerly spelled with a digraph: ecol-ogy (so listed in the first edition of the OED).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
ecology misused for environment: Stage 1

**economic.** A. And economical. Economical means “thrift” or, in the current jargon, “cost-effective” <it’s not economical to have so many workers with duplicative responsibilities>. Ecological should be used for every other meaning possible for the words, almost always in reference to the study of economics <economic growth>. Hence we have ecological studies and economic interest but economical shopping. See -c. Cf. uneconomical.

B. And financial. Economic is increasingly often misused for financial. When the reference is to pecuniary affairs of a household or business, the word should be financial, not economical (which refers to larger-scale finances). There is an irony in the usage, since economic comes from a Greek word meaning “management of the household.” E.g. “The firm financed a string of big-budget movies that perpetually left it on the brink of economic [read financial] ruin but managed to come up with a big hit often enough to stay afloat.” Steve Pond, “Beating the FinancialTerminator?” Wash. Post, 17 Oct. 1995, at C7.

But the phrase economic ruin is acceptable when the reference is to a geographic area (such as a town) or a country—e.g.:


**ecstasy.** So spelled, not *ecstacy*—e.g.: “Sometime in late January or early February the Seahawks will provide something permanent. It will inspire either a euphoria approaching religious ecstasy [read ecstasy] or a groundswell of frustrated hopelessness.” Ted Miller, “Leap of Faith or Fall from Grace?” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 9 Dec. 2006, Sports §, at D1.

When the word denotes the drug MDMA, the spelling remains the same but the term is usually capitalized—e.g.: “In Oklahoma, sad to say, studies show that while the use of drugs such as marijuana, cocaine and ecstasy [read Ecstasy] by young people has declined, the average percentage of kids in grades eight, 10 and 12 who say they’ve tried those substances is above the national average.” Editorial, “High Rise; Teen Drug Use Numbers Sobering,” Oklahoman (Oklahoma City), 6 Jan. 2007, at A10.

Occasionally the word is also misspelled with an *x*- displacing the *c*- Here, the doubly mangled spelling got past the copy desk: “What begins with sitcom-style infighting turns to touchy-feely reconciliation when the family Stoner drops a tab of Extacy [read Ecstasy] in patriarch Ira’s drink.” Peter Debruge, “When Do We Eat?” Daily Variety, 13 Apr. 2006, at 20. See spelling (A).

**ecstatic.** (/ek-stat-ik/ or /e-stad-/). Frequently mispronounced /e-stad-ik/. See pronunciation (B).

**ecumenical** /ek-yoo-men-i-kel/ (= supporting the idea of greater cooperation and unity between different branches of Christianity) has been predominantly so spelled since the 1920s in AmE and the 1950s in BrE—the earlier spelling having been *ocumenical* or *ecumenical*. The corresponding noun is ecumenism /e-kyoo-miz-әm/—a variant being *ecumenicism*.

Curious thing about this word: some have tried to extend its reach beyond Christianity to promote better understanding among people of all religious faiths. That certainly reflects the spirit of the word, and yet it may well damage or at least dilute its central meaning.

Current ratio (ecumenism vs. *ecumenicism*): 25:1

**edema** /e-deem-ә/ (= a swelling in a body part caused by an abnormal accumulation of fluid in cells or in a body cavity) has been the predominant spelling in AmE since 1910 and in BrE since the late 1970s. The variant spelling *oedema* or *oedema* is universally falling into disuse.

Current ratio (edema vs. *oedema*): 5:1

**edgewise; edgeways.** Both words are mostly restricted to versions of the phrase couldn’t get a word in
edgewise. In AmE, it’s always edgewise; in BrE, it’s typically edgewise.

edible; eatable. These adjectives are broadly synonymous, but they can be differentiated. What is edible is capable of being eaten without danger, or fit for consumption (edible plants). E.g.: “The autumn olive, which many conservationists viewed until recent years as ideal, is appealing because its berries are edible by deer and birds, and the plants grow quickly and hold back erosion.” Anne Paine, “Autumn Olive Deemed Too Invasive,” Tennesseean, 1 Oct. 1996, at B1. “With any type of edible wild mushrooms, it is very important that you always cook them thoroughly.” Kathy Casey, “Wild Mushrooms,” Seattle Times, 2 Oct. 1996, at F1.

What is eatable is at least minimally enjoyable or palatable (<the food at that restaurant isn’t even eatable>). E.g.: “Along the way, they’ve maintained a live-and-let-live attitude with the gawkers who show up to watch as they paw through the garbage and recycle the eatable morsels.” George Snyder, “Dump Bears May Pose Menace,” S.F. Chron., 29 July 1995, at A13.

Eatable is often used as an attributive noun, usually in the plural—e.g.:

- “We can assume that such concentrations of rich eatables made them natural synonyms, as time went on, for something politically desirable.” George Hebert, “Real Pork in Real Barrels,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 15 July 1996, at A7.
- “One of those vehicles tows a trailer personally designed by the Duke of Edinburgh—full of drawers, recesses, cubby-holes and compartments from which in short order all eatables, dishes and utensils are retrieved.” John MacLeod, “A Picnic in Scotland?” Scottish Daily Mail, 18 June 2015, at 17.

edification. In the phrase for your edification (= for your moral or intellectual instruction), the word edification is sometimes misspelled (usually but not always for jocular effect) to mean “for your enjoyment” or the like—e.g.:

- “Does [NFL Commissioner Roger] Goodell plan to have owners, team presidents and head coaches sign an annual nocheating pledge at the league meeting every March? One suspects that the real purpose of even committing such ideas to paper is simply theater for the edification [read appeasement?] of the public.” Bill Ordine, “Spy Reply,” Baltimore Sun, 8 Mar. 2008, Sports §, at 15.

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edification misused in the sense of “thrill, titillation”: Stage 1

Edinburgh (the capital of Scotland) is pronounced /ed-in-bar-ә/ in four syllables—not /ed-in-barg/. The latter, though, is the correct pronunciation of Edinburgh, Texas, the seat of Hidalgo County. In BrE, some speakers syncopate the pronunciation of the Scottish city to /ed-in-brә/.

-edly. With words ending in -edly, the classic adverbial formula in an X manner does not always work. Although amazedly means “in an amazed manner,” allegedly does not mean “in an alleged manner” and purportedly does not mean “in a purported manner.” Nor does admittedly mean “in an admitted manner.” Rather, the unorthodox formula for these words is it is . . . -ed that; i.e., allegedly means “it is alleged that,” and so on. Instead of bewailing the unorthodoxy of these words ending in -edly, we should welcome the conciseness they promote and should continue to use the forms that have made their way into common usage. We have many of them:

- admittedly deservedly
- advisedly designedly
- allegedly markedly
- assertedly reportedly
- assuredly resignedly
- avowedly supposedly
- concededly unadvisedly
- confessedly undoubtedly

See allegedly & confessedly.

Even so, any new or unusual form ending in -edly ought to be avoided if a ready substitute exists, whether or not the in an X manner formula works—e.g.:

- “There is a certain appearance of arrogance in the readiness of men to stand up in front of others and preach a sermon or deliver an address, as though their thoughts were recognizedly superior to those of the audience.” Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work 11 (1940). (Here the thoughtful reader is likely to pause and wonder why the writer didn’t use the more recognizable word: recognizably. If there’s a real nuance here, it probably isn’t worth achieving.)
- “I’m as awkward an interviewee as you’re likely to get,’ he says, laughing embarrassingly.” Clive Anderson, “Mr. Funny: Peculiar Interview,” Sunday Telegraph, 29 Sept. 1996, Features §, at 3. (Here the more natural wording would be to replace embarrassingly with the phrase with embarrassment.)

See qualifiedly.

educable. A. And educible. Educable = capable of being educated. Educible = capable of being elicited (i.e., educed). See educational & educe.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
**B. And *educatable.** Although the shorter form is standard, the longer variant sometimes crops up—e.g.: "Sooner or later, we have to go back to the realization that the only education the educatable [read educable] can ever get that will keep them from going to prison has to come from their parents." "Parental Responsibility," *Phoenix Gaz.*, 23 Mar. 1995, at B8. See -ATABLE.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
*educatable for educable: Stage 1 Current ratio (educable vs. *educatable): 66:1*

**educate the public, to.** Typically, this phrase simply means "to seek to change public opinion." Whether the means is through disseminating information or propaganda is often in the eye of the beholder. But the only desired result is typically to have masses of people think differently about some issue—e.g.:

- "An unprecedented coalition of record companies, artists, and music organizations led by the Recording Industry Assn. of America (RIAA) announced Sept. 26 the launch of an aggressive multimedia campaign designed to educate the public that unauthorized downloading of digital music is illegal." Bill Holland, "Coalition Sets Anti-Piracy Ad Campaign," *Billboard*, 5 Oct. 2002, Upfront §, at 4.

Of course, the "educators" almost always have a vested interest in all the free "education" they dispense. But that's not always the connotation—e.g.:

- "Through nearly three decades of organized protests and attempts to educate the public and corporate-owned utilities to [read about or on] the virtues of alternative sources of energy and conservation, Crocker has generated an emotional electricity of his own." Paul Levy, "Still Active After All These Years," *Star Trib.* (Minneapolis), 27 Sept. 1994, at E1.

**educational; educative; *educatory.** Educational = (1) having to do with education <educational issues>; or (2) serving to further education <educational films>. (In sense 1, education is often used attributively; to prevent a misuse that sense 2 was intended <education issues>: an educational issue is not an issue that is educational.) Educative = tending to educate; instructive <educative lectures>. *Educatory is a NECESSARY VARIANT of educative.

For a related word, see educable.

Current ratio (educational vs. educative vs. *educatory): 28,905:374:1

**educator; educationist; *educationalist.** Educator, a 17th-century coinage that didn't become popular till the 19th century, is a FORMAL WORD for teacher; it dignifies the person described. E.g.: "Tomorrow, she will receive the Outstanding Teacher Award during Alumni Day at Lehigh University. Five other educators also will be honored." Denise Reaman, "Freemansburg Teacher to Get Award for English Instruction," *Morning Call* (Allentown, Pa.), 4 Oct. 1996, at B1.

**Educationist,** by contrast, is a DYSCEMESIS suggesting a puffed-up teacher who cloaks commonplace ideas in abstract, theoretical language or else turns common sense on its head—e.g.:

- "The educator John Keats noted a fundamental divide between the progressive educationist, for whom 'the individual has only a functional significance in society,' and the traditionalist, to whom 'society is merely a function of individuals." John R. Dunlap, "Dumb and Dumber: Does Choice Matter?" *Am. Spectator*, Sept. 1996.
- "Educationists love the humane-sounding idea of self-esteem. It gives them cover for low standards and low effort both on their part and that of students." Walter Williams, "Girl Who Received Top Marks in School Couldn't Read Street Signs," *Chattanooga Free Press*, 15 Sept. 1996, at B7. (At the end of the sentence, PARALLEISM could be maintained by changing both on their part and that of students to both on their part and on the part of students.)
- "Not surprisingly, educationists love a system where brand-new schools are built to their liking, while they retain control." "The Business of Schooling," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 27 Sept. 1996, at A16.

In World English, educator appears in print more frequently than educationist by a ratio of 34 to 1, and than *educationalist* by a ratio of 42 to 1.

In BrE, educationist is sometimes used in the sense that educator bears in AmE—e.g.: "The current project involving educationists, churchmen and others, in an effort to strengthen the teaching of morality in the national school curriculum, has now reached substantial agreement on the way forward—about everything except sex." Clifford Longley, "Sacred and Profane," *Daily Telegraph*, 30 Aug. 1996, at 23.

*Educationalist is essentially a NECESSARY VARIANT of educationist. And like that term, it is sometimes used in BrE without negative connotations—e.g.:

- "Peter Chambers, educationalist [read educationist or educator], born November 27, 1933; died September 19, 1996." Martin Wainwright, "Peter Chambers" (obit.), *Guardian*, 5 Oct. 1996, at 18. *Educationalist is somewhat more common in BrE than in AmE.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
*educationalist for educationist: Stage 4 Current ratio (educationist vs. *educationalist): 1.2:1*

*educatory. See educational.
“The first few hearings have *educed* [read elicited or brought out] several interesting comments by several interested parties.” John Javetski, “House Takes a Broader View of Restructuring,” Electrical World, Dec. 1995, at 5.

Sometimes the word appears where *deduce* or *infer* or even *glean* would be better—e.g.: “Hitherto, how he fitted into the screwball reputation of that magazine has had to be *educed* [read deduced or gleaned] from his ‘The Years with Ross’ (1959).” John McAleer, “The Thurber Spirit,” Chicago Trib., 17 Dec. 1995, at C1. See *adduce*.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *educe* misused for *elicit*: Stage 1
2. *educe* misused for *deduce*: Stage 1

**educible.** So spelled—not *educeable*. See -ABLE (A) & -educable (A).

**-ee. A. General Principles.** This suffix (from the French past-participial -é) originally denoted "someone who is acted upon"; the sense is inherently passive. It's an especially active suffix; that is, people are continually creating neologisms with it. Some of these are almost always made from verbs in the passive voice—e.g.:  

*acquittee* = one who is acquitted  
*arrestee* = one who is arrested  
*conscriptee* = one who is conscripted  
*detaine* = one who is detained  
*educatee* = one who is educated (by an educator)  
*expellee* = one who is expelled  
*inauguree* = one who is inaugurated  
*indictee* = one who is indicted  
*invitee* = one who is invited  
*liberee* = one who is liberated  
*permittee* = one who is permitted  
*returree* = one who is returned  
*selectee* = one who is selected  
*separatee* = one who is separated  
*shelteree* = one who is sheltered  
*smugglee* = one who is smuggled  
*telephoneree* = one who is telephoned

The suffix also has a dative sense, in which it acts as the passive agent noun for the indirect object. This is the sense in which the suffix is most commonly used in peculiarly legal terminology:  

*abandonee* = one to whom property rights are relinquished  
*advancese* = one to whom money is advanced  
*consignee* = one to whom something is consigned  
*disclosee* = one to whom something is disclosed  
*grantees* = one to whom property is granted  
*lessee* = one to whom property is leased  
*patentees* = one to whom a patent is or has been issued  
*trustee* = one to whom something is entrusted  
*vendees* = one to whom something is sold

At least one word ending in -ee has both a normal passive sense and a dative sense. *Appointee* = (1) one who is appointed; or (2) one to whom an estate is appointed. Sense 2, of course, is primarily legal.

The suffix -ee, then, is correlative to -or, the active agent-noun suffix: some words ending in -ee are formed as passive analogues to -or agent nouns, and not from any verb stem: *indemnitee* (= one who is indemnified; analogue to *indemnitor*); *preceptee* (= student; analogue to *preceptor*).

These are the traditional uses of the suffix. There is a tendency today, however, to make -ee a general agent-noun suffix without regard to its passive sense or the limitations within which it may take on passive senses. Hence the suffix has been extended to phrasal verbs, even though only the first word in the phrase appears in the -ee word. *Discriminatee* (= one who is discriminated against) and *tippee* (= one who is tipped off). Then other prepositional phrases have gradually come into the wide embrace of -ee: *abortee* (= a woman upon whom an abortion is performed); *confiscatee* (= one from whom goods have been confiscated).

Some -ee words contain implicit possessives: *amputees* (= one whose limb has been removed); *breachees* (= one whose contract is breached); *condemnnees* (= one whose property has been condemned). In still other words, -ee does not even have its primary passive sense—e.g.:  

*arrivee* = one who arrives  
*asylee* = one who seeks asylum  
*attendee* = one who attends  
*benefitee* = one who benefits (or, possibly, "is benefited")  
*escapee* = one who escapes  
*signee* = one who signs  
*standee* = one who stands

Finally, the suffix is sometimes used to coin jocular words such as *chatee* (= one who is cheated).

The upshot of this discussion is that -ee is subject to abuse and that writers must be careful about the forms they use. For active senses we have -er, -or, and -ist at our service; we should be wary of adopting any new active forms ending in -ee and do our best to see that *attendee* and *standee*—or see *signee* in an active sense (see *signee*)—together with similar forms, come to an eternal rest. Otherwise, we risk wasting any sense to be found in this suffix. For example, “the unskilled workers used to ‘dilute’ skilled workers in time of war should have been called *diluters* instead of *dilutees*; the skilled were the *dilutees*” (FMEU2 at 146).

**B. Word Formation.** The principles applying to words ending in -atable apply also to agent nouns ending in -ee. Thus we have *inauguree*, not *inauguratee*; *subrogatee*, not *subrogateee* (though the latter is infrequently used mistakenly for the former).

**C. Stylistic Use of.** Stylists know that -ee agent nouns are often inferior to more descriptive terms.
They sometimes objectify the people they describe, although the writer may intend no callousness—e.g.: “[Catherine] Ojok and another abductee [read abducted woman] ran away when [Gen. Raska] Lukwiya told them they would become ‘his wives’ as soon as they had their first menstrual period.” Ben de la Cruz, “Moving Past Life as a Rebel Slave,” Wash. Post, 29 July 2008, at A11.

E.E. Cummings. See Cummings.

eerie (= fear-inducing; strange; weird) has always been the predominant spelling. The variant spelling *eery appeared sometimes in BrE until the mid-19th century. Although it is becoming frightfully common again, *eery is best considered a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 61:1

effect, v.t. A. Generally. This verb—meaning “to bring about, make happen”—is increasingly rare in English. Besides sounding pretentious, it often spawns wordiness. The verb tends to occur alongside ZOMBIE NOUNS such as improvement—e.g.:

“... ‘as just as some transactions were about to be effected [read to take effect or to be concluded], the settlement plans were delayed indefinitely following a meeting of bankers at the central bank.” Victor Mallet, “Kuwait Delays Interbank Plan,” Fin. Times, 4 July 1991, at 14.


“For some schools in the state, the present system of oversight has not effected improvement [read improved things or improved anything or brought about improvement].” “School Reform Plan Deserves Passing Grade,” News & Record (Greensboro), 2 May 1995, at A6. (Another possible revision: The present system of supervision has failed to improve many schools in this state. [On the use of oversight in the original sentence, see oversight (A).])

B. And affect. Effect (= to bring about) is often misused for affect (= to influence, have an effect on). The blunder is widespread—e.g.:


• “So far, 63 buildings in downtown Boston and the suburbs have been affected [read affected] this week by the strike.” Dina Gerzman, “Janitors’ Strike Spreads into Quincy,” Patriot Ledger (Quincy, Mass.), 3 Oct. 2002, News §, at 1.


It could be that the widespread misuse of impact is partly an attempt to sidestep the problem of how to spell affect. See affect & impact.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

effect misused for affect: Stage 2

C. And effectuate. Most dictionaries define these words identically, but their differentiation should be encouraged. Although both mean “to accomplish, bring about, or cause to happen,” stylistes have generally considered effect the preferable word, effectuate a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

No longer need this be so. The growing distinction—common especially in law—is that effect means “to cause to happen, to bring about” <effect a coup>, while effectuate means “to give practical effect to (some underlying goal)” <effectuating the purpose of the statute>. As a matter of word frequency, effect (as a verb) is much more common than effectuate.

effective; efficacious; efficient; effectual. All these words mean generally “having effect,” but they have distinctive applications. Effective = (1) having a high degree of effect (used of a thing done or of the doer) <more effective study habits>; or (2) coming into effect <effective June 3, 1994>. Efficacious = certain to have the desired effect (used of things) <efficacious drugs>. Efficient = competent to perform a task; capable of bringing about a desired effect (used of agents or their actions or instruments) <an efficient organization>. Efficient increasingly has economic connotations.

Effectual, the rarest and perhaps the most troublesome of these words, means “achieving the complete effect aimed at”—e.g.:

• “The power over the purse may in fact be regarded as the most complete and effectual weapon with which any Constitution can arm the immediate representatives of the people.” Letter of William Hall, “Gingrich and Founding Fathers,” Advocate (Baton Rouge), 22 Jan. 1996, at B6 (paraphrasing The Federalist No. 58).

• “Not only is the rabies vaccine completely effectual for dogs and cats, but more states are requiring proof of a rabies vaccine to obtain a license for a dog.” Ann L. Huntington, “Vaccine Has Not Eliminated Rabies Threat,” Hartford Courant, 26 Mar. 1996, at E5. (In that sentence, completely is redundant with effectual. See completely.)

• “George Washington [remarked] in his first annual message to Congress in 1790 that to be prepared for war is one of the most effectual ways of preserving peace.” Merrick Carey & Loren Thompson, “Misplaced Priorities on Preserving the Peace,” Wash. Times, 29 May 1996, at A17.

Why the most troublesome? Because effectual is often stretched to describe a person instead of a person’s action or some other thing—e.g.:


• “They seem to shy away from any moves to render the society more responsive and council members more

This stretch is all the more understandable because the negative form—ineffectual—usually does describe a person <an ineffectual manager>. But the history of effectual has not been parallel: most often, it doesn’t refer to people.

On the use of effectually for effectively, see effectively.

**Language-Change Index**

**effectual** misused for effective: Stage 3

effectively; effectually. Effectively = (1) in an effective manner; well <to speak effectively>; (2) in effect, actually <she has effectively become his mother-surrogate>; or (3) completely; almost completely <that resource is now effectively gone>. All three senses are common.

Effectually (= completely achieving the desired result) often wrongly displaces effectively in senses 2 and 3—e.g.:

• “Schools [that] had once been mixed were now effectually [read effectively] segregated.” Nik Cohn, “Aftershock: The Bradford Riots Came as a Surprise to Outsiders,” Guardian, 15 July 1995, at T20.

• “And introduction of government assistance dictated secularization of the programs, he said, effectively [read effectually] cutting out the very heart that made it successful.” Maureen Boyce, “Group Says Religion Key to Helping Homeless,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 10 July 1996, City Plus §, at 6.

Curiously, the adverb effectually was significantly more common than effectively until just after 1900, when the word-frequency poles were suddenly reversed. Why that is so remains a minor linguistic mystery. See effective.

**Language-Change Index**

effectually misused for effectively: Stage 2

effectual. See effective.

effectuately. See effectively.

effectuate. See effect (c).

effeminate. See female.

effe†e, now a skunked term, has traditionally meant “worn out, barren, exhausted”—e.g.:

• “In contrast, many of the new album’s icily elegant, minor-chord-driven tunes sound uninspired, effete, even cynical—older indeed, but not necessarily in ways that one associates with creative growth.” Elysia Gardner, “Record Rack,” L.A. Times, 12 May 1996, Calendar §, at 69.

• “Since a population tends to be mirrored by its elected representatives, this has resulted in an effete city council generally devoid of original ideas.” Letter of Gene Bunning, “Move on Annexation,” Houston Chron., 21 May 1996, at A23.

But today—owing in large measure to Vice President Spiro Agnew, who used the phrase *effete corps of impudent snobs*—writers have made it the victim of slipshod extension, often using it to mean “sophisticated and snobbish.” This development might show the influence of the rhyme with elite. In any event, the usage predates Agnew’s famous phrase by several decades, having arisen in the 1920s. It was quite common by the latter half of the 20th century—e.g.:

• “He was cooing to her like a turtle dove. After her money, of course. All the same, these effete [read decadent] aristocrats of the old country. Make a noise like a rich widow anywhere in England, and out come all the Dukes and Earls and Viscounts, howling like wolves.” P.G. Wodehouse, *The Return of Jeeves* 111 (1954).

• “True Chicagoans know that South Siders—salt-of-the-earth, blue-collar beer drinkers—are Sox fans, while effete, [read stuffy (no comma)] North Side yuppies are Cubs fans.” Sara Paretsky, “Baptism in the Bungalow Belt,” Chicago Trib., 29 Aug. 1996, at N3.

• “Now, lest I be branded an effete [read a sophisticated] lunchroom snob, my second-favorite lunch was Campbell’s Chicken Gumbo soup in one of those smelly old-fashioned thermoses.” Maureen Clancy, “Lunch Box Memories,” San Diego Union-Trib., 5 Sept. 1996, Food §, at 5.

Still others use it as a genteeleism denoting weakness or (surely because the words look similar) effeminacy—e.g.:

• “I had already done what I could to protect him, insisting he be given a normal-sounding, non-French, regular-kind-of-guy name, and extracting a solemn promise from my wife that there would be no prissy haircuts or other effete [read frilly or effeminate] embellishments.” Joe Dinck, “Poodle!! He’s a Peruvian Pit Bull,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 28 Apr. 1996, at B1.

• “From the 1940s on, American film saw the rise of a snide, supercilious and vaguely gay villain, starting with the manipulative Clifton Webb in the detective noir film *Laura*. That tradition of the effete [read effeminate], aristocratic villain has lived on.” Ana Swanson, “The Love That Dare Not Speak?” Toronto Star, 2 Aug. 2015, Insight §, at 2.

• “But Buckley’s effete [read refined or genteel] mannerisms were also in Vidal’s cross hairs. ‘They’re both gay-baiting each other,’ Neville notes.” John Anderson, “The Birth of TV News Discourse,” Wash. Post, 6 Aug. 2015, at C1 (referring to William F. Buckley and Gore Vidal).

As with other skunked terms, the thing to do is simply to avoid using it.

**Language-Change Index**

1. effete to mean “sophisticated, snobbish”: Stage 4
2. effete to mean “effeminate”: Stage 3

**Language-Change Index**

(For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

**Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but . . . **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but . . . **Stage 5:** Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
efficacious. See effective.

efficacy; efficiency. Efficacy = the capacity for producing a desired effect; effectiveness <the drugs had greater efficacy when administered at bedtime>. Efficiency = the ability to accomplish something with minimum time or effort <the managers worked on improving plant efficiency>. So efficacy exists when you can do something at all, while efficiency exists when you can do something quickly and well.

efficient. See effective.

effluence (= something that flows out) has come into use as a euphemism for various bodily excretions—e.g.:

- "To those who are sweating, hurting and knocking the effluence out of one another in the humidity-soaked, 90-plus heat, this amounts to a free ride." Gene Seymour, "Haircut, Rookie Year Over for Sauerbrun," State J.-Register (Springfield, Ill.), 20 July 1996, Sports §, at 9.
- "An ugly naked man does painful, bloody damage to himself (he pares his fingernails with a knife down to the bone, for example), eats his nose effluence and hammers his teeth." Barbara Schulgasser, "Spike and Mike's Animated Shorts Long to Be Tasteless," S.F. Examiner, 20 Sept. 1996, at C5.

If this trend continues, the word will degenerate so that it will no longer be possible to write about effluence with positive connotations, as here: "The magic scent is not some romantic elixir but the aromatic effluence of our immune system." F. Bryant Furlow, "The Smell of Love: How Women Rate the Sexiness and Pleasantness of a Man's Body Odor Hinges on How Much of Their Genetic Profile Is Shared," Esquire, Mar. 1996, at 38.

The word is pronounced /ef-lou-an[t]s/. Cf. influence.

effluvium. A plural form. Effluvium (= [1] a smelly emanation or stench; or [2] industrial waste) forms the plurals effluvia and effluviums. The former has long predominated and is established as standard. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (effluvia vs. effluviums): 97:1

B. Singular form. By noxious contamination, the plural form effluvia has invaded the territory of the singular. It ought to be rebuffed, usually not by changing to effluvium but by making the verb plural—e.g.: "What distinguishes this brisk and eminently readable book from the business-related effluvia that crosses [read cross] our desks is Adler's almost canine attention to the real story." Gil Schwartz, "This Hole Was the Pits," Fortune, 14 June 1993, at 140. Why not effluvium crosses? Because the plural form effluvia has taken on figurative senses for which the singular is largely considered inappropriate or unavailable—as in that sentence. It appears likely that effluvium will go the way of datum: the plural form is relatively common (and struggling to stay plural), while the singular form is disappearing. See data.

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effluvia misused as a singular: Stage 1

effrontery. A. For affront. Effrontery (= shameless insolence), when misused for affront (= an open insult), is a malapropism. E.g.:

- "This is the ultimate effrontery [read affront] to the people who support the team—the fans." "Don't Tread on Me," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 15 Sept. 1989, at C2.
- "The novel carries with it the noble lesson that a premature verdict based on supposition is an effrontery [read affront] to justice if the dignity of even one person is abridged or disregarded." Bruce Simon, "Mob Action Has Tragic Aftermath," Richmond Times-Dispatch, 19 Nov. 1995, at G4.

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effrontery misused for affront: Stage 1

Current ratio (an affront to vs. *an effrontery to): 252:1

B. Misspelled *affrontery. This malapropism has occurred with some frequency since the late 18th century. It remains fairly common today—e.g.:

- "Sweet the vista was, until a harman had the affrontery [read effront] to rattle through the aisle with a cart bearing cans of Dortmunder Union." Cal Fussman, "Tilt at Beer Kegs," Esquire, Feb. 1998, at 96.
- "But beware, the august Augusta acres don't take too kindly toward such affrontery [read effronty]. This battleground of Richmond County is littered with the great expectations of players who have led the Masters after the first round." Furman Bisher, "History Against DiMarco," Atlanta J.-Const., 6 Apr. 2001, at D10.

The correct form effrontery derives from the French effronté (lit., "shameless"). The erroneous form *affrontery has no real pedigree because it isn't a legitimate word: the OED calls it an obsolete mistake for effrontery, and the permissive W3 doesn't even record it. In fact, the error results from confusion with affront, which derives from the French affronter (lit., "to confront" or "to strike on the head"). See nonwords.

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*affrontery for effrontery: Stage 1

Current ratio (effrontery vs. *affrontery): 141:1

effugio. See back-formations.

-efy. See -fy.

e.g. A. Generally. This abbreviation, short for exempli gratia (/ek-sem-ple grah-tee-uh/) [L. "for example"], introduces representative examples. In AmE, it is preferably followed by a comma (or, depending on the construction, a colon) and unitalicized. In BrE, curiously enough, the periods are sometimes omitted—e.g.: "The problem with seeking a legislative cure for the ethical disease is that most of the perceived

**B. Style and Usage.** As with other familiar abbreviations of Latin phrases—such as *etc., et al.*, and *i.e. (and despite the way they appear in this sentence)—eg is not italicized <serve with a favorite fruit, e.g., peaches or apricots>. And like the others, it is best confined to lists, parenthetical matter, and citations rather than in text, where some substitute such as *for example* is more natural <it goes well with fruit, such as peaches or apricots>.

**C. With *etc.*** Using the abbreviation *etc.* after an enumeration following *e.g.* is superfluous because one expects nothing more than a representative sample of possibilities. But *etc.* might be required after *i.e.* (L. *id est* “that is”) to show the incompleteness of the list.

**D. Clear Reference.** One should clearly indicate what the signal refers to: “Out-of-pocket losses include medical expenses, lost earnings, and the cost of any labor required to do things that the plaintiff can no longer do himself” (e.g., a housekeeper).” But “things that the plaintiff can no longer do himself” are not exemplified by a *housekeeper*. (Or does the writer mean *housekeeping* or *be a housekeeper*)? In any event, wherever readers encounter an *e.g.*, they rightly expect a sampling of appropriate items—not an ambiguous or all-inclusive listing. In the given example, it might be: *e.g.*, *keep house, drive a car, tend the garden. See *i.e.*

*equality* is the anglicized form of the French *égalité* (= equality). The *OED* pronounces the gallicism obsolete, and so it should be, in deference to *equality*. E.g.:

- “Is this a sign of greater equality [read equality], inverted snobbery, or simple confusion?” Robert Harris, “The Way We Were,” *Sunday Times* (London), 22 July 1990, Books §, at 8-1
- “But one of the wealthiest families, acting out of a sense of equality [read equality] and good fellowship, would insist that all members of the class be included in their children’s guest lists.” Charlton Heston, “Heston on Heston,” *Chicago Trib.*, 3 Sept. 1995, Sunday Mag. §, at 13
- “‘Thus Marx lives on, masquerading as social justice, equality [read equality] and fairness—all the while punishing people for being productive and successful.’ Editorial, “Wealth Distribution Bias,” *Saratoga Herald-Trib.*, 5 July 2000, at A12.

*egis.* See *aegis.*

egotium; *egoism*; *egocentrism*; *egocentricity*; *egomania.* *Egotism* = an exaggerated sense of self-importance; *self-praise*; *arrogance.* *Egoism* is a philosophical term meaning “a doctrine that self-betterment is the guiding method of existence, or that self-interest is the primary motive in all one’s actions.” The use of *egoism* in the sense “selfishness” is a *slipshod extension*—e.g.:

- “Unlike his peers—Lawrence J. Ellison of Oracle, Steven P. Jobs of Apple Computer or Bill Gates of Microsoft—he is not only not a technologist, he is also not known for overt egoism [read egotism], or for ruffling feathers.” Matt Richtel, “A Cheerleader, for a Company in a Midlife Funk,” *N.Y. Times*, 23 June 2002, §, at 3, 1. (Notice how the four negatives in one sentence fatigue the reader, and the unparallel construction deepens the mire.)

The other three words are closely related. *Egocentrism* and *egocentricity* are synonymous, with perhaps a slight degree of difference. *Egocentrism* = the quality of being self-centered and selfish; looking only to one’s own feelings and needs. *Egocentricity* = the quality of being egocentric, individualistic, or self-centered. *Egomania* is extreme egocentrism.

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*Egoism* misused for *egotism*: Stage 2

egregious /i-gree-jos/ formerly meant “outstanding,” but has been specialized in a pejorative sense so that it now means “outrageously bad.” E.g.:

- “I should be a most egregious host to expose my guests to the tender mercies of the servants in the Pope’s Little House.” Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, *Communion Blood* 75 (1999) (the Pope’s Little House being the starting point of an inquisitorial condemnation).
- “The subject fires up people on all sides of liability disputes: the ones who’ve been harmed; the budget hawks; and the lawmakers who scuffle year after year over special relief bills to get cash for victims of egregious acts that left people injured for life.” Steve Patterson, “Golf Course Owner Fuming Over Cost to Fix Bulldozer Damage Caused by State,” *St. Augustine Record* (Fla.), 26 Aug. 2015, News §.

**Language-Change Index**

*Egregious* in the sense “very bad”: Stage 5

egress. See *ingress.*

eisegesis. See *exegesis.*
Language and the Study of Language 43 (5th ed. 1874).

Still, /ə/-thar/ is the dominant pronunciation in BrE, and it remains common (though arguably pretentious) in AmE. Cf. neither (A).

B. Number of Elements. Most properly, either . . . or can frame only two alternatives, and no more: "Now Mr. Arafat has failed for a year to keep the promise without which he never would have seen either the White House, its lawn, Mr. Clinton or Mr. Rabin [omit either]." A.M. Rosenthal, "Yasir Arafat's Promise," Wall Street J., 9 Sept. 1994, at A15.

It is understandable that writers would want to be able to say any of the following in fewer than seven syllables—and those who like either for this purpose may succeed in the long run. But the better practice, for the time being, is to rely on the disjunctive or for a list of many—not either . . . or. Cf. neither.

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C. Faulty Parallel with either . . . or. This is a common problem: "New Hampshire Right to Life sends its newsletter to about 10,000 abortion opponents that Mrs. Hagan said either contributed money or time [read contributed either money or time] to the cause." Gustav Niebuhr, "G.O.P. Race Jumps to Where Fundamentalists Are Few and Far Between," N. Y. Times, 19 Feb. 1996, at A9. See PARALLELISM.

D. Singular or Plural. As the subject of a clause, either takes a singular verb—e.g.:

• "The law [is] . . . supposed to be 'family friendly', but we suggest you keep the kids away from Mom or Dad next April when either of them are [read is] bouncing off the walls with the complex instructions for filing claims." "Getting Taxes on Track," Wall Street J., 2 Oct. 1997, at A22.

• "Reimer did not say whether either of them is a job candidate." "McKinney Stripped of Army Title in Sex Case," Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 10 Oct. 1997, at A5.

Nouns framed by either . . . or take a singular verb when the noun closest to the verb is singular, but a plural verb when that noun is plural—e.g.:

• "What happens when grown children continue to pull on mom's apron strings or play on her 'mom guilt' for longer than either they or she needs?" Ruth Walsh, "Magazine's 'Mover and Shaper' to Speak," St. Petersburg Times, 5 Jan. 1994, at D2.

• "He gives every sign of not stopping until either he or they are thoroughly defeated." Marianne Means, "Investigators Waiting in the Wings," Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 3 Nov. 1996, at A81.

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E. Not . . . either. This phrasing should typically be a neither . . . nor construction—e.g.: "They are cynical shams that do not require either the council or the mayor to abide the weak processes they establish." "Flouting the Public's Will," Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 15 Mar. 1996, at B6. (A possible revision: They are cynical shams that require neither the council nor the mayor even to abide the weak processes they establish.)

E. Either or both. This phrase denotes the meaning generally assigned to and/or. Generally speaking, though, neither phrase finds a place in good writing. E.g.: "Either or both [read Both] parties may expect increasing voter disinterest if they accept newly elected members running as members of the other party." Letter of Charles P. Hughes, "Whatta Deal?" Chattanooga Times, 13 Apr. 1995, at A6. (On the use of disinterest in that sentence, see disinterest.) See and/or.

G. Meaning "each of two" or "both." Either in this sense <houses on either side of the street> is less common than each (or both). But it is perfectly idiomatic—e.g.: "The framed lists—there is one on either side of the chapel—are rolls of all the Dominican sisters from the Springfield Roman Catholic diocese." Steven Spearie, "Sisters in Spirit," State J.-Register (Springfield, Ill.), 28 Nov. 1997, at A7.

For more on either . . . or, see CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTIONS & PARALLELISM.

ejecte. See -ee.

ek e out, a PHRASAL VERB, has traditionally meant "to supplement with great effort or bit by bit; to add to (something); to make (something) go further or last longer." Today, this traditional usage is rare, but it still sometimes appears—e.g.:

• "John Andre, their martyred co-conspirator, received a memorial in the Poets Corner of Westminster Abbey—something of an irony since he eked out his income by writing doggerel and was unpopular with his fellow officers who patronized him as an opportunist." Robert Taylor, "Benedict Arnold Lost Gamble on Warfare," Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 2 Sept. 1990, at G4.

• "The deal promises to be the first in a series of part current, part advance refundings as the fiscally strapped state . . . ekes out as much debt service savings as possible." Martin Z. Braun, "N.J. Eyes $450M GO Refunding," Bond Buyer, 16 Oct. 2002, at 1.

• "Look up, look down, to attic and basement, for usable space, as we do on Page 5. Look at a handful of clever ideas about where else to eke out space, on Pages 4 and 8." "In Our Houses, Something Real," Wash. Post, 16 Oct. 2002, at T2.

Instead, the phrase is most commonly used nowadays in the sense "to succeed in obtaining or sustaining (a thing) with great difficulty"—e.g.:

• "In Tokyo, stocks eked out small gains by the end of Friday's session after a three-day winning streak." "Stocks Languish in Flat Session," S.F. Examiner, 27 Sept. 1996, at B1.

Although this usage began by slipshod extension, it is now firmly entrenched as standard.

Unfortunately, by still further extension, sportswriters have come to use *eke* without its inseparable companion *out, as if it meant something like *squeak*—e.g.: "Actually, you surely noticed that Northwestern *eked* [read *squeaked*?] back into the Top 25 to take the last rung on the strength of whipping the mighty Ohio U. Bobcats." Larry Guest, "Why Are the Pollsters Against Northwestern?" *Orlando Sentinel*, 25 Sept. 1996, at D1.

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1. *eke out* in the sense "to get by with great difficulty": Stage 5
2. *eke* misused for *squeak or fight*: Stage 3

-EL. See diminutives (c).

**elaborate**, vb., may be either transitive (to elaborate a point) or (more commonly) intransitive (to elaborate on a point). Although both *to elaborate* and *to elaborate on* may mean "to work out in detail," the former suggests "to produce by labor," and the latter suggests "to explain at greater length." Knowing this nuance allows you to choose the apter phrasing.

**elapse** once had two uses, as a noun and as a verb. Today, however, the noun is an archaism—*lapse* being the noun corresponding to the verb *elapse*. E.g.:

- "Thus, only those emigrating permanently will escape the charge and only then after the *elapse [read lapse]* of three years and in relation to non-UK assets." Donald Elkin, "Finance & the Family (Expatriates)," *Fin. Times*, 14 July 1990, at vi.
- "Many of the faces repeat with *an elapse [read a lapse]* of years, turning giggy, sparrowlike girls in middy blouses into graceful young women or pensive boys into jocular young adults." Carolyn Jack, "Prints from Glass Plates Depict Life of River Town," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 29 Mar. 2002, at E1.

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*elapse* used for *lapse*: Stage 1

**elder; eldest**. These are variants of *older and oldest*, with restricted uses such as *elder statesman, elder in the church* (or church *elder*), or *elder brother* (or *sister*). If *older or oldest* works in context, it’s probably the better choice.

**elderly**. This adjective began as a euphemism for *aged or old*, but even *elderly* has now acquired negative connotations. Perhaps *senior*, the newest euphemism, will one day have to be replaced as our youth-dominated popular culture continually denigrates anything associated with old people.

As an adjective, *elderly* has traditionally been applied most often to people <an elderly aunt>, but it may apply to other living things <an elderly dog> or, rarely, something personified <an elderly ship>.

As a noun, *the elderly* has undergone pejoration and is now generally disused in favor of *senior citizens*. Deciding at what age people become the elderly must be left to your own good judgment. That’s one advantage of *senior citizen*: American culture has loosely established that you become a senior citizen at 60 to 65. There’s no quarrel about that range as being the standard; at 65, only the facts can then be disputed, as some people embark on a post-30 quest to misrepresent their age.

**eldritch** (= weird, eerie) is sometimes misspelled *eldrich*—e.g.: "June is the month of the summer solstice, and of Midsummer’s Eve—when, according to *eldritch* [read *eldritch*] lore, witches, fairies, spirits of the dead and supernatural folk of all sorts are abroad and active." Jim Wise, "Midsummer Past Is Brought Home on a Whiff of Magnolia," *Herald-Sun* (Durham, N.C.), 19 June 2000, at B1.

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*eldritch* misspelled *eldrich*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 30:1

*elect* is uniformly hyphenated as a combining form—hence *president-elect, chair-elect*, etc. See *postpositional adjectives*. See also *bride-to-be*.

**elector** = (1) esp. in BrE, a legally qualified voter; or (2) in AmE, a member of the electoral college chosen by the states to elect the president and vice president. Sense 1 appears occasionally in AmE, especially in older works—e.g.: "The first view to be taken of this part of the government relates to the qualifications of the *electors* and the elected." *The Federalist* No. 52, at 325 (James Madison) (Clinton Rossiter ed., 1961). Sense 2 is more usual in modern AmE—e.g.: "The President held office for four years and then had to be given—or denied—a second term by *electors* picked by the people." Fred Rodell, *Nine Men* 44 (1955).

**electoral** (= of, relating to, or involving electors) is so spelled. But *electorial* is a common misspelling—e.g.:

- "Both camps agreed that today’s Supreme Court hearing will be the defining moment in a five-week battle over who is the winner of Florida’s 25 *electoral [read electoral]* votes, which either candidate would need to reach the 270 *electoral [read electoral]* votes required to win the White House." William Douglas, "Supreme Court to Hear Arguments Today That Could Finally Settle Battle for White House," *Newsday* (N.Y.), 11 Dec. 2000, at A4. (The

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(For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
electric; electrical; electronic. Electric = (1) of, relating to, or operated by electricity <electric train> <electric chair>; or (2) thrilling; emotionally charged <a musician's electric performance>. Electrical overlaps with sense 1 of electric—that is, it commonly means "concerned with electricity" <electrical engineering> <electrical outlet>. The choice between the two seems to be governed largely by euphony: although electric is more usual, electrical occurs in a few set phrases beginning with vowels.

Electronic = (1) of, relating to, or involving electrons; or (2) of, relating to, or involving the branch of physics known as electronics, or to systems or devices developed through this science. Sense 2 is far more common—e.g.: "Toyota treats a blueprint for a change on an engineer's desk (or its electronic equivalent) the way it would an unfinished component." Alex Taylor III, "How Toyota Defies Gravity," Indianapolis Star, 25 Jan. 2006, at B2.

eleemosynary /el-ә-mәs-ә-nәr-e/, related etymologically to the word alms, is a formal word for charitable. E.g.: "It requires an effort considerably more sustained than the bursts of eleemosynary fervor witnessed at holiday time." Clyde Haberman, "Giving Thanks at St. Bartholomew's," N.Y. Times, 22 Nov. 1995, at B7.


elegance; elegance. A distinction has emerged. Elegance is the quality or state of being elegant. Elegance is a thing that is thought to be elegant. Concededly, though, the history of these words is a messy one. Since 1750, elegance has eclipsed elegance in frequency of occurrence.

Current ratio: 180:1

Elegant Variation. See inelegant variation.

elegy; eulogy. An elegy is a mournful song or poem, whereas a eulogy is a funeral oration or, by extension, a laudatory speech. Writers occasionally misuse elegy for eulogy—e.g.:

Speaking in precise, well-crafted paragraphs, Poland's most popular political figure delivered an extemporaneous elegy [read eulogy] to the movement that had spawned him." Adam Karatyntczyk, "The Age of Solidarity; Testing Poland's Patience," New Republic, 11 June 1990, at 20, 21.


"After the players were introduced, Knight gave a moving elegy [read eulogy] for his old coach and friend." "Just One Minute: College Basketball," Indianapolis Star, 1 Feb. 2010, at B1.

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electoral misspelled *electoral: Stage 1
Current ratio: 5,203:1

elemental; elementary. Elemental is the more specific term, meaning (1) "of, relating to, or involving the elements of something; essential" <an elemental component of the machine>; or (2) "of, relating to, or involving a force of nature, or something like it" <elemental rage>. E.g.: "From the ringing words of his first inaugural—the only thing we have to fear is fear itself"—Roosevelt's presidency was about taking charge and elemental fairness." David Warsh, "Hollywood vs. History Books," Boston Globe, 24 Dec. 1995, at 69.

Elementary means "introductory; simple; fundamental." E.g.: "Ms. Handler [noted] that the company's real goal was to realize Mr. Hillis's dream of building digital computers that could 'learn' and perform more than elementary reasoning." David E. Sanger, "A Computer Full of Surprises," N.Y. Times, 8 May 1987, at D1.

elephantine (= slow, heavy, and awkward, like an elephant) is pronounced /el-i-fәn-tin/, /el-i-fәn-teen/, or /el-i-fәn-trәn/—always with the accent on the third syllable, not the first or last. See animal adjectives.

elephantine

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eliminate, strictly speaking, means to get rid of something that already exists <we downsized to eliminate several layers of bureaucracy that had built up>. The verb should not be misused for prevent or avoid; that is, it shouldn’t refer to something that doesn’t yet exist. E.g.:

- “Two readers who experienced debilitating crashes with Power Mac 8500 systems were able to eliminate [read prevent] crashes by moving DRAm DIMMs away from the vicinity of the cache.” Ric Ford, “Coming Clean: Apple Has a New Set of PCI Updates,” MacWEEK, 4 Dec. 1995, at 52.

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eliminate misused for prevent: Stage 2

-ELLE; -ELLA. See diminutives (d).

**ELLIPSES.** See punctuation (f) & quotations (e).

elliptic; elliptical. There is much overlap. The adjective elliptic most strongly corresponds to the noun ellipse, the geometric term—e.g.: “Mars is fourth from the sun, having an elliptic orbit ranging from 129 to 156 million miles distant from it, compared to our average 93 million miles.” Mina Walther, “Far from Humble, There May Be No Place Like Home: Earth,” Sarasota Herald-Trib., 8 Sept. 1996, at F6.

The adjective elliptical traditionally corresponds most strongly to elliptis, the grammatical and rhetorical term for an omission—e.g.: “‘Goodbye South, Goodbye’ tells its difficult-to-follow story in a fractured elliptical style that mirrors the characters’ rootless, lumpy lives.” Stephen Holden, “Wheeling and Dealing in Taiwan’s Backwaters,” N.Y. Times, 1 Oct. 1996, at C13. See -ic.

The four-syllable elliptical occurs more than twice as often in print as elliptic, and the differentiation suggested above may not hold firm—given the rise in the 1990s of “ellipticals” as training equipment (also known as “elliptical machines”). These machines have the user’s feet travel in an ellipse. What may happen in the long term is that elliptic will be the scientific term answering to ellipse and that elliptical will be the popular term for all senses.

elocute, meaning “to speak in a grand, affected manner,” is a usually facetious back-formation from elocution—e.g.: “Simon Russell Beale plays Oswald, the afflicted Alving son. He’s an actor who elocutes so well that talk no longer reveals character but effectively conceals it.” Vincent Canby, “A Crowd Under the National’s Umbrella,” N.Y. Times, 12 June 1994, § 2, at 5.

**elocution; locution; allocution.** Elocution = style in speaking; the art of speaking persuasively. Locution = a word or phrase. Allocution = (1) a formal address; (2) a judge’s formal address asking a criminal defendant to speak in mitigation of the sentence to be imposed; or (3) loosely, a criminal defendant’s speech in mitigation of the sentence to be imposed.

elope. The OED and many other dictionaries define this term as if it had historically been a sexist one in law: a. Law. Of a wife: To run away from her husband in the company of a paramour. b. In popular language also (and more frequently) said of a woman running away from home with a lover for the purpose of being married” (OED). These definitions suggest that only women can elope, but even legal writers have long made men as well as women elopers—e.g.:

- “If evidence was admitted to show that House had armed himself, and was hunting for Steadman, under the impression that the latter had eloped with his wife, and was secreting himself in that vicinity, it is difficult to see upon what principle his threats in that connection were excluded.” Alexander v. United States, 138 U.S. 353, 356 (1891).
- “James Campbell had eloped with the wife of one Ludlow.” Adger v. Ackerman, 115 F. 124, 130 (8th Cir. 1902).

Today the word does not ordinarily apply exclusively to women. It may, of course, as here: “After an idyllic childhood, Anderson impulsively eloped at 18 and endured a wedding night that she called ‘one of the great disasters in the history of sex on this planet.’” Dana Kennedy, “The Anderson Tapes,” Entertainment Weekly, 27 Oct. 1995, at 82. But more typically the word applies to the couple—e.g.: “He and his bride-to-be decided to elope to Canada.” Marty Meitus, “Apples of Our Eye,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 9 Oct. 1996, at D3.

*else but; *else than. Instead of either of these ungainly phrases, use a simple but or the more idiomatic other than—e.g.: “This has nothing to do with some supposed slacker mentality that strikes 20-something deaf and dumb to anything else but [read but or other than] the boob tube.” Helen Ubinas, “What?! This Place Doesn’t Have Cable!!” Hartford Courant, 1 Aug. 1997, at E1.

else’s. Possessive constructions such as anyone else’s and everyone else’s are preferred to the obsolete constructions *anyone else and *everyone else. Although whose else is technically correct, modern usage prefers who else by analogy to the forms made with anyone and everyone. Who else’s has predominated over whose else in AmE since the 1960s and in BrE since the 1990s. See possessives (1). Current ratio (anyone else’s vs. *anyone else): 168:1

Current ratio (who else’s vs. whose else): 2:1

*else than. See *else but.
elude. See allude (b).

elusive; *elusory; illusory; *illusive; allusive. Elusive (rather than *elusory) is the usual adjective related to elude; illusory (rather than *illusive) is the usual adjective related to illusion. In short, *elusory and *illusive are needless variants.

More than that, however, the multiple forms can lead to confusion between them. Most commonly, *illusive is misused for elusive—e.g.:• “This unlikely pair manages to outflank the stolid legal bureaucracy, chase down an illusive [read elusive] serial killer and still find time to savor Gotham's more exotic attractions.” “Crime in the Big Apple,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 14 June 1992, Everyday Mag. §, at C5.
• “Pats found the illusive [read elusive] third goal with just six minutes left on the clock.” Jessica Farry, "Pats Wallop Three Goals Past Rovers," Sligo Champion (Ireland), 28 July 2015, Sport §, at 38.

Allusive (= containing an allusion or characterized by use of allusion) is also occasionally misused where elusive is the intended meaning—e.g.: “Toyota brought Scion, its small car intended to catch the eye of allusive [read elusive] Gen Y.” Jay Binneweg, “A Whimper, Not a Bang,” Santa Fe New Mexican, 11 Jan. 2003, at E1.


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1. *illusive misused for elusive: Stage 1
   Current ratio (elusive concept vs. *illusive concept): 24:1
2. allusive misused for elusive: Stage 1

*elvish. See elfin.

EM−; IM−. See EN−.

e-mail; E-mail; email. Since the 1990s, e-mail has remained the prevalent form in print sources. The letter e—short for electronic—is sometimes capitalized, but the trend is to make it lowercase. The unhyphenated email is unsightly, but it might prevail in the end. In print sources, e-mail is almost twice as common as email. Ultimately, the hyphen may well disappear—since that is what midword hyphens tend to do—but for the time being it is more than holding its own. (The same is true of e-commerce and other forms prefixed by e−.)

Some bootless objections remain. A few writers have objected to e-mail as a shortened form of e-mail message <send me an e-mail>—and also to using it as a count noun <I had three e-mails>. Both of these uses are now standard. Others have questioned whether e-mail should function as a verb <please e-mail me with the answer>, but that question has long since been answered affirmatively.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
email for e-mail: Stage 4
   Current ratio (e-mail vs. email): 2:1

email list; Listserv. An e-mail list is a subscription service through which participants discuss topics relevant to the forum through e-mails. Listserv is software that runs e-mail lists. Although it is common to see listserv used to refer to e-mail lists generically, that use should be avoided—e.g.: “For about three years I subscribed to an Internet 'listserv' [read e-mail list] that gave charter enthusiasts across America an opportunity to chat.” Marion Brady, “Charter Schools: Incubators of Innovation?” Orlando Sentinel, 13 Nov. 2002, at A17. Listserv is a registered trademark of L-Soft International, Inc. and should always be capitalized. There is no -e on the end of the name because the software was originally written to run on university IBM mainframe computers, whose filenames were limited to eight characters. And so, for example, the name of a list set up to discuss the works of Shakespeare is Shakspar.

emanate (= to flow forth, issue, originate from) has diverse uses. Sometimes the word refers to something physical—e.g.: “Inside, the hardwood floors gleamed and delicious aromas emanated from the kitchen.” Jamie Marshall, “Charm on the Farm,” Town & Country Monthly, Sept. 1996, at 49. At other times, though, the movement is figurative—e.g.: “All the more ironic was the fact that this fatuous rhetoric emanated from Chicago, of all places.” “Educators or Lobbyists?” Wash. Times, 1 Sept. 1996, at B2.

*embracation. See embarkation.

embargo. Pl. embargoes—not *embargos. See plurals (d). For more on the word, see boycott.

CURRENT RATIO: 8:1

embrace; *embracation; *embarkment. Embracement = (1) the act of going on board a means of transportation; or (2) the act of starting a mission or enterprise. The second and third forms have been needless variants since the 18th century.

CURRENT RATIO (IN ORDER OF HEADWORDS): 64:2:1

embarrass. See spelling (a).

embarrassedly. See -edly.

*embassador. See ambassador.

embassy; legation. Often assumed to be synonymous in diplomatic contexts, these words should be distinguished. An embassy is under an ambassador, and a legation is under a minister, envoy, chargé d'affaires, or other diplomatic agent not having the titular rank of ambassador.

embattled, adj. This word has traditionally meant “ready for battle,” usually in reference to an aggressor whose troops and weapons are ready for fighting. Only since the mid-20th century has the word taken on a sense similar to beleaguered (perhaps through sound association with battered) and been applied instead to the victim of aggression. Today this derived sense threatens to vanquish the original sense (which might, sadly, be said to be “embattled”)—e.g.:


embroze; *embraze; *imbaze. The first is the standard spelling. The second and third are needless variants. See en-.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 763:83:1

embryo. Pl. embryos, not *embyros. See plurals (d).

Current ratio: 8,143:1

Em-Dashes. See punctuation (g).

emend. See amend.

emery board (= a file used as a manicuring implement) is sometimes misspelled *emery board, as if it had some connection with the Georgia university—e.g.: “With the egg suspended on straws inside the tube of paper taped to a platform of emery [read emmary] boards, Farnhof dropped the device onto a target.” Lisa Teachey, “Fun: Learning the Formula for Rice Science Olympiad,” Houston Chron., 27 Jan. 1997, at A13. Emery is the anglicized version of the French word émeri (ultimately of Greek derivation), denoting a coarse, granular mineral used for grinding or polishing.

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emery board misspelled *emmary board: Stage 1
Current ratio: 57:1

emigrant; émigré. There is a latent differentiation between these words. An emigrant is someone who leaves a country to settle in another. Émigré has the same sense, but applies especially to one in political exile. The first acute accent is often omitted (emigré) in AmE. As for frequency of occurrence in English-language contexts, emigrant has greatly predominated over émigré.

emigrate. See immigrate.

émigré. See emigrant.

eminent. See imminent.

eminently (= notably, conspicuously) is frequently used, in mild hyperbole, to mean “very” <eminently qualified>. For some common misuses, see imminent & infinitely (A).

Emmy (= the statuette given as a television award) forms the plural Emmys—not *Emmies. See plurals (E).

Current ratio: 27:1

emote. See back-formations.

emotional; emotive. Although both words can mean “of, relating to, or involving emotion or the emotions,” emotional is the usual term in this sense. Otherwise, the two are differentiated. Emotional = affected by emotion; showing strong emotion <the victims were highly emotional about the incident even several years later>. Emotive = arousing emotion <emotive words>.

*empale. See impale.

empanel; impanel. Empanel (= to put on a panel; esp., to swear [a jury] to try an issue or case) is now the preferred spelling in both AmE and BrE. E.g.: “It isn’t clear how long final questioning will last or when a jury can be empaneled for opening statements.” “102 Make the Cut for Simpson Jury Pool,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 10 Oct. 1996, at A2. Impanel, though once the predominant form, might now be regarded as a needless variant. Yet it occurs just about as frequently.

Current ratio: 1:1

empathic; empathetic. Empathic (= of, relating to, displaying, or eliciting empathy) has long been the usual form. But empathetic is frequently encountered, doubtless because of the close analogy to sympathetic—e.g.:


For now, the term empathic is standard in print sources. But a terminological shift may be at work.

Current ratio: 1.4:1

empathy; sympathy. Empathy is the ability to imagine oneself in another person’s position and to experience all the sensations connected with it. Sympathy is compassion for or commiseration with another.
emphatic; *emphatical. Since about 1820, emphatic has been the standard term—eclipsing the previously popular *emphatical. See -atical.

Current ratio: 98:1

empirical; empiric, adj. Empirical is the word generally used, and empiric might easily be labeled a needless variant. But medical writers, surprisingly enough, often use empiric—e.g.:

- “We recognize that there was more empiric therapy used in nonclinic patients by the primary care physicians without recourse to bronchoscopy.” R. Andrew McIvor et al., “An Effectiveness Community-Based Clinical Trial of Respirgard II [etc.],” 110 Chest, July 1996, at 141.

Still, medical writers use empirical therapy and empirical treatment about as often as they put empiric in those phrases, and it would doubtless be a good thing if their usage mirrored general usage.

Current ratio: 72:1

employ is a formal word for use—and is inferior whenever use might suffice.

employ(e). Although employé, the French form, might logically be thought to be better as a generic term, employée (which in French denotes the feminine gender) is so widespread—minus the accent mark—that it is not likely to be uprooted. Although The Wall Street Journal and U.S. News and World Report were longtime holdouts for employe, the form employee is standard. See independent contractor.

Current ratio (employees vs. employes): 169:1

emporium (= a large shop) predominantly made the plural emporiums in all varieties of English from about 1830. Around 1940, BrE predominantly adopted the Latinate emporia, and within a decade World English followed suit. But by 1960, the homogeneric plural emporiums once again firmly established itself in AmE. So today it’s emporiums in AmE and emporia in much of the rest of the world. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (World English): 1:2:1

empower; *impower. The second is an obsolete spelling. The prefixes typically become en- and im-.

EN-; IN-. No consistent rule exists for determining which form of the prefix to use before a given word. But it’s fair to say that the French form en- is more a living prefix than in-. That is, en- has won most of the battles in which it contended against in-.

The following lists show the preferred form at left and the variant on the right. Of course, when the root word begins with a -b-, -m-, or -p-, the prefixes typically become en- and im-.

Preferred Form  Variant Form
embalm  *imbalm
embark  *imbark
embed  *imbed
embro 
embody  *imbody
embolden  *imbolder
embosom  *imbosom
embower  *imbower
embrown  *imbrown
empower  *impower
encage  *incage
encapsulate  *incapsulate
encase  *incase
enclasp  *inclasp
enclose  *inclose
enclosure  *inclosure
encrust  *incrust
encryption  *incryption
encumber  *incumber
encumbrance  *incumbrance
endow  *indow
endowment  *indowment
endue  *indue
enfold  *infold
engraft  *ingraft
engulf  *ingulf
enlace  *inlace
ennmesh  *inmesh
ensheathe  *insheathe
enshrine  *inshrine
ensnare  *insnare

emulate. Emulate = to strive to equal or rival; to copy or imitate with the object of equaling. A person may emulate another person, but not a habit or a style. The word is frequently misused for adopt—e.g.:

- “Culture research is now being published in the leading organizational journals, but (ironically) only by emulating [read adopting] the same positivist research model that culture researchers originally deplored.” Daniel R. Denison, “What Is the Difference Between Organizational Culture and Organizational Climate?” 21 Academy Mgmt. Rev. 619, 644 (1996).

For a word with which emulate is occasionally confused, see immolate.
ensoul  *insoul
ensphere  *insphere
ensue  *issue
enthrall  *inthral
enthrone  *inthrone
entice  *intice
entitle  *intitle
entomb  *intomb
entreat  *intreat
entrench  *intrench
entrust  *intrust
entwine  *intwine
entwist  *intwist
enwind  *inwind
enwrap  *inwrap
enwreathe  *inwreathe
imbrue  *embrue
impale  *empale
imbrue  *embrue
impoverish  *empoverish
inflame  *enflame
inquire  *enquire
inquiry  *enquiry
inure  *enure

Especially troublesome to writers are word pairs with varying prefixes according to inflection: enjoin but injunction, encrust but incrustation, etc.

enamel, vb., makes enameled and enameling in AmE, enamelled and enamelling in BrE. See SPELLING (B).

enamor; enamour. The first is AmE, the second BrE. Though each spelling can be found in both varieties, enamor has made greater inroads into BrE than enamour has into AmE. World English is tending toward the AmE spelling. See -or; -our.

enamored takes the preposition of, not with or by—e.g.:

- “There are also the areas we are becoming enamored with [read enamored of]: for example, health insurance, security companies.” South Africa Invites U.S. Biz Back, Crain’s Detroit Bus., 30 Sept. 1996, at 45.

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*enamored with for enamored of: Stage 4
Current ratio (enamored of vs. with by): 11:6:1

encase; *incase. The first is the standard spelling. See EN-.

enclave (= a small, distinct area or district where an insular group of people live), a 19th-century French loanword, long received the anglicized pronunciation /en-klayv/. In recent years, however, a gallicized pronunciation /on-klayv/ has become commonplace in AmE. See gallicisms.

enclose; *inclose. The former spelling is now preferred in all senses. E.g.: “While parents are off shopping, children ages 3 to 8 can play in the glassed-enclosed [read glass-enclosed or glassed, enclosed] childcare center.” Gregory J. Gilligan, “Kids Quarters,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 26 July 1993, Bus. §, at 1. See EN-.

Current ratio: 9:1

*enclosed please find; *please find enclosed; *enclosed herewith; *enclosed herein. These phrases—common in commercial and legal correspondence since the mid-19th century—are archaic deadwood for here are, enclosed is, I’ve enclosed, or the like. Interestingly, business-writing texts have consistently condemned the phrases since the late 19th century:

- “[Please find enclosed] A more ridiculous use of words, it seems to me, there could not be.” Richard Grant White, Every-Day English 492 (1880).
- “Enclosed herewith please find. Enclosed and herewith mean the same thing. How foolish to tell your reader twice exactly where the check is, and then to suggest that he look around to see if he can find it anywhere. Say, ‘We are inclosing our check for $25.50.’” Wallace E. Bartholomew & Floyd Hurlbut, The Business Man’s English 153 (1924). (If that sentence had been written recently, inclose would have been enclosed.)
- “Please Find Enclosed. This worn-out formula is not in good use in letters, either business or personal.” Maurice H. Weseen, Crowell’s Dictionary of English Grammar 470 (1928).
- “When you read a letter that sounds as if it were a compendium of pat expressions from some musty old letter book of the goose-quill period, do you feel that you are communing with the writer’s mind? On the contrary, if you have a discerning mind, you know that you are merely getting a reflex from one who lacks taste and good mental digestion. . . . When you compose letters, beware these bromides: . . . inclosed please find.” H. Cramp, Letter Writing: Business and Social 22–23 (1930).
- “Business words and expressions borrowed from an earlier generation can make your writing sound artificial and pedantic. Every letter will read like a form letter, and you will sound bored or, even worse, boring. Thinking up substitute phrases is easy if you put your mind to it. Consider some of these revisions: . . . Enclosed please find [becomes] I am enclosing.” Maryann V. Piotrowski, Effective Business Writing 53 (1989).

Current ratio (enclosed is the vs. enclosed please find): 16:1

enclosure; *inclosure. The first spelling is standard in all senses. See EN-.

encomium (= warm praise) forms the plural encomiums or encomia. The native-English plural has been predominant since the 18th century and is still standard—e.g.:

• “The eulogies and encomiums have centred exclusively upon the departing Tom Watson.” Oliver Brown, “Thomson Endorsement Inspires Scott to Purge His Open Nightmares,” Sunday Telegraph, 19 July 2015, Sport §, at 3.

See plurals (b).

encounter, vb., = (1) to come across; meet with <she had never encountered the word>; (2) to confront (an adversary); engage in conflict with <he finally encountered his nemesis at the entrance to the factory>; or (3) to run into (a difficulty or complication) <we’ve never encountered that problem>. Although sense 1 is occasionally criticized, it dates from the 14th century and has an unimpeachable lineage.

crust; incrust. Encrust is the standard spelling; *incrust is a rare variant. See en-.

crustation. See incrustation.

cryption (= the act of encoding or enciphering) is so spelled—not *encryption or *incryption.

cumbrance; *incumbrance; *cumbrance. The preferred spelling of this word, meaning “a claim or liability that is attached to property and that may lessen its value,” is encumbrance in both AmE and BrE. *Cumbrance is a needlessly variant. See en-.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 146:44:1

derbar; encyclopaedia. The *ae- was predominantly shortened to –e- in AmE by 1905 and in BrE by 1970. *Encyclopaedia is an archaic spelling throughout the English-speaking world. See ae.

Current ratio: 5:1

EN-Dashes. See punctuation (h).

endear, vt., is properly a reflexive verb. President John F. Kennedy endeared himself to the press. Wagnerors endeared themselves to the people they’d like to manipulate. But in the following sentence, endear is used incorrectly as a regular transitive verb—as a near-synonym of charm—instead of as a reflexive: “Roberts, whose Columbo-like, disheveled personality has endeared [read endeared him to or charmed] reporters for decades—he once set his desk on fire with a cigarette—is likely to help morale.” Larry Reibstein, “It’s Back to the Future,” Newsweek, 18 Apr. 1994, at 41.

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endear misused for charm: Stage 1

endeavor, vb., is a formal word for attempt or try—either of which is preferable in everyday contexts. But endeavor suggests more of a challenge and more of a sustained effort—e.g.: • “If you are trying to prove that your ancestor arrived in Texas before the closing days of the Republic in the 1840s or if you are endeavoring to learn how, when and where your foreign-born Texas ancestors were naturalized, the voter registration lists will reveal these facts.” Lloyd Bockstruck, “Confederate Lists Can Aid Genealogists,” Dallas Morning News, 31 Aug. 1996, at C11.

Much the same is true of endeavor, n., which means “an undertaking; earnest effort.” E.g.: “From that standpoint, [the march] has the makings of a worthy endeavor—one designed to promote pride in Latinos, a diverse group of ethnicities, as well as push political awareness.” “A March for Civil Rights,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 9 Oct. 1996, at A14.

ended, p.pl.; ending, pr.pr. In phrases such as the year ending 31 December 1997, some fiscal writers have pedantically insisted that ending should be ended if the year has already passed. The present participle, it is argued, should be used for future periods <the week ending 7 March 2026>, but not past ones. In those circumstances, the argument runs, the past participle is more accurate <the week ended 14 September 1996>.

But the correlative term beginning is used in analogous senses <the week beginning 12 January 1992>, and there is no valid objection to ending, whether the reference is to a future or past period.

endemic. See epidemic.

end(ing), n. End, not ending, corresponds most idiomatically to the noun beginning. E.g.: “The turnover of the Sinai is a beginning, not an ending [read end].”

In print sources since 1700, the phrase beginning and ending has consistently appeared more frequently than beginning and ending—today by an almost 3-to-1 ratio. See parallelism.

endive. The traditional pronunciation is /en-div/. The Frenchified /on-deev/ is an affectation.

ENDNOTES. See footnotes (b).

endorse; indorse. The usual spelling is endorse, and that is the only acceptable spelling when the word is used figuratively to mean “to express approval of publicly; to support.” E.g.: “The IRS, of course, doesn’t sanction or endorse specific investments.” Karen Cheney, “Don’t Be Taken In by the Phony Investing Pitches,” Money, Mar. 1997, at 41. For more on the meaning of endorse, see approve (n).

In legal discussions relating to checks and other negotiable instruments, indorse predominates in AmE. But popularly, endorse is the more frequent spelling in all contexts—and most checks have “Endorse here” printed on the back. *Endorse on the back is a redundancy: en- means “on” and the root dors- means “back.”

endorsee. See -ee.
endow; *indow. The first is the standard spelling. The second is a variant spelling. See en-.

Current ratio: 68:1

end product is usually a REDUNDANCY for product.

end result, a REDUNDANCY for result, rose to prominence over the course of the 20th century. Safire called it "redundant, tautological and unnecessarily repetitive, not to mention prolix and wordy." William Safire, "Peace-ese," N.Y. Times, 17 Nov. 1991, § 6, at 22. The only exception occurs when the writer needs to refer to intermediate results as well as end results. Cf. final outcome.

endue; *indue. Both mean (1) "to provide with a quality or trait"; or (2) "to put on (a piece of clothing)" (AHD). Although neither form is common, the spelling endue predominates. *Indue is a NEEDLESS VARIANT. See en-.

Current ratio: 2:1

energy-saving, adj., is so hyphenated. See PHRASAL ADJECTIVES.

enervate; innervate. Enervate (/en-ar-vayt/) means "to drain the vigor out of"—e.g.: "It is a great and enervating mistake for young writers not to see all the hazards that stand between them and successful communication." Gorham Munson, The Written Word 32 (rev. ed. 1949). Probably because the word sounds a bit like energize, it is sometimes used where that word would convey the intended meaning—e.g.: "Gutsy performances by 'Deep Impact' in 29 territories and a three-day weekend in parts of Europe gave exhibs some cheer last week, but not enough to enervate [read energize] overall business that was characterized as flat in France, quiet in the U.K. and indifferent in Spain." Don Groves, "'Godzilla' Storms Malaysian B.O.," Variety, 14 June 1998, Film §, at 14.

"The intent of cliche makers is to color up and enervate [read innervate or enliven] language so as to make it easier to comprehend. Alarming, it does not always work that way." Edward S. Spector, "Seeking Some Closure on Those Tired Clichés," Buffalo News, 4 May 2001, at B18.

Innervate (/i-nar-vayt/) means "to supply with energy" or "to supply (a muscle) with nerves." It is most often found in medical writing—e.g.: "The doctor severs a few of the nerves that innervate the vocal muscles so they don't keep the cords slammed shut." Dr. Paul Donohue, "Surgery May Be Solution for Vocal Muscles," Grand Rapids Press, 30 Mar. 2007, at C7.

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енervate misused for energize: Stage 1

*enflame. See inflame.

enforce; *inforce. A. Spelling. The latter is an archaic spelling whose only vestige appears in reinforce. See en-.

Current ratio: 325:1

B. "Enforcing" a Contract. Lawyers continually speak of enforcing contracts, but this term is not apt unless one is seeking specific performance. Usually, the law merely specifies a remedy for breach of contract—damages—and does not compel performance.

enforceable; *enforcible. Since the mid-19th century, enforceable has been the preferred spelling in both AmE and BrE. E.g.: "A contract is enforcible [read enforceable] even though it does not specify the type of deed to be given." Robert Kratovil, Real Estate Law 83 (1946). Cf. forcible.

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enforceable misspelled *enforcible: Stage 1

Current ratio: 238:1

England. See Great Britain.

English, vb. This useful verb, dating from the 14th century and meaning either "to render in English" or "to translate into English," occurs frequently in linguistic texts but often surprises those unfamiliar with such texts—e.g.: "A number of words that only a few years ago were still thought of as lifted from the Latin have now become so completely Englished that they take the -er ending instead of -or." Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work 99 (1940). Of course, anglicize is the more common and less jarring alternative.

engraft; *ingraft. Since the 1790s, the standard spelling has been engraff. See en-.

Current ratio: 6:1

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енграф изоображен в варианте engraft: Stage 1

Current ratio: 6:1

See irregular verbs (b).

The adjectival use of engraven predominates—e.g.: "An engraven silver urn, one of his old prizes, held a dozen felt-tipped pens, one of which he now took in hand." Arthur Miller, "The Bare Manuscript," New Yorker, 16 Dec. 2002, at 82, 91.

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енграфен для предшествующего форм: Stage 1

Current ratio (had engraven vs. had engraven): 12:1
**enlarge** (= to heighten, intensify, or improve) should refer to a quality or condition, not to people. So while you can enhance people's education or experience or even salaries, you can't really enhance people themselves. But some writers fall into error—e.g.: “If all workers do what they are supposed to do together, . . . everyone will be enhanced from [read improved by] working together.” Sheila Storm, “Knowlton Focuses on Details,” *Successful Bus.,* 27 Sept. 1993, at 1.

Similarly, because *enhance* has long had positive connotations, it is a mistake to use it in reference to something bad, such as injuries—e.g.: “Papiano says that the intubation enhanced [read aggravated] the injury.” William Nack, “From Fame to Shame,” *Sports Illustrated,* 19 Apr. 1993, at 70. Unfortunately, lawyers have developed what they call the *enhanced-injury doctrine,* which allows an injury victim to seek damages from a deep-pocket company even if the company didn't directly cause the injury; under that rule, a person seriously injured by a drunk driver in a car crash could sue not only the driver but also the car manufacturer for not making the victim's car safe enough for such a crash. The use of *enhance,* though not a good choice, is understandable: to a plaintiff's lawyer who stands to gain a percentage of any recovery, an injury can be “enhanced” if the potential damages are greater. By this logic, though, an excruciating injury would be the most “enhanced” situation. This is pure torture to the English language.

**enigma.** Pl. *enigmas*—preferably not *enigmata.* See plurals (b).

**enjambment** (= in poetry, the continuation of a line, couplet, or verse from one to the next without a noticeable pause) is the standard spelling—e.g.: “Tra-" to effect the continuation of a line, couplet, or verse from one to the next without a noticeable pause) is the standard spelling—e.g.: “Traditional forms are reanimated through syncopated rhythms and line enjambment.” Rita Dove, “Poet’s Choice,” *Wash. Post,* 2 Sept. 2001, at T12. *Enjam-" is a variant spelling common in the late 19th century but now archaic.

**enjoin**. See *jeopardize.*

**enjoined; injunction; enjoinment.** The words of the Fowler brothers are as apt today as they were when first written:

As *rejoin* rejoinder, so *enjoin* enjoiner. The word is not given in the [first edition of the *OED,*] from which it seems likely that Dickens [“Merely nodding his head as an enjoiner to be careful.”] invented it, consciously or unconsciously. The only objection to such a verb is that its having to wait so long, in spite of its obviousness, before being made is a strong argument against the necessity of it. We may regret that *injunction* holds the field, having a much less English appearance; but it does; and in language the old-established that can still do the work is not to be turned out for the new-fangled that might do it a shade better, but must first get itself known and accepted.


The *OED* contains two illustrative examples of *enjoin-er,* but *injunction* still generally “holds the field” in both positive and negative senses of *enjoin.*

Yet *enjoiner* has become more common than it was in the Fowlers' day in the sense “a command, esp. one that prohibits.” E.g.: “Never go to bed mad. For generations, wise old long-marrieds have offered this advice to spatting couples—an *enjoiner* endorsed by many of their modern professional congers, marriage counselors.” Michael Segell, “Make Love and War,” *Esquire,* Aug. 1997, at 128.

Enjoinment, missing from W2 and labeled archaic in W3, is recorded in the *OED* from the 17th century in the sense “the action of enjoining.” Today this word is fairly common in legal contexts <the court's enjoin-ment of their picketing was fully warranted>. It has been fairly steadily used in print sources from the early 19th century to the present day.

**enjoy myself.** See I *enjoyed myself.*

*enlargen,* which is recorded in neither the *OED* nor W3, is a needless variant of *enlarge,* vb. It has appeared sporadically since the early 19th century and remains surprisingly common—e.g.: *A reddened spot appears on the skin, enlargens [read enlarges], and becomes raised, like a pimple.” Amy J. Vellucci, “Rash of Lake Ith Complaints May Be Just the Beginning,” *N.H. Sunday News,* 10 July 1994, at A1.

*Four years later, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, while enlargening [read enlarging] the Intracoastal Waterway, dumped dredge material at the island's northeastern cor-ner:” Tao Woolfe, “Glancing Back,” *Sun-Sentinel* (Fl. Lauderdale), 22 Mar. 1996, Palm Beach Plus §, at 3.

*He started stealing his wife's birth control pills in an attempt to enlargen [enlarge] his breasts, had plastic surgery on his face and underwent his own procedures to remove body hair.” Dave Wedge, “Deadly Docs,” *Boston Herald,* 23 July 2000, at 1.

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Rockets essentially gutted their team to bring in forward Charles Barkley, whose presence should _liven_ [read _enliven_] and inspire the Rockets to make one more run at an NBA title.” George Diaz, “Rockets Coming of Age,” _Orlando Sentinel_, 1 Nov. 1996, at G21.

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_liven up_ meaning “to _enliven_”: Stage 5

en _masse_. Pronounced /en mas/ or /əhn mas/.

**enology** (= the knowledge or study of wines and wine-making), a word introduced in the early 19th century, is predominantly so spelled in AmE—_oenology_ in BrE. Oddly, however, _oenophile_ (= a lover of wines) is the standard spelling in both AmE and BrE. Whoever decided this point of AmE usage must have been tippling unduly.

Current ratio (enology vs. _oenology_ in World English): 2:1

**enormity; enormousness.** The historical differentiation between these words should not be muddled. _Enormousness_ = hugeness, vastness. _Enormity_ = outrageousness, ghastliness, hideousness. For example, Alan Dershowitz once noted that Noam Chomsky “trivializes the enormity of the Chinese massacre [at Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989].” Letter of Alan Dershowitz, “Left’s Response to Beijing Massacre,” _L.A. Times_, 13 July 1989, § 2, at 6. But President George Bush was less fastidious when referring to a different event: on 10 July 1989, he said he was buoyed and cheered by “the enormity of this moment,” a historic challenge to reform the Polish economy.

The following examples typify the careful writer’s usage—e.g.:

- “A limited encounter with the Devil; his clansmen now try to explain, even as they realize the enormity of his sin.” William Safire, “Be Nobody’s Puppet,” _N.Y. Times_, 5 Sept. 1996, at A23.

The _OED_ notes that “recent examples [of _enormity_ for enormousness] might perh. be found, but the use is now regarded as incorrect.” Its evidence certainly shows a historical trend to make the word mean “monstrous wickedness,” but the secondary meaning never really disappeared—e.g.:

- “To appreciate the befuddling _enormity_ [read vastness] of these Olympics you need to wrestle with the following.

In Atlanta this weekend there are 42,000 volunteer workers, 30,000 police and soldiers, 15,000 media personnel and 10,788 athletes.” Paul Hayward, “Business Opens for Olympics,” _Daily Telegraph_, 20 July 1996, at 30.


- “Titanic’s numbers raised Fox’s confidence in the _enormity_ [read _enormousness_] of the women’s market.” David Ansen, “The Court of King Jim,” _Newsweek_, 13 Apr. 1998, at 70.

- “The _enormity_ [read _enormousness_] of Mr. Gore’s triumph allows him to move more quickly to patch up relations with Mr. Bradley’s backers.” Richard L. Berke, “A Sweep by Gore Assures [read _Ensures_] Nomination,” _N.Y. Times_, 8 Mar. 2000, at A1, A16. (For more on _assure_ and _ensure_, see _assure_.)

Some sentences teeter on an ambiguity: is the word used correctly (and something horrific is afoot) or incorrectly (so that sheer size is at issue)? E.g.: “Americans are well aware of the _enormity_ of the long-term-care problem that is facing the country.” Karen McNally Bensinger, “Insurance Can Defray Cost of Long-Term Care,” _Plain Dealer_ (Cleveland), 21 July 1996, at F6. How you read that sentence depends on your political inclinations: either something sinister is at work or else a big problem looms. The ambiguity might be considered splendid; yet it might also lead one to conclude that this is a _skunked term_.

Again, is the writer of the following sentence partisan? And if so, is the writer a Republican or a Democrat? “Pick a superlative, any superlative. Chances are it doesn’t come close to portraying the _enormity_ of the Republican victory Tuesday.” “Big Win,” _Amarillo Globe-Times_, 10 Nov. 1994, at A4.

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_enormity_ misused for _immensity_: Stage 4

**enough, adj.; sufficient.** Although _enough_ modifies either count nouns <_enough books_> or mass nouns <_enough stamina>, _sufficient_ should modify only mass nouns <_sufficient oxygen_>. (See count nouns and mass nouns.) And while the usage problem can be solved by making it _sufficient numbers of_, the single word _enough_ does the job better—e.g.: “The Pacific Maritime Assn., which represents shipping lines and terminal operators, claims the union has been deliberately slowing the work pace by failing to dispatch _sufficient numbers of_ [read _enough_] skilled workers to job sites.” Nancy Clevelan & David Streitfeld, “Logjam at Ports Continues as Sides Blame Each Other,” _L.A. Times_, 17 Oct. 2002, Bus. §, pt. 3, at 2.

There are, of course, exceptions to the general rule: _sufficient_ (or more often _insufficient_) _funds_ is a common phrase. But the following examples misuse _sufficient_ for _enough_ or _adequate_:

- “President Rosemary Brester reports she’s encountering substantial problems finding _sufficient_ [read _enough_]

- "That would have been the 'easy answer,' said Jack Grobe, head of the committee in charge of deciding ... when First-Energy has made sufficient [read enough] changes to the plant's management so it can be trusted to operate safely." John Funk, "NRC Praises Davis-Besse for Handling of New Issue," Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 17 Oct. 2002, at C4.

For more on sufficient, see adequate (A).

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enough, adv.; sufficiently. The same rule of thumb that applies to the adjectives applies to the adverbs as well—though because of the strictures of grammar, errors with this pair are less likely to occur.

*enounce. See announce.

enplane. See airlines.

*enquire. See inquire.

enquiry. See inquiry (B).

enroll; enrol. Enroll is the standard spelling in AmE, enrol in BrE.

enrollee. See -ee.

enrollment; enrolment. This word is spelled -l- in AmE and -ll- in BrE.

en route; *enroute. The standard form is en route. In modern print sources (mostly American), the closed-up *enroute appears occasionally; although the OED suggests that this one-word version is exclusively North American (the earliest example being 1967), it occurs also in BrE.

The phrase is pronounced /en root/ or /on root/. Avoid /root/. Although /root/ is accepted for the word route by itself, in this phrase the pronunciation should invariably be /root/. For more, see route.

Current ratio: 17:1

ensue; *insue. The first is the standard spelling.

Current ratio: 2,347:1

*ensurance. See insurance (A).

ensure; insure. See assure.

*enswathe is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of swathe, vb. See swathe.

Current ratio (to swathe vs. *to enswathe): 65:1

enter. A. For enter into. Idiomatically speaking, one enters into a contract with another; one does not merely *enter a contract. E.g.: "At the time the contract is entered [read entered into], the agreed-upon payment must be a reasonable forecast of just compensation for the harm that would be caused by a breach." Even so, to enter into a contract with is usually prolix for to contract with.

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*enter a contract for enter into a contract: Stage 1

B. The Phrase enter in. Although to the modern ear this phrase is a REDUNDANCY, it occurs frequently in poems, in hymns, and especially in the Bible (KJV). It does not belong in mundane passages.

enterprise is often misspelled *enterprize—e.g.: "The study is part of an effort to figure out what to do with programs like the enterprise [read enterprise] zones." Aldo Svaldi, "Bidders Seek Chance to Guide State's Hand," Denver Bus. J., 23 Aug. 1996, at A4. The spelling H.M.S. Enterprise can be seen in the opening credits of the Star Trek series Enterprise. There, the spelling reflects the correct name of an 18th-century ship.

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enterprise misspelled *enterprize: Stage 1

Current ratio: 238:1

enthrall; enthral; *inthrall; *inthral. The spelling enthral is standard in AmE, enthral in BrE. The misspellings are to be avoided. See EN-.

*enthuse, vb., is a widely criticized BACK-FORMATION avoided by writers and speakers who care about their language. The verb can be either transitive or intransitive. As a transitive verb, it was originally confined to passive-voice uses <I am enthused by the game>, but by the mid-1990s the word had taken on active uses <she enthused me about the game>. E.g.:

- Transitive: "After discovering that the bags were no longer being imported into the U.S., I tracked down the company in Denmark, and, well, he enthuses [read gushes], 'here we are!'" Lynell George, "Once Feared Lost, This Relationship Is in the Bag Again," L.A. Times § pt. 5, at 12.

Although the adjective *enthused is virtually always inferior to enthusiastic, it is increasingly common—e.g.:

- "Wall Street was enthused [read enthusiastic], bidding up CBS stock $50 in one day to $313." Larry Reibstein, "Barry Diller's Greatest Hit?" Newsweek, 11 July 1994, at 46.
- "With reviews like that, Detroit is so enthused [read enthusiastic] about its prospects that it is positioning the new class of compacts as the centerpiece of an old-fashioned, '50s- and '60s-style all-out autumn advertising blitz." Janice Castro, "Small Cars, High Hopes," Time, 12 Sept. 1994, at 58.
- "The coming project he sounds most enthused [read enthusiastic] about is 'The Foreigner,' an English-language
entice, *intice. The latter is an obsolete spelling of entice (= to lure, attract). *Inticement is also obsolete for the corresponding noun enticement. Both i- spellings are therefore needless variants, but they occasionally appear in modern sources—e.g.:

- “Hindu fringe groups have accused missionaries of using money and other means to convert poor and illiterate Indians. Christian groups deny using such enticements [read enticements], which is [read are] illegal in Indian law.” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 24 Jan. 1999, at B7. (On the misuse of is for are in that sentence, see remote relatives.)

Current ratio: 413:1

entire is accorded the second syllable: /en-ˈtir/ , not /en-ˈtr̩/. On this word as a noncomparable adjective, see ADJECTIVES (B).

tenentle; title, v.t. The word entitle has two meanings: (1) “to provide with a right or title to something” <entitled to a discount>; and (2) “to give a title to” <a book entitled Woe Unto You, Lawyers!>. Sense 1 is more common. And sense 2, in the best usage, is confined to the past-participial adjective (as in the illustration with the book title).

As a transitive verb, title is preferred over entitle. Hence What are you going to title your article?, not *What are you going to entitle your article?

The Associated Press Stylebook and several other newspaper guides reserve entitled to mean having a right to do or have something. But sense 2 actually predates sense 1, and both senses are well established.

entomology; etymology. Entomology is the study of insects. Etymology is the study of word origins or, more usually, the derivation of a given word. The two words are occasionally confounded—e.g.:

- “Fly fishermen must also study the etymology of insects [read entomology], what they [read insects] look like, how they move, so they can mimic them.” Marianne Costantinou, “Reel-Life Story with a Cast of Thousands,” S.F. Examiner, 31 May 1999, at A12. (Besides the usage error, this buggy sentence also contains a latent redundancy [entomology of insects] and an ambiguity [they with two possible antecedents].)

- “To begin, one should go to the root entomology [read etymology] of the words.” Michael Storey, “Otus the Head Cat,” Ark. Democrat-Gaz., 14 Oct. 2000, at E3. (Root etymology is redundant.)

See etymology.

Entomology is sometimes, in its spelling, confusingly influenced by the spelling of etymology—e.g.:

“It is no accident that Musil was trained as an engineer, that Ernst Jünger and Nabokov should be serious entomologists [read entomologists], that Broch and Canetti are writers schooled in the exact and mathematical sciences.” George Steiner, In Bluebeard’s Castle 130 (1971).

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1. etymology misused for entomology: Stage 1
2. entomology misused for etymology: Stage 1
3. entomology misspelled *entymology: Stage 1

entrance; entry; entranceway; entryway. Both entrance and entry may refer to the act of entering. In reference to structures, entrance connotes a single opening, such as a door, while entranceway, entryway, and entry suggest a longer means of access, such as a corridor or vestibule.

entrust, not *intrust, is now the usual and preferred spelling. See en-.

Current ratio: 7:1

enumerable; innumerable. Though close in pronunciation, these words have opposite meanings. Enumerable = countable; capable of being listed. Innumerable = unable to be counted. The words should be pronounced distinctly so that listeners won’t misunderstand.

In writing, the most common error with these words is to misuse enumerable for innumerable—e.g.:


Both terms are sometimes misspelled *innumer-able. Most frequently the term misspelled is innumer-able—e.g.: “He had to rescue innumerable [read innumerable] wounded soldiers on Omaha Beach.

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The word number is redundant when used with either term. See redundancy.

**Enumerations.**

A. *First(ly), second(ly), third(ly); one, two, three.* The best method of enumerating items is the straightforward first, second, and third. The forms firstly, secondly, and thirdly sound stuffy and have an unnecessary syllable, and one, two, and three sound especially informal. E.g.: “This leaves but two possible effects of the service mark’s continued use: One [read First], no one will know what CONAN means. Two [read Second], those who are familiar with the plaintiff’s property will continue to associate CONAN WITH THE BARBARIAN.” Conan Props. v. Conan Pizza, 752 F.2d 145, 156 (5th Cir. 1985) (Clark, J., dissenting). See firstly.

B. *Comma Before the Last Element.* The question whether to use the serial comma—or, as it’s sometimes called, the "Harvard" comma or "Oxford" comma—is more vehemently argued than any other punctuation issue. Fashions in public-school textbooks and journalists’ manuals come and go, but only one method is ironclad in avoiding unnecessary ambiguities: inserting a comma before the final element. Hence *a, b, and c* rather than *a, b and c.* Problems arise, for example, with elements containing two or more items, as *a and b, c and d, e and f, and g and h.* The last two elements are muddled if the comma is omitted.

Consider this sentence, an example of how using the serial comma can prevent a syntactical train wreck: “Like almost any modern player, most of the $80 models play DVDs, music CDs, video CDs, MP3 music disks you’ve created on your computer and so on.” On your computer and what? The classic example of ambiguity is the apocryphal book dedication, “To my parents, Ayn Rand and God.”

This sort of thing creeps into print more often than journalists might expect—e.g., “The university’s chemistry, biology, physics and marine and environmental-science departments, which are now scattered around campus, will be housed in the center with its 73 laboratories.” Chris Moran, “USD Given $10 Million for Campus, will be housed in the center with its 73 laboratories.” Chris Moran, “USD Given $10 Million for Campus, Science, Tech Center, ” San Diego Union-Trib., 14 June 2002, at B2. Still, the trend among journalists is to omit the serial comma. Hence the rule as stated by a leading authority in punctuation: “Three or more elements in a series are separated by commas. When the last two elements (words, phrases, or clauses) in a series are joined by a conjunction, a comma comes before the conjunction—unless you’re a journalist.” Karen Elizabeth Gordon, *The New Well-Tempered Sentence* 46 (rev. ed. 1993). See punctuation (b).

C. *Within a Single Sentence.* To keep the sentence short, enumerate items with parenthetical numbers: (1), (2), (3), etc. Of course, if the sentence becomes overlong anyway, you’re better off dividing it up.

D. *And Before the Last Element.* See and (c).

E. *Bullets.* See punctuation (b).

**Enunciate /en-nə-seyt/.** Ironically, the word is sometimes mispronounced /shee/ in the third syllable. For the sense, see announce.

**Enunciation.** See pronunciation (f).

*Enure.* See inure.

**Envelop** is the verb (“to wrap or cover”), *envelope* the noun (“wrapper, covering”). The verb is pronounced /en-vel-op/; the noun is pronounced either /en-və-lohp/ or /on-və-lohp/.

**Enviably; Envious.** That which is *enviably* is at least worthy of it. A person who is *envious* feels or is struck by envy. *Envious* usually takes the preposition of *envious* of her sister’s success), but historically has also taken against or at. See jealousy.

The pair is in the unenviable position of being susceptible to word-swapping—e.g.:


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*Envious* misused for *enviable: Stage 1*

Current ratio (envious reputation vs. *enviable reputation): 91:1

**Envision; Envisage.** Although *envisage* is more than a century older—having been used since the early 19th century— *envision* is now much more common in AmE. Today, *envisage* is a literary word in AmE, but the ordinary word in BrE. Not until the mid-1970s, however, did *envision* supplant *envisage* as the more usual term in AmE.

Both words mean “to visualize,” but there is perhaps an incipient differentiation underway—one that should be encouraged. As suggested by W11, *envision* means “to picture to oneself” <1 don’t envision winning the tournament>, while *envisage* means “to contemplate or view in a certain way” <she envisages the building as being in a state of severe decline>.

In fact, though, American speakers and writers tend to use *envision* in both ways, to the exclusion of *envisage*—e.g.:

- “Champions of the coming age of autonomous vehicles envision a time when car accidents do indeed become

- “Weiss envisions it as a Wall of Fame, with scores of artists.” David Menconi, “UNC’s Own Rock and Roll Hall of Fame,” *News & Observer* (Raleigh), 22 Aug. 2015, Entertainment §.

Still, *envisage* is hardly unknown in AmE—e.g.: “President Clinton’s advisers . . . earnestly hope that the fragile arrangement *envisaged* in the Dayton peace plan will somehow hang together.” Mike O’Connor, “Stray Cable from Bosnia Creates Stir in Capital,” *N.Y. Times*, 10 Oct. 1996, at 29.

*en vogue. See in vogue.*

envoi; envoy. For the sense “a postscript to a poem or essay,” both spellings are used. Major American dictionaries are divided on the point—some listing *envoi* first and others *envoy* first. In that sense, though, *envoi* is the more usual spelling by a 6-to-1 ratio in print sources.

That development makes for useful differentiation because *envoy* is now used almost exclusively in diplomatic contexts. Both words are preferably pronounced /en-voi/, not /on-voi/.

envious. See jealousy & envious.

eolian. See aeolian.

eon (= an indefinitely big era) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Aeon* is an obsolescent variant. See ae.

epaulette; epaul. In the 1780s, English borrowed this word from French, in which the word is spelled *epaulette*. Through 1880, that was the predominant spelling in English as well, but from 1900 or so the feminine suffix was frequently dropped: *epaul* vied with *epaulette* for about a century, during which time most American dictionaries gave priority to *epaul*. Today, however, *epaulette* remains the more frequent spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Epaulette* is accented on the last syllable, *epaul* on the first.

Current ratio (epaulette vs. epaul): 1.5:1

épée (= a fencing sword, narrow with a sharp point) is normally so spelled, with its two accents, and pronounced either /e-pay/ or /ep-ay/. See diacritical marks.

epenthetic (= of, relating to, or consisting of the insertion of a superfluous syllable or sound into the middle of a word) is the standard adjective—*epenthetical* being a needless variant. Several mispronunciations contain *epenthetic* schwas, such as /ath-o-leet/ for what should be a two-syllable *athlete* and /reel-o-tar/ for what should be a two-syllable *realtor*. See athlete & realtor. See also pronunciation (b).

Current ratio: 668:1

epexegesis. See exegesis.

epic, adj.; *epical. See epochal (a).*

epicenter (BrE *epicentre*). This is a scientific term meaning “the point on the surface of the earth just above the underground focal point of an earthquake.” It shouldn’t be used thoughtlessly as a synonym for center—e.g.:

- “Jan-Wolter Wabeke, 52, has been at the *epicenter* [read center] of the debate over the Netherlands’ social legislation both at home and abroad.” Christopher Dickey & Friso Endt, “Playing by Dutch Rules,” *Newsweek Int’l.*, 4 June 2001, at 18.

- “Ramsey, who is elusive about his home life, is the only one of the five who lives in public housing, which was at the *epicenter* [read center] of the summer’s gang warfare.” Alex Kotlowitz, “Proving Ground,” *Chicago Trib.*, 10 June 2001, Mag. §, at 12.


One of William Safire’s correspondents, a geophysicist named Joseph D. Sides, attributes this type of misusage to “spurious erudition on the part of writers combined with scientific illiteracy on the part of copy editors.” (As quoted in Safire, “On Language,” *N.Y. Times*, 6 May 2001, § 6, at 22.) But maybe these types of misusage are just metaphorical descriptions of focal points of unstable and potentially destructive environments.

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epicenter misused for *center*: Stage 1

epicure. See gourmet.

epicurean. So spelled—preferably not *epicurian*. E.g.:


- “Asian cuisine is nothing if not adventurous, and the Munchers were ready to push the *epicurian* [read epicurean] envelope.” Peter Genovese, “Currying Flavor,” *Star-Ledger* (Newark), 13 June 2008, Today §, at 61.

The same recipe spoils other cognates of *epicure* as well—e.g.: “One would end up no doubt oscillating madly between *epicurianism* [read epicureanism] and stoicism.” Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason*om 331 (1995).

**Language-Change Index**

epicurean misspelled *epicurian*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 151:1
epidemic; endemic. A disease is an epidemic when it breaks out and rages in a community, only to subside afterward. A disease is an endemic when it constantly exists within a certain population or region. The latter term, which also applies to plants, is comparatively rare.

The words are sometimes used as adjectives. Epidemic = extremely prevalent; widespread. Endemic = native to a particular region or group. Cf. pandemic.

epigram; epigraph. Because these similar-sounding terms are similar in meaning, they are therefore often subject to word-swapping. Epigram = (1) a short, witty poem; or (2) a concise, pointed, and usually clever saying. (Cf. apothegm.) Epigraph = (1) an inscription, esp. on a building or statue; or (2) a thematic quotation at the beginning of a book, chapter, etc. So although an epigram can constitute an epigraph, the reverse does not hold true.

epilogue (= a parting word at the end of a written or spoken presentation) is so spelled—not *epilog. Cf. analogue, catalog(ue) & dialogue. For a comment on the potential decline of the -ue form, see -AGOG(UE).

Episcopal Church; *Episcopalian Church. Strictly, one refers to the Episcopal Church and to an Episcopalian minister. The word Episcopalian is most commonly a noun, as in I’m an Episcopalian. Yet many writers have started using Episcopalian as an adjective—e.g.:

- “The Liberal Catholic Church . . . is independent of the Roman Catholic and Episcopal [read Episcopal] Church.” Luisa Yanez, “Church Dissolves Cultural Barriers,” San-Sentinel (Fl. Lauderdale), 30 May 1988, at B3. (Note the concord problem here.)
- “Chauncey, descended from clergymen (his father was an Episcopal [read Episcopal] minister, his ancestors Puritans), went to church, and afterward he added to the diary entry.” Nicholas Lemann, “The Structure of Success in America,” Atlantic Monthly, Aug. 1995, at 41, 42.

Cognates of epistle

- A cognate of epistle (letter), the word is pronounced /i-pis-ta-ler-eel/.

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*Episcopal Church for Episcopal Church: Stage 1
Current ratio (Episcopal Church vs. *Episcopal Church): 64:1

epistolary (= of, relating to, or based on letters) is sometimes wrongly made *epistolatory—e.g.:


A cognate of epistle (letter), the word is pronounced /i-pis-ta-ler-eel/.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*epistolatory for epistolary: Stage 1
Current ratio (epistolary vs. *epistolatory): 155:1

epitaph. See epithet (b).

epithet. A Meanings. Epithet = (1) an esp. apt description or label, whether the quality denoted is favorable or unfavorable; or (2) a slur or an abusive term. Sense 2 is quickly driving out sense 1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

epitaph for slur or term of abuse: Stage 5

B. And epitaph. Epitaph (= a gravestone inscription) is sometimes misused for epitaph in the sense of “a derogatory name.” Today the blooper is irksomely common—e.g.:

- “He is a man taken to belittling his staff and his wife, using racial epitaphs [read epithets] when speaking with men he knows to be bigots and bragging of extramarital affairs.” Stephen Watson, “A Masterful [read Masterly] Saga of LBJ’s Senate Years,” Buffalo News, 12 May 2002, at F5. (See masterful.)

In Canada, this error has provoked the ire of a letter-writer: “Art Hanger, the Calgary Reform MP, last week accused Liberal Mary Clancy of ‘hurling epitaphs’ when she attacked Reform immigration policy. [¶] Clancy replied mockingly that ‘marble epitaphs’ are rather too heavy to hurl, and chided Hanger for his misuse of language. [¶] Actually, they’re both wrong—but who expects politicians to understand English? [¶] An epitaph is not a headstone: it’s a funeral oration or a memorial inscription written on a tomb.” Sydney Sharpe, “Calgary Schools Benefit from Companies’ Castoffs,” Calgary Herald, 22 Jan. 1995, at A2.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

epitaph misused for epitaph: Stage 1
Current ratio (contemptuous epithet vs. *contemptuous epithet): 45:1

C. And expletive. These words overlap somewhat, since a shouted epithet is also an expletive in the sense of “an exclamation, esp. a profane or scatological exclamation.” But expletive is also a term in grammar, referring to a word that serves no real purpose in a sentence but merely fills a syntactic space (most commonly it or there, as in it is raining or there is something we need to talk about). See expletives.

epitome /i-pit-o-mee or ee-pit-o-mee/ = (1) an ideal representation of a class of things; or (2) a summary, abstract. E.g. (sense 1): “In short, he is the epitome of all that many liberals find evil in the boardrooms of America.” Ted Bunker, “No Place for Liberals at This CEO’s Table,” Boston Herald, 7 Oct. 1996, at 26.

The word does not mean “pinnacle” or “climax”—e.g.:

- “ESPN reached the epitome [read pinnacle or zenith] of boredom during its marathon coverage of the NFL draft.”
Peter Morici, “Export Our Way to Epic-Making of Other

A near-equivalent of meaning—would the establishment of the commission—an unlikely

tating techology. The word should not be used lightly. “Five devas-

kәl/) = marking an epoch, or a new period in chronol-

, For example, today we are in the Holocene Epoch
division of a period, which in turn is a division of an


Wash. Post


episodic

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epitome misused for pinnacle: Stage 1

Current ratio (reach the pinnacle vs. *reach the epitome): 46:1

euphemism

epoch (ep-ək/) = (1) a date of an occurrence that starts things going under new conditions; or (2) a period of history. Some stylists object to sense 2 as an example of slipshod extension—an unnecessary word since era fills the role nicely. But the extension occurred in the 17th century, and good writers today use the word in that sense—e.g.: “Scientists at the Smithsonian Institution . . . have challenged . . . the notion that our early ancestors were prodded into existence in response to abrupt environmen-

In the taxonomy of geological time, an epoch is a division of a period, which in turn is a division of an era. For example, today we are in the Holocene Epoch of the Quaternary Period of the Cenozoic Era.

epchial. A. And epic, adj; *epical. Ephchal (/ep-ə-kal/) = marking an epoch, or a new period in chronology. The word should not be used lightly. “Five devastating epochal floods have visited the valley since the establishment of the commission.” (Only if the writer intended to convey that five epochs had passed since the establishment of the commission—an unlikely meaning—would epochal have been correct.)

Epic = (1) of, relating to, or involving an epic (i.e., a long heroic narrative); or (2) surpassing what is ordinary or usual. *Epical is a needless variant.

Current ratio (epic poem vs. *epical poem): 615:1

B. And epoch-making. The phrase epoch-making—a near-equivalent of epochal—is sometimes mistakenly written *epoch-making. E.g.: “We are at the end of only the second decade of the revolutions in microelectronics and telecommunications, and the lesson of other epic-making [read epoch-making] innovations, such as electricity, is that productivity gains . . . will likely continue.” Peter Morici, “Export Our Way to Prosperity,” Foreign Policy, 22 Dec. 1995, at 3.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*epic-making for epoch-making: Stage 1

equable. See equitable.

equal, n. & adj. See coequal.

equal, vb., makes equalled and equalizing in AmE, equalled and equalling in BrE. See spelling (b).

equal if not better. This phrase works if the thing being compared has already been mentioned and doesn’t need further mention in a sentence—e.g.: “The Pac-10 has equal, if not better, drawing power, but as a shaper of college athletics, its best days have passed.” Percy Allen, “Pac-10 Plays Waiting Game as Stakes Rise,” Seattle Times, 28 Aug. 1996, at F13 (comparing the Pac-10 with the Big Eight athletic conference, mentioned in the previous paragraph). But if the point of comparison is yet to be made and a than-phrase follows better, the construction is illogical because you cannot say that something is equal than something

eponym; eponymous. Eponym (= a person, place, or thing that gives its name to someone or something else) is sometimes misused to denote the bearer of the borrowed name—e.g.: “Nouns derived from proper names of people or places, such as sandwich, are called eponyms [read namesakes].” Howard Wolinsky, “Click Here: Our Favorite Places on the Net,” Chicago Sun-Times, 24 Oct. 2006, Financial §, at 54.

Likewise, the adjective eponymous (= characteristic of a person, place, or thing that gives its name to someone or something else) is traditionally used with the source of the name—e.g.: “Made from gamay grapes grown in the eponymous region of France, Beaujolais Nouveau is a red wine produced very quickly through a process known as carbonic maceration.” Allison Knab, “A Little Beau Peek,” Chicago Trib., 15 Nov. 2006, at 34.

But today, eponymous is commonly (and sloppily) used with the derived name rather than the eponym itself—e.g.: “His eponymous London restaurant earned three stars in the latest Michelin guide, so achievement of that goal rests on his New York venture.” Jennifer Leuzzi, “Gordon Ramsay Lands in New York,” N.Y. Sun, 15 Nov. 2006, Food & Drink §, at 11. (A possible revision: His London restaurant, which bears the owner’s name, earned three stars . . . .) Sticking with the traditional usage would clear up ambiguities such as this example from the same source: “Other Warhols on offer at Christie’s include ‘Sixteen Jackies’ (estimate upon request), and his eponymous four-panel portrait of the novelist Judith Green (estimate $2 million—$3 million).” João Rivas, “Another Record Week?” N.Y. Sun, 13 Nov. 2006, Arts & Letters §, at 13. Is that portrait named after Green or Warhol? Or is the reader to take eponymous literally and conclude that Green was named after the portrait?

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

eponym for namesake: Stage 2

equable. See equitable.

equal, n. & adj. See coequal.

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You have to make it equal to in order to parallel better than—e.g.:
- “We should make their salaries equal (if not better than) [read equal to (if not better than)] those of the administrators.” Gwen Diaz, “A 10-Point Parent Proposal,” Ledger (Lakeland, Fl.), 17 Oct. 1995, at B6.
- “Humphreys’s pomp for Ireland was at least the equal if not better than his nemesis Ronan O’Gara.” Tony Ward, “Sixton Is Now a Man Under Severe Pressure,” Belfast Telegraph, 12 May 2015, Sport §, at 49. (Here, equal, preceded by the, functions as a noun, making the construction even more illogical by creating a false parallel with the adjective better. A possible revision: Humphreys’s pomp for Ireland at least equally—if not surpassed—that of his nemesis, Ronan O’Gara.)

See illogic (b). Cf. cannibalism & parallelism.

Of course, the mistake is far less frequent than the correct phrasing in edited English—e.g.: “Harrington says the Red Sox must have a stadium that is equal to, if not better than, the new ones in Cleveland, Baltimore and Toronto.” Will McDonough, “Harrington Expounds on Ballpark, Figures,” Boston Globe, 6 Mar. 1996, at 61.

If equal and better are used as verbs, of course, no prepositions are needed. The usage becomes less tricky—e.g.: “Banks’ investment performance has at least equaled if not bettered that of their non-bank competitors.” “You Don’t Have to Be Big,” ABA Banking J., Nov. 1988, at 57.

The particle in this phrase is almost always unnecessary and faulty—e.g.:
- “While the hosts of late-night talk shows set the tone and the guests pull in the viewers, the bands are equally as [read equally] important.” Leo Pusateri, “Developing Value Culture Means New Ideas,” Bus. First (Buffalo), 19 Jan. 1998, at 27.

The variant phrase as equally is just as (i.e., equally) poor—e.g.:

Not every use, though, is incorrect: if the words equally as simply appear together but are really parts of other constructions, all may be well <I love you equally as a nephew and as a friend>.

The pronunciation is /ee-kwə-nim-ə-tē/ or /e-/.

**equil.brium** (=} evenness of mind, esp. under pressure) often appears in the redundant phrase *equanimity of mind*—e.g.:
- “After compiling these other successes, she entered the next bar exam with equanimity of mind [read equanimity], and passed.” Vivian Dempsey, “A State of Mind for a Second Try,” Recorder (S.F.), 24 Nov. 1992, at 7.
- “A mature person of mellow temperament, retaining an equanimity of mind [read equanimity] under all circumstances, with a complete understanding not only of himself or herself but of his or her relations, is a person of true character.” Fan Xing, “The Chinese Cultural System,” SAM Advanced Mgmt. J., Jan. 1995, at 14. 18.

The pronunciation is /ee-kwə-nim-ə-tē/ or /e-/.

**equinoctial; *equinoxi.al.** The former has been standard since the early 18th century. The latter is a need-less variant.

The pronunciation is /ek-wi-tə-bal/.

**equitable; equable.** Equitable (/ek-wi-tə-bal/), deriving from equity, has associations of justice and fairness, or that which can be sustained in a court of equity. To nonlawyers it generally means “fair.”
whereas to lawyers it may also mean “fair” but just as often means “in equity” <equitable jurisdiction> <equitable remedies>. Equable (/iˈklə-bəl/) = even; tranquil; level.

Each word is sometimes misused for the other—e.g.:

- “Certainly Henman’s realistic approach and his equitable [read equable] temperament make him better equipped than most to overcome what has basically been a sudden lack of confidence.” John Parsons, “Henman Hoping to End His Slump,” Daily Telegraph, 18 Feb. 1998, at 39.

**Language-Change Index**
equable misused for equitable: Stage 1
Current ratio (equitable distribution vs. *equable distribution): 63:1

equivalence; equivalency. In most contexts, equivalency is a needless variant of equivalence. But the -cy form is standard in the term high-school equivalency exam. See -ce.

equivalent. A. Prepositions with. As an adjective, equivalent preferably takes the preposition to, not with—e.g.: “The $20 million is more than any other NFL coach will receive and approximately equivalent with [read equivalent to] the $3 million a year that Pat Riley and John Calipari earn in the NBA.” “Sports Digest: Jets,” Baltimore Sun, 8 Feb. 1997, at C2. As a noun, it almost always takes the preposition of <this Australian wine is an equivalent of a good, robust Burgundy>.

**Language-Change Index**
*equivalent with for equivalent to: Stage 1
Current ratio (equivalent to vs. *equivalent with): 112:1

B. A Malapropism: *equivocal with. Misusing equivocal for equivalent is a surprising malapropism, committed here by the chair of a college biology department: “Though physical sexual identity is not equivocal with [read equivalent to] sexual orientation, the point I am trying to make is that not all things are as black and white as some homophobes might like them to be.” Joseph Adam Pearson, “Homophobia a Useless Passion That Destroys Lives on Both Sides,” Ariz. Republic, 28 Sept. 1994, at B6.

**Language-Change Index**
equivocal misused for equivalent: Stage 1
equivoque (= [1] an ambiguous term; or [2] a punning word) is the standard spelling. *Equivoque is a variant. The word is pronounced /ek-wa-vohk/.

Current ratio: 8:1

**-er. A. And -or.** These agent-noun suffixes can be especially vexatious. Many words that were once considered Latin borrowings have become so thoroughly naturalized that they take -er instead of -or (e.g., adviser, prohibiter, promoter, propeller). But not impostor (which does not refer to someone who imposes). The historical tendency has been to make the Latinate -or the correlative of -ee (especially in legal writing), hence donee/donor, indemnitee/indemnitor, obligee/obligor, offeree/offor, transforee/transferor, venteve/vendor. See -ee.

Attempts to confine -er to words of Anglo-Saxon origin and -or to those of Latin origin are fruitless because so many exceptions exist on both sides of the aisle. Nevertheless, Latinate words tend to take -or, though there are many exceptions—a few of which appear below in the -er column:

-er —or
adapter abductor
conjuror collector
corrupter distributor
digester impostor
dispenser infiltrator
deror investor
eraser manipulator
idoler offeror
profferer persecutor
promoter purveyor
requester surveyor

B. And -re. Words borrowed from French generally arrived in English with the -re spelling. Most such words have gradually made the transition to -er. A few words may be spelled only -re, such as acre, chancere, massacre, and medioore, because of the preceding -c-. Still others—the great majority—have variant spellings, the -er ending usually being more common in AmE and the -re ending in BrE. The following words have this distinction: caliber, -re; center, -re; goiter, -re; liter, -re; louver, -re; luster, -re; meager, -re; meter, -re; miter, -re; miter, -re; reconnoiter, -re; scepter, -re; sepulcher, -re; somber, -re; specter, -re; theater, -re. Likewise maneuver, manoeuvre. An odd exception is accouter (both AmE and BrE)—the putative AmE spelling *accouter never having caught on.

Occasionally, heated debates break out over how to spell such words. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Government Printing Office was accused of upsetting the balance of trade by recommending liter over litre. The pro-litre forces argued that other nations would be more likely to import American goods if those goods bore the litre spelling. But when the GPO conducted a worldwide survey, it found that more people spell it liter than litre. (That was true in World English beginning about 1900.) And so liter it remained in official American publications. See Lee Lescaze, “The Style Board: Telling Government Where to Put Its Hyphens,” Wash. Post, 18 Oct. 1980, at A3.
Some American companies have started using the -re spellings to distinguish themselves and perhaps to try to bring some cachet to their projects. Many major cities, for example, have downtown buildings called Such-and-Such Centre. Next door might be the Such-and-Such Theatre. People who go into such centers and theaters should be on their best behavior—no, make that behaviour.

C. And -est. See COMPARATIVES AND SUPERLATIVES.

era (= a period in history known for a particular event or for specific characteristics) is legitimately pronounced either /eer-ә/ or /air-ә/—the former being traditional.

eradicable. So formed—not *eradicatable. See -ABLE (d) & -ATABLE.

Ergative Verbs. A. Generally. In the mid-20th century, grammarians devised the term ergative (“working”) to describe a verb that can be used (1) in the active voice with a normal subject (actor) and object (the thing acted on) <1 broke the window>; (2) in the passive voice, with the recipient of the verb’s action as the subject of the sentence (and most often the actor’s becoming the object of a by-phrase <the window was broken by me>; or (3) in what one textbook called “the third way,” as an intransitive verb (without a direct object) <the window broke>. Ergative verbs show remarkable versatility. For example, you might say that he is running the machine or the machine is running, she spun the top or the top spun, the crew decided to split the rail or the rail splits at that point.

Not all verbs can be ergative: you couldn’t, for instance, change I cleaned the window to *The window cleaned. And verbs that are ergative with some nouns are not ergative with others, so you couldn’t change I broke a bad habit into *A bad habit broke.

The unfamiliar term ergative isn’t especially helpful to most people trying to understand these verbs and the idiomatic way they function. But in general, ergative verbs tend to communicate a change of state <Geller bent the spoon> <the spoon bent>, and we may think of that change as “working.” The change may also be a change of position instead of a change of state <spin the bottle> <the bottle spins>, or it may be a change of movement <may I drive your car?> <your car drives nicely>. It may also be a change brought about by cooking <steam the rice> <the rice is steaming>, an activity that seems conducive to ergative verbs.

B. Uses. Because the ergative verb eliminates the actor altogether, sentences that use it suggest some action that takes place spontaneously. Why? It may be because of a rule <hunting season starts in November> or a natural process <when the leaves drop> that makes the actor irrelevant. It may be a device to hide the actor <the rumor spread quickly throughout the office> or even to create mystery <the door slammed shut behind them>.

C. Misuses. Sometimes writers ill-adviseiously give transitive verbs intransitive uses as if the verbs were ergative—e.g., “Even the Infamous Could Redeem Were Jesus Here, Book Says,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 30 July 1994, at A20. This headline writer showed enough sophistication to use the subjunctive were (for a condition contrary to fact) but confused the passive to be redeemed with the active to redeem. Likewise, in STANDARD ENGLISH the verb pique is transitive only—hence possibly passive—but the writer of the following sentence tried to make it ergative (perhaps to avoid the passive voice): “Anderson was impressed with Weiskopf’s attitude. And when others also called to sing the praises of Loch Lomond, Anderson’s interest piqued [read was piqued].” Bill Huffman, “Course of ’Compelling’ Beauty,” Ariz. Republic, 29 Sept. 1994, at D6. (This misuse of pique might also result from confusion with peak. See pique.)

Ergative verbs take some getting used to, so new coinages are likely to sound as jarring as nouns suddenly made into verbs <grow the business> (see functional shift). They can give prose a voguish, trendy tone <that jacket wears nicely on you> or else a tone of COMMERCIALSE <the books shipped yesterday> <sorry, your flight canceled>.

ergatocracy. See governmental forms.

ergo [L. “therefore”] is a slightly archaic equivalent of therefore or hence. Its traditional use is in logic, where it introduces the conclusion to a syllogism. But outside logic, ergo tends toward light irony, while therefore and hence tend toward seriousness. Today ergo often has a tongue-in-cheek effect—e.g.: “Too much or too powerful baking powder can give your cake an artificial high, which cannot be maintained after it comes out of the oven. Ergo, you might want to cut back on the amount called for,” Gail Perrin, “The Q & A Corner,” Boston Globe, 8 Oct. 1997, at E3.

“Greek physicians such as Galen (130–201 A.D.) believed . . . that treatment of disease and injury was based on keeping each humor in proper equilibrium. Ergo, fever, allegedly caused by an excess of blood, were treated by bleeding.” Thomas V. DiBacco, “Burn Treatment: Way Cool!” Wash. Post, 4 Nov. 1997, at Z10.

“Oslo was only the last among several sensible European cities . . . to withdraw their bids to host the 2022 Winter Games in the face of public resistance and IOC arrogance. Ergo Beijing, again. Neither cost nor public opinion matter [read matters] in what has become the natural territory of the modern Olympic Games.” John Barber, “Toronto, Please Don’t Make an Olympic Bid for 2024,” Toronto Star, 26 Aug. 2015, at A13. (On the neither . . . nor problem of grammatical number, see neither . . . nor (A).)

The word is pronounced /air-goh/ in Latin, but /әr-goh/ in English.

eristic, adj.; *eristical. Eristic has always been the predominant and therefore standard form of this word, which means “of, relating to, or involving controversy or disputation.” See -ic.

Current ratio: 24:1
erodible; *erodable; *erosible. The standard form—almost ten times as common in print as the other forms combined—is erodible. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 566:84:1

erotica (= print or photographic materials intended to appeal to prurient interests) is a plural form, and it is appropriately used in the plural when clearly referring to more than one object—e.g.: "A set of Roman erotic frescoes were [read was] unveiled in Pompeii yesterday. . . . The discovery of the erotica, some of which are humorous or bawdy, has led to a theory that the baths also contained a lupanar, or brothel." Bruce Johnston, "Erotic Pompeii Frescoes Unveiled," Daily Telegraph, 15 Nov. 2001, at 20. But that convention is far from universally observed in World English, as a parallel example shows: "A collection of 800 figures decorates the walls both inside and out. The erotica is especially energetic and provocative. Then again, living in the middle of nowhere 1000 years ago, there must have been plenty of time for yoga and much, much more." Brian Johnston, "India's Ancient Erotica Site," Southland Times (N.Z.), 12 Dec. 2001, Travel §, at 17.

In fact, today erotica is almost always used as a singular noun, in reference to the genre itself—e.g.:

- "The future Lord Cobbold, sometimes nicknamed the Blue Baron, . . . has been criticised by those who do not believe that erotica is a suitable way to make a living for an Eton-educated blueblood." Hamida Ghafoor, "Blue Baron Launches Red-Blooded Sex Book," Daily Telegraph, 26 Nov. 2001, at 7.

- "Brief explanatory titles note [that] this early century erotica was shown mostly in the waiting rooms of French brothels as a sort of appetizer, and that 'uncles' often brought teenage nephews to such fare after mass on Sundays 'to start their initiation into manhood.'" Todd McCarthy, "The Good Old Naughty Days," Variety, 10–16 June 2002, at 31.

- "The Justice Department must convince the Supreme Court that same policy should cover the explicit erotica that permeates various Web sites." Editorial, "Public Libraries Are No Place for Porn," Indianapolis Star, 29 July 2002, at A16.

eroticism; *erotism. The latter has been a needless variant since it first emerged in the late 19th century. Cf. autoeroticism.

Current ratio: 22:1

er. Traditionalists rhyme this word with fur; others tend to make it rhyme with bear. Each side is likely to think the other errs.

Pronunciation authorities have long preferred /әr/ over /әәr/. Among the overwhelming number are these: Richard Soule & Loomis J. Campbell, Pronouncing Handbook of Words Often Mispronounced 30 (1873); E.B. Warman, Warman's Practical Orthoepy and Critique 196 (1887); John H. Bechtel, Hand-Book of Pronunciation and Phonetic Analysis 50 (1900); Thorlef Larsen & Francis C. Walker, Pronunciation: A Practical Guide to American Standards 68 (1930); Charles B. Anderson, A Guide to Good Pronunciation 51 (1931); Daniel Jones, An English Pronouncing Dictionary 148 (7th ed. 1946); Estelle B. Hunter, A Short-Cut to Correct Pronunciation 26 (1946); Morriss H. Needelman, A Manual of Pronunciation 111 (1949); Ruth Gleeson & James Colvin, Words Often Misspelled and Mispronounced 75 (1963).

A few authorities have gone beyond just listing /әr/ and have discussed the issue—e.g.:

- "Err. Rhymes with her. In spite of error and errant, don't say 'We have aired and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep! Let the thought of deterring deter you from a mispronunciation of erring." Alfred H. Holt, You Don't Say! 57 (1937).

- "Err must be pronounced to rhyme with were, not with ware . . . The imperfect tense erred times with herd, and the present participle erring times with purring." John Baker Opdycke, Don't Say It 303 (1943). (On his spelling of rhyme, see rhyme.)

- "Some argue that err is etymologically connected to the words error and errant, and so should be pronounced similarly. This does not cut the mustard, because to draw such a parallel now, after UR has been the only recognized pronunciation since time immemorial, is pedantic and sophistical, a feeble attempt to find a legitimate reason for a mistake . . . AIR did not appear in a dictionary until the 1960s, and despite its rapid rise to popularity, most current authorities still prefer UR." Charles Harrington Elster, There Is No Zoo in Zoology 51 (1988).

At least one language commentator did an about-face in the mid-20th century. In 1931, Frank Colby said: “Properly pronounced, err rhymes with fur, her, purr.” Your Speech and How to Improve It 114 (1931). By 1950, he had changed his mind: “It must be that dictionary makers are under oath not to listen to people talk. Why else would the dictionaries, without exception, refuse to recognize the Standard American pronunciation ehr for err? They insist on ‘urr,’ to rhyme with burr. . . . The truth is that err and erring are so closely associated with error (both are from the Latin errare, ‘to err’), that ehr and EHR-ing are the natural and most logical pronunciations. They most assuredly prevail at all levels of American speech.” Frank O. Colby, The American Pronouncing Dictionary of Troublesome Words 147 (1950).

The ranks of the traditionalists are shrinking, and the counterintuitive nature of the old pronunciation (given the sound of error and errant) seems to have doomed it. But those who care about our linguistic heritage and use the language with flair avoid the snare of /әәr/ and boldly say /әr/.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i–li.)

errant; arrant. **Errant** = (1) traveling; itinerant <knight errant>; or (2) fallible, straying from what is proper. Sense 2 overwhelmingly predominates—e.g.: “Other holes, strategically placed bunkers keep errant shots from going too far astray.” Chris Dortch, “Challenges Fly Wild at New Eagle Bluff Course,” Chattanooga Times, 26 Oct. 1995, at C6.


Generally used in reference to people or their actions, *errant* is not synonymous with *erroneous*—e.g.: “He piles so many *errant* [read *erroneous*] conclusions atop skewed observations atop false premises that you hardly know where to start.” Gregory Stanford, “‘Color Bar’ Will Die Once Talent Matters More than Race,” *Milwaukee J. Sentinel*, 4 Oct. 1996, at D3.

**Arrant** began as an alteration of *errant* and originally had the same sense (“wandering”), but now usually appears as a term of contempt, as in *arrant knave* or *arrant nonsense*. It has two meanings: (1) “utter; extreme”; and (2) “egregious; outstandingly bad.” Often those two senses seem to converge—e.g.: “Because of the majority’s *arrant* abuse of the filibuster, 60 Senate votes will be required this morning to move the issue.” “Down to the Wire on Ethics,” *Boston Globe*, 30 Sept. 1994, at 18.

Sometimes *errant* is misused for *arrant* where there is no sense of wandering or straying—e.g.: “Applying this logic, my living room may be considered an uplands gateway to the uplands. Such *errant* [read *arrant*] nonsense could be extended ad infinitum.” Marvin Petal, “Oxnard Needs PVP Plant,” *Ventura County Star*, 26 Sept. 2002, at B7. *Arrant nonsense* has been a set phrase since the mid-18th century.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *errant* misused for *erroneous*: Stage 2
   - *errate* misused for *arrate*: Stage 2
   - *errata* misused for *arrata*: Stage 2
   - Current ratio (*arrant nonsense* vs. *errant nonsense*): 9:1

3. *arrant* misused in what should be *knight errant*:
   - *knight arrant*: Stage 1
   - *knight errant*: Stage 1
   - Current ratio (*knight errant* vs. *knight arrant*): 666:1

**ERRATA.** Like *addenda* and *corrigenda*, the plural form *errata* (= errors; corrections to be made) should be used only when listing more than one item. E.g.: “It is important to clarify some of its abundant *errata*.” Letter of Mark A. Caldwell, “Flat Wrong,” Chattanooga Times, 29 July 1995, at A4. See *plurals* (n).

If there is only one mistake, the singular *erratum* is called for—e.g.: “Professor Esmond Wright, doyen of British Americanists and former holder of the chair of modern history at Glasgow University, insists his ‘embarrassing *erratum*’ was totally unintentional.” Rob Brown, “Apology as History Repeats Itself,” *Scotland on Sunday*, 16 June 1996, at 3. The English plural *erratum* is not used. See *corrigendum*.

The pronunciation is /i-raht-o/ or /i-ray-ta/—not /i-rat-s/.

**Erroneous** is sometimes erroneously spelled *erronious*.

Current ratio: 1,361:1

**Ersatz** (= serving as an artificial and inferior substitute), a 19th-century German loanword, is pronounced either /air-sahts/ or /air-zahts/.

**Erstwhile; quondam; whilom; sometime.** Each of these terms means “onetime, former, at a former time,” and those simpler alternatives are almost always better. By far the most common in AmE and BrE is *erstwhile* (/orst-w[h]il/), which is called a “literary” word in the *OED*. The least common are *quondam* (/kwon-dam/) and, even rarer, *whilom* (/hwil-lam/). (See *quondam & archaism*. The word *sometime*, an invitation to a *miscue*, is often misused as if it meant “occasional, from time to time.” See *sometime* (b).

We need one of these words in the language—probably *erstwhile*—because *former* and *onetime* do not always suffice. Our embarrassment of riches, with four synonyms for one sense, is exceeded only by most writers’ embarrassment at having to use any one of them in addressing a less-than-listened audience. Following are examples of each, from the least common to the most:

- “Remember Bernie? He was the *quondam* CIA hirerling from Miami who attained notoriety as one of the Watergate burglars.” Harry Rosenfeld, “Money Continues to Talk in Politics,” *Times Union* (Albany), 4 Sept. 1994, at B5. *(Quondam* is much more common in BrE than in AmE.)
- “Not so bad if you don’t mind being served by an *erstwhile* barista who’s now required to know just as much about chorizo and goat cheese as macchiatos and frappuccinos.” “It’s More than Average, Joe,” *Sun-Sentinel* (Ft. Lauderdale), 20 Aug. 2015, at A1.

For more on *onetime* (as opposed to *one-time*), see *one-time*.

**Eruption; irruption.** *Eruption* = the act or process of bursting or breaking out <a volcanic eruption>. *Irruption* = the act or process of rushing or breaking in; violent entry or invasion <an irruption of water through a breach in the dam and into the spillway>. *Irruption* also carries the specialized sense of “an abrupt increase in the local population of an animal”—e.g.: “Ornithologists call these erratic southern movements ‘invasions’ or ‘irruptions’ and refer to these species as ‘irruptive migrants.’” Scott Shalaway, “The Wild Side,” Gaz. & *Daily Mail* (Charleston, W. Va.), 16 Feb. 1996, at D1.

*Escalate* is pronounced /es-ka-layt/, not /es-kya-layt/. See *class distinctions*. 
**escape.** As an intransitive verb, with *from or out of,* *escape* means "to gain one's liberty by fleeing; to get free from detention or control" <he escaped from prison>. As a transitive verb, with a direct object, it means either (1) "to succeed in avoiding (something unwelcome)" <they escaped suspicion>, or (2) "to elude (observation, search, etc.)" <its significance had previously escaped me>.

The word is pronounced /es-KAYP/—not /ek-SAYP/. See pronunciation (b).

**escapee** (= someone who escapes) should more logically be *escaper* or *escapist.* (See —EE.) But the life of our language has not followed logic. In all varieties of English, writers now choose *escapee* much more often than *escaper.* That’s too bad: *escapee* uses the passive -ee suffix to denote an activity that usually involves great ingenuity and exertion—more, say, than *attendee.*

*Escapist* suggests Houdini, i.e., someone who makes a living putting on "escapes" from difficult predicaments (also known as an *escapologist*). *Escapist* also has irrelevant figurative uses, as in *escapist fiction* (i.e., as the adjective corresponding to *escapism*).

One writer defines *escapee* as "one who has been caught after escaping, or while preparing to escape." Paul Tempest, *Laq’s Lexicon* 75 (1950). Perhaps that is how a lag (= a convict sentenced to penal servitude) understands the term. But most writers and speakers would find nothing amiss in saying, "The *escapees* were never caught," and would object only to their not being caught.

**eschew** v.t.; *eschewal,* n. The second syllable of both words is pronounced just as the word *chew* is pronounced: /es-choo/. Many seem to think that the *esch-* sequence is pronounced /esh/. It is not. The /esh/ sound makes the word resemble a sneeze.

**esophageal,** the adjective corresponding to the noun *esophagus* /i-sof-a-gas/, is a word typically pronounced only by doctors. And most American doctors say /i-sof-a-jee-AL/; but the traditional pronunciation (reflected, for example, in *W2*) is /ee-soh-FAJ-ee-al/.

**esophagus** (= the tube through which food and drink pass from the pharynx to the stomach) has been the standard AmE spelling since about 1915. *Oesophagus,* the traditional spelling dating back to the 18th century, has long been standard in BrE, but since 1980 *esophagus* has continually threatened to overtake it in frequency within British print sources. In World English, *esophagus* predominates.

Current ratio: 4:1

**esoterics** is, strictly speaking, incorrect for *esoterica,* and most dictionaries do not yet recognize it. But it predominated in published texts throughout the 19th century and is now almost as common in AmE as *esoterica.* In some plain-spoken contexts, *esoterics* sounds natural where *esoterica* would seem precious—e.g.: "The same easy strength is there, and the same earthy approach to the *esoterics of law.*" Fred Rodell, *Nine Men* 331 (1955). Both forms should be considered plural. Cf. *erotica.*

Current ratio (*esoterica vs. esoterics*): 3:1

**especial; special.** The line is muddy to nonexistent. One might defensively read the historical evidence to suggest that traditionally, *especial* (= distinctive, significant, peculiar) is the opposite of *ordinary* <the public press is entitled to peculiar indulgence and has *especial* rights and privileges>—and that *special* (= specific, particular) is the opposite of *general* <this community has special concerns>. Increasingly, though, *special* is driving out *especial* in all senses—and has steadily been doing so since the mid-19th century.

*Especial* is so rarely used in AmE today—even in learned journals—that some might term it obsolete. But it does occasionally appear, most often when modifying a noun whose corresponding adjective would naturally take the adverb *especially.* That is, a writer who might otherwise refer to something that is *especially powerful* would refer to its *especial* power—e.g.: "I found myself wishing the NSO had packed a show-stopper—an American work of *especial* power and virtuosity," Tim Page, “NSO Visits the Cradle of Classical,” *Wash. Post,* 26 Oct. 1997, at G1. The phrase *special power* might have connoted something like a superhuman or otherworldly power—surely not the intended sense. On the whole, though, *especial* might confidently be categorized as an archaism.

**especially** (= much more than usual; to a particularly high degree) is pronounced /e-spesh-a-lee/—not /ek-/. See *most especially.*

**espresso** (= a specially prepared coffee through which steam is forced under high pressure) is so spelled—not *expresso.* But writers frequently use the erroneous form—e.g.:

- "It is the color of chocolate truffles, the *expresso* [read *espresso*] that gets you through the morning and the dirt in your flower garden." Jackie White, "Shades of Brown," *Tulsa World,* 10 Dec. 2002, at D6.

For the proper and common mispronunciations, see pronunciation (b).

**esoterica** Current ratio (*esoterica vs. esoterics*): 3:1

**espresso** mispronounced *expresso:* Stage 1

Current ratio: 47:1
Esq., in AmE, typically signifies that the person whose name it follows is a lawyer. The mild honorific is used nowadays with the names of men and women alike; it is incorrect, however, if it appears with any other title, such as Mr. or Ms. In BrE, of course, esquire is used of any man thought to have the status of a gentleman.

One law review has devoted several pages to an article on whether women attorneys should use esquire. Richard B. Eaton, “An Historical View of the Term Esquire as Used by Modern Women Attorneys,” 80 W. Va. L. Rev. 209 (1978). As to the title and purpose of that article, however, it is worth noting that “Esq. is . . . not used on oneself, e.g. neither on a card (which bears Mr.) nor on a stamped-and-addressed envelope enclosed for a reply.” Alan S.C. Ross, “U and Non-U: An Essay in Sociological Linguistics,” in Noblesse Oblige (Nancy Mitford ed., 1956). But somehow, the idea has gotten out that Esq. is something you put after your own name—e.g.: “These [lawyers] assembled here are not ordinary litigators. Instead of appending a mere ‘Esq’ after their names, they are ‘Factl’—Fellows of the American College of Trial Lawyers.” David Margolick, “At the Bar,” N.Y. Times, 10 Mar. 1989, at 23. In fact, it is quite non-U for a lawyer to put Esq. on cards, stationery, and self-addressed envelopes. See class distinctions.

The real question, therefore, is not whether women should append Esq. to their own names but whether others should append it to women attorneys’ names. The answer: if you’re going to use Esq. with attorneys’ names, do it for both sexes. If precisionists are bothered by this practice, they should pretend that Esq., when used after a woman’s name, stands for esquiress (recorded in the OED from 1596). See sexism (d).

**ESQUE.** This suffix—meaning “like, resembling”—almost always creates a solid word, as in romanesque, Rubenesque, statuesque. E.g.: “One could almost see the Clintononesque curling and biting of the lip for dramatic effect.” “New Democrats and New Laborites,” Omaha World-Herald, 20 Nov. 1997, at 28. Of course, given the suffix’s meaning, it’s wrong to add -like to the end of such a word—e.g.: “A man painted in white stands on a pedestal striking various statuesque-like [read statue-like or statuesque] poses.” Alan Byrd, “Will the Real Key West Please Stand Up?” Orlando Bus. J., 23 May 1997, at 1.

**-ESS.** See sexism (d).

eyass, v.t. See assay.

**-EST.** For antique verb forms such as goest and sayest, see archaisms (n). For superlative adjectives such as strongest and finest, see comparatives and superlatives.

estate agent. See realtor.

**esthetic.** See aesthetic.

**estimable; estimatable.** These terms have undergone differentiation. Estimable once meant “capable of being estimated,” but now exclusively bears the meaning “meriting high esteem; deserving respect; admirable.” E.g.:


Estimatable, the less common term, means “capable of being estimated.” E.g.:

- “Mr. Kelly said a judgment or a settlement would have to be ‘likely and estimatable’ to take a reserve for any litigation.” Matt Ackerman, “BNY Mellon CEO: Cycle’s Still Building,” Am. Banker, 23 June 2008, at 1.

See -atable.


**estimate, n.; estimation.** A distinction should be observed. Estimate = an approximate calculation or judgment. Estimation = (1) the process of approximately calculating or judging; or (2) judgment of worth.

**estivate (es-ta-vayt/), v.i., from L. aestivare, to spend summer, “is the opposite of hibernate (= to sleep through the winter). It usually moderates to something like “to spend a lazy summer” —e.g.:”

- “Of course as you get older, your taste for roaring around France one night per town fades considerably, and you lean toward one spot where you estivate indefinitely.” Henry Mitchell, “Reveries from the Chateau Circuit,” Wash. Post, 18 July 1986, at D2.

In zoology, the word bears a technical sense correlative to hibernate—e.g.: “As the weather heats up this month, they should retreat to their burrows to estivate, the summer equivalent of hibernation.” Gail Wesson, “Rodent-Buster Gets Call in Squirrel Crisis,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 14 July 1996, at B3.

*Estivate* is a variant spelling. See ae.

**estrogen (= a female hormone produced in the ovaries) is predominantly so spelled both in AmE and in World English. In BrE, *oestrogen* predominated
in the mid-20th century, but since the mid-1970s the simplified spelling without the digraph has become predominant even there. Cf. estrus.

Current ratio: 8:1

**estrus** (= the reproductive cycle of female mammals) is so spelled—not *estrus cycle*. For a similar difference in spelling between adjective and noun, see *mucous membrane* under **mucus**. See also estrus.

Current ratio: 5:1

estrus (= the periodic sexual excitability of a female placental mammal) has been predominantly so spelled in AmE since the 1930s and in World English since the 1960s. In BrE, the spelling *oestrus* (or, with a digraph, *aestrus*) has been consistently preferred since the 18th century. See **estrus cycle**. Cf. **estrogen**.

Current ratio: 2:1

**-et.** See diminutives (**f**).

et al. **A. Generally.** *Et al.* is the abbreviated form of the Latin phrase *et alii* (= and others), which is used only in reference to people, whereas **etc.** is used in reference to things. Since **alii** is abbreviated, it always takes a period. But American writers commonly mispunctuate it *et al*, *et al.*, or *et al.*—all wrong.

A. **Style and Usage.** As with other familiar abbreviations of Latin phrases such as *etc.*, *i.e.*, and *e.g.* (and despite their appearance here), *et al.* is not italicized <Jefferson, Madison, et al.>. And like the others, *et al.* is best confined to lists, parenthetical matter, and citations. Avoid it in text, where a substitute such as **and the others** is more natural <as conceived by Jefferson, Madison, and the others>.

B. **With Possessives.** *Et al.* does not fit comfortably alongside possessives: “Clifford T. Honicker’s chilling account of Louis Slotin’s, S. Allan Kline’s et al. encounter with the Nuclear Age is as horrific as it is emblematic.” Letter of Glenn Alcalay, *N.Y. Times*, 10 Dec. 1989, § 6, at 14. (Read: Clifford T. Honicker’s chilling account of Louis Slotin’s, S. Allan Kline’s, and others’ encounter . . . .) Do *etc.* for the misuse of *etc.* for *et al.*, see **etc.** (**c**).

etc. **A. Generally.** More than 400 years ago, John Florio wrote: “The heaviest thing that is, is one *Etetera.*” It is heaviest because it implies a number too extensive to mention. Following are some of the most sensible words ever written on *etc.*:

Every writer should be on his guard against the excessive use of *etc.* Instead of finishing a thought completely, it is easy to end with an *etc.*, throwing the burden of finishing the thought upon the reader. If the thought is adequately expressed, *etc.* is not needed. If the thought is not adequately expressed, *etc.* will not take the place of that which has not been said. The use of *etc.* tends to become a slovenly habit, the corrective for which is to refrain from using *etc.* except in the driest and most documentary kind of writing. George P. Krapp, *A Comprehensive Guide to Good English* 229 (1927).

Writers should generally try to be as specific as possible rather than make use of this term. Still, it would be foolish to prohibit *etc.* outright because often one simply cannot practicably list all that should be listed in a given context. Hence, rather than convey to the reader that a list is seemingly complete when it is not, the writer might justifiably use *etc.* (always the abbreviation). In text, a substitute such as *and others* is usually a better choice.

B. **And etc.** This is an ignorant redundancy, *et* being the Latin **and**. The error may be partly a holdover from the now-obsolete abbreviation of the phrase using an ampersand and -:- &c. That form should rest in peace.

C. **For et al.** The term *etc.* should be reserved for things, not for people; *et al.* serves when people are being mentioned. But liberal ideologues might think the following usage quite appropriate: “The presidential heavyweight hopefuls—Dole, Sen. Phil Gramm, ex-Tennessee Gov. Lamar Alexander, etc. [read *et al.*]—were present and accounted for at the GOP Midwest leadership conference in Green Bay over the weekend.” “Lake Jump,” *Chicago Trib.*, 22 May 1995, § 1, at 12. See et al.

D. **Misspelled and Mispronounced.** When spelled out, the Latin words should be separate <et cetera>. When pronounced, the term should not be shortened to three syllables—so /et set-ə-ra/, not /et set-ra/. The abbreviation is surprisingly often misspelled *ect.*, perhaps because the *-t-* in the first syllable of *etc.* is often mispronounced as a *-k-* or *-x-* (as if it were ex cetera). See pronunciation (**b**).

E. **Punctuating.** Punctuate around this phrase just as if the words *and others* were substituted in its place. For example, don’t put a comma after *etc.* if it’s the tail end of a subject <side dishes of carrots, potatoes, broccoli, etc.> are also available. *The Chicago Manual of Style* sits on the fence about this point, recommending the extra-comma approach but allowing the no-comma approach. But because it’s more logical—and consistent with other phrases in a series—the more fastidious approach is to omit the comma.

F. **Style and Usage.** As with other familiar abbreviations of Latin phrases such as *et al.*, *i.e.*, and *e.g.* (and despite their appearance here), *etc.* is not italicized <lions, tigers, bears, etc.> And like the others, *etc.* is best confined to lists and parenthetical matter. Avoid it in text, where some substitute such as *and the like* is far more natural <lions, tigers, bears, and other wild animals>.
G. Repeating. It's possible to repeat etc. to denote a great multiplicity—e.g.: “For every tone of voice, there is a corresponding literary style. So many tones of voice—heartily, earnestly, pensively, shrilly, rebukingly, stridently, whispering, etc., etc., so many styles are there. When you ask yourself in advance of writing something, what style shall be adopted, you are really asking, in what tone shall this piece be written.” Gorham Munson, *The Written Word 72* (rev. ed. 1949). In *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870), Anna Leonowens quoted the King of Siam as saying et cetera twice; it became thrice in the musical *The King and I* (1951) for comic effect.

H. Using with e.g. or i.e. See e.g.

-ETH. See archaisms (b).

ethical, like grammatical and legal, carries a double meaning: “conforming to ethics” and “relating to ethics.” Here the meaning is not entirely clear (though the latter is probably the sense): “Her independence from the White House was uncertain as she faced a tough decision over the future of the F.B.I., which was in turmoil over the ethical problems of its director, William S. Sessions.” David Johnston, “Oddly, Reno’s ethics,” *The New York Times* in February 1999.

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-ETHICIST. *Ethicist. Ethician.* *Ethician* is more than two centuries older (dating from the early 17th century) and is therefore given precedence in most dictionaries. But *ethicist* overwhelmingly predominates in modern usage—being about 150 times as common in print—so *ethician* is now a needless variant. E.g.: “George Annas, a Boston University medical ethicist, opposes the legislation and predicted it will never pass in Massachusetts.” Liz Kowalczyk, “Current Case Shows Need for Regulations,” *Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, Mass.), 24 Aug. 1996, at 1. The matter was settled even more soundly when Randy Cohen’s popular column, “The Ethicist,” was established in *The New York Times Magazine* in February 1999.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

ethical for one who specializes in ethics: Stage 5
Current ratio (ethicist vs. *ethician*): 148:1

ethics. A. And ethn. Although the distinction escapes many writers, it is plain. *Ethics* = the field of moral science. Bentham defined *ethics* as “the art of directing men’s actions to the production of the greatest possible quantity of happiness, on the part of those whose interest is in view.” Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* 310 (1823; repr. 1948). The singular form *ethic* means “a set of moral principles.”

*Ethos* /ee-thahs or ee-thohs/ = the characteristic spirit and beliefs of a community, people, or group. E.g.: “Part of the appeal of Zisquit’s work is its juxtaposition of a minimalist approach to poetic language . . . with an ethos and sense of place that is filled with echoes and refiguration of the Old Testament and the ancient world,” R.D. Pohl, “A Minimalist Whose Work Embraces the Ancient World,” *Buffalo News*, 7 Dec. 1997, at G5. See ethos.

The term *ethos* sometimes appears where atmospheric would be more appropriate—e.g.: “But he has his place in athletics history as one of the four members of the British team which ran to a marvellous victory in the 4 x 400 metres relay in the highly-charged ethos [read atmosphere] of the Berlin Olympics of 1936.” “Godfrey Brown” (obit.), *Times* (London), 7 Feb. 1995, Features §. Despite Jesse Owens’s great feats in 1936—performed while Hitler watched—an event such as the Olympics is too fleeting to give rise to an ethos.

B. And morals. H.W. Fowler concisely states a distinction: “ethics is the science of morals, and morals are the practice of ethics” (*FMEU1* at 152). Although such a distinction might be observed in Philosophy 101, the terms overlap in common usage, both bearing the sense “principles or habits regarding right and wrong.” Cf. morale.

ethos (= a set of ideas and moral attitudes that typify a particular group) is preferably pronounced /ee-thahs/, though /ee-thohs/ is more common. Cf. bathos.


Aetiology is a common BrE variant. *Aetiology* is a variant spelling to be avoided.

Current ratio (etiology vs. aetiology vs. *aetiology*): 7,107:1,451:1

-ETTE. See diminutives (e) & sexism (d).

etymology. See entomology.

ETYMOLOGY. A. English Etymology Generally. Etymology is the study of word derivations. Understanding etymology often leads to a greater appreciation of linguistic nuances. For example, knowing the history of words such as the following can open up vistas:

- *abominable*, L. ab- “off, away from” + ominaric “to prophesy, forebode”—hence “being an evil omen.”
- *exorbitant*, L. ex- “out of, away from” + orbita “wheel track”—hence “off track” or “out of line.”
- *inoculate*, L. in- “into” + oculus “eye (i.e., ‘bud,’ as in eye of a potato)” —hence to graft a bud from one plant to another, where it will continue to grow. The sense of implanting germs to produce immunity from a disease dates from the early 18th century.
- *symposium*, Gk. syn- “together” + posis “a drink.” The term was extended from “a drinking party” to “a convivial meeting for intellectual stimulation,” and then was
extended further to "a collection of articles published together on a given topic."

Learning the classical roots and prefixes of English words—as by studying Donald M. Ayer’s English Words from Latin and Greek Elements (Thomas D. Worthen ed., 2d ed. 1986)—will certainly repay the effort.

But while the study can help considerably, making a fetish of it can lead to many linguistic fallacies. For many words, modern usage is pretty well divorced from etymology. For example, in distinguishing assiduous from sedulous, it doesn’t particularly help to say that assiduous is “sitting to” a thing and that sedulous is “without trickery.” It would be more helpful to note that although the words are close synonyms, assiduous is much more common (by a 6-to-1 ratio in print). And although the etymology of assiduous suggests greater intensity, the rarity of sedulous betokens a special intensity.

Another fallacy arises when pedants object inflexibly to hybrids or morphological deformities. Some, for example, insist that homophobe, in Greek, would refer to a self-hater. But in English, of course, homo is simply a slang shortening of homosexual, and homophobe—though at variance with classical word formation—is perfectly understandable to any reasonable speaker of AmE. The etymological "error" is no error at all. See homophobe.

So learn all you can about etymology, but temper that knowledge with other types of linguistic facts. Then you’ll be in a position to choose words prudently. And you’ll be better equipped to answer questions such as these: Must alternatives be limited to two? Must a decimation involve the destruction of only 10% of a group of things? Is the better spelling lachrymose or *lacrimose? Must a magistrate be the supreme judge in a given jurisdiction? Which spelling is right: idiosyncrasy or *idiolycrasy? Does inflammable mean that something will ignite, or won’t? For views on those questions, see the appropriate entries.

B. Native vs. Classical Elements. The English language has undoubtedly benefited from its diverse sources. This diversity springs mostly from the English Renaissance, when writers decided to supplement what they considered a meager vocabulary by importing words.

They borrowed freely from foreign languages—mostly Latin, French, and Greek—when adding to the English word-stock. William Caxton, who introduced printing into England in 1477, is credited in the OED with the first use of abjure, admiration, apparition, callumious, capacity, desperate, factor, ingenious, inhuman, nuptial, seduce, and sumptuous, among many other words. It might be hard for modern readers to imagine a time when those words seemed foreign or absurd. But many of Caxton’s other borrowings haven’t fared so well: for example, excision (= a rooting out), exercise (= army), magistration (= a command). Another early word-borrower, Thomas Elyot, wrote in the early 16th century. Like Caxton, Elyot had his word-coining successes (animate, attraction, education, excrement, exterior, frugality, irritate, persist) and his failures (ellative, apply, assentator). In that respect, these writers are typical of the age.

Some coinages from that period seem to have arisen not from any felt need but from a particular writer’s penchant for the far-fetched. Our historical dictionaries are brimming with strange and ridiculous formations, such as celeripedian (= a swift footman) and latrocination (= highway robbery). Many such terms, which appeared only once or twice in the recorded history of the language, were coined by fervent neologists who had little or no sense of linguistic necessity. See NEOLOGISMS.

The result of all this word-coining, though, is that English now has many sets of words formed from analogous etymological elements. Many of these words, having coexisted in English for many centuries, retain the same basic meanings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>Latin/French</th>
<th>Anglo-Saxon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| enchi
dion | manual        | handbook    |
| hyp
gal    | subterranean | underground |
| proleg
monon   | prologue     | foreword    |
| prophe
sys     | predict      | foretell    |
| sarcopha
gous   | carnivorous  | meat-eating |

But others have undergone differentiation to varying degrees:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>Latin/French</th>
<th>Anglo-Saxon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| prodom
ne      | postpartum   | afterbirth  |
| prognosis | precence     | forerunner  |
| sympa
thy     | compassion   | fellow feeling |
| thesis   | position     | placement   |

Those listings show that the Greek derivatives tend to be the most arcane, the Latin a little less so, and the Anglo-Saxon not at all. But this tendency has many exceptions. The Anglo-Saxon gainsay is certainly less common today than the Latin contradict, and the Anglo-Saxon hapless is out of luck in competition with the Late Latin unfortunately. And the Greek is much more common than the Latin in the following pairs: anonymous (Gk.) and innominate (L.); hypodermic (Gk.) and subcutaneous (L.); anthology (Gk.) and florilegium (L).

All in all, though, the generalization about Greek derivatives—when they have synonyms from Latin or Anglo-Saxon—holds true. Many Greek terms lie at the periphery of the English language—e.g.:

- alphabetic (= illiterate [L.], unlettered [A.S.])
- anamnesis (= reminiscence [L.])
- chirography (= handwriting [A.S.])
- exlex (= outlaw [A.S.])
- peritiomy (= circumcision [L.])
They therefore serve writers inclined toward sesquipedality, but they seem laughable to those inclined toward plain language.

In specialized writing, a knowledge of classical languages is especially helpful: Latin in law, for example, or Greek and Latin both in medicine. But regardless of your career path, it's useful to enhance your awareness of Greek and Latin word roots. You'll gain a greater sensitivity to the English language and its origins and nuances.

C. Etymological Awareness. Through wide reading and a conscious sensitivity to words and their origins, good writers become aware of etymological associations that may escape others. Ignorance of etymologies can easily lead writers astray, as when a journalist gave the label holocaust (Gk. "burnt whole") to a flood. Following are sentences in which writers wandered into etymological bogs:

- "The right to exclude or to expel aliens in war or in peace is an inherent and inalienable right of every independent nation." (The root alien- causes problems when we say that a country has an inalienable right to exclude aliens.)
- "What we are concerned with here is the automobile and its peripatetic [able to walk up and down, not just itinerant] character."
- "This is a result which, if at all possible consonant [lit., "sounding together"] with sound judicial policy, should be avoided."

In the first and third specimens, an incongruous repetition of the root sense occurs; in the second, the writer has insensitively abstracted and broadened a word still ineluctably tied to its root sense. Cf. sound of prose & verbal awareness.

D. Folk Etymology. Popular notions of etymology are often quite colorful—and quite wrong. Indeed, word origins are a common subject of conversation in English-speaking countries. But such discussions ought to be well grounded because linguistic resources are widely available to serve as guides.

That wasn't always so, and folk etymology has left its mark on the language. Take a few common examples. *Pea* is a false singular of *pease*, which was mistakenly taken as a plural. Likewise, *a newt* is a historical error for *an eft*, *an adder* for *a nadder*, and *an apron* for *a napron*. *Titmouse* now makes the plural *titmice* even though the word has no real connection with *mouse* or *mice*. *Primrose* and *rosemary* were earlier *primerole* and *romarin*, neither of which has anything to do with roses, but they were repelled precisely on that mistaken assumption.

Historical examples may be interesting, but modern examples are still reparable. To cite but one example, many well-educated people believe that *posh* means "port outward, starboard home," and that the word refers to the most desirable positions in an ocean liner. In fact, though, professional etymologists haven't ascertained that etymology—indeed, they've pretty much rejected it. So under *posh*, most dictionaries say "origin unknown." Although the popular notion would make it a colorful term, the facts unfortunately get in the way of a good story.

In fact, etymologists are immediately suspicious of any proffered word origin that involves an acronym. But that doesn't stop the stories from being told like the urban legends they usually are. No, *tip* does not mean "to insure promptness." (And in any event, *tep* would have been the better spelling if the word were an acronym, since *ensure* would be correct in this context, not *insure.* See assure.) In fact, the word goes back to the Middle English *rippe*, and from there probably further back to the Low German, but the precise origin isn't known. That's the kind of answer that can spawn silly ahistorical theories.

A typical example of folk etymology occurs in the following sentence, in which the writer apparently wants the base word *mean* to bear its ordinary English sense in the word *demean*: "By ridiculing the idea of vampires ('Vampires haunt Russian psyche,' 14 November), you *demean* yourself (literally, deprive yourself—and us—of meaning) and hold out a less-than-supporting hand to the northern Russians whose plight you depict." Letter of M.J. Platts, "They Say Vampires, We Have Phobias," Independent, 18 Nov. 1992, at 22. In fact, though, *demean* doesn't mean "to deprive of meaning"; rather, its sense is "to lower in quality or position."

For other examples of folk etymology treated in this book, see *coleslaw, helpmate, hiccups, parti-colored, rescission (A) & Welsh rabbit*. For a good study on the subject, see Hugh Rawson, *Devious Derivations* (1994). For a useful historical work, see A. Smythe Palmer, *The Folk and Their Word-Lore* (1904).

E. Bibliography on English Etymology. Those wishing to look further into etymology should consult the books listed in the Select Bibliography at the end of this book.

Euclidean (= of, relating to, or devised by Euclid, the Greek mathematician who lived about 300 b.c.) is the standard spelling. *Euclidian* is a variant. Cf. *Mephistophelean & Shakespearean.*

Current ratio: 13:1

eulogy takes a, not an—and has done so since the mid-19th century. (See a (A).) For the misuse of *elegy* for eulogy, see *elegy.*

Euphemisms are supposedly soft or unobjectionable terms used in place of harsh or objectionable ones. The purpose is to soften; the means is usually indirection—saying one thing and meaning another. To discerning readers, of course, some euphemisms may seem unnecessarily mealy-mouthed—even silly.

We euphemize if we refer to someone not as *drunk*, but as *inebriated* or *intoxicated*; not as a *drug addict*, but (much more vaguely) as *impaired*; not as having *died*, but as having *passed away*; not as mentally *retarded*, but as *exceptional* or *special*; not as *disabled*, but as *differently abled* or *even challenged*; not as *malingering*, but as *suffering from a factitious disorder.*
Among some writers, the style persisted well into the 19th century, euphemisms were quite common. In the mock-heroic style that was popular in the 18th century, writers often avoided calling things by their more understandable names. For every unpleasant or socially awkward subject, euphemisms are usually available.

Other euphemisms, however, are roundabout and clumsy. Some writers use rodent operative or extermination engineer in place of rat-catcher. We see pregnancy termination rather than abortion; sexually ambidextrous rather than bisexual; armed reconnaissance rather than search-and-destroy mission; permanent layoff rather than firing. For every unpleasant or socially awkward subject, euphemisms are usually available.

Sometimes, though, euphemisms appear for words that might otherwise seem innocuous. In the workplace, for example, the terms employee and worker may be thought to have unpleasant associations with the division between management and labor. So in the 1990s, some companies promoted the terms partner, teammate, crew member, and the like to avoid what might be perceived as putting people down. As organizations become "flattened," traditional titles (such as senior executive vice president) and even generic terms (such as manager) fall by the wayside. Likewise, the lower spheres are upgraded as secretaries become assistants or even administrative assistants.

Still other euphemisms denote things that have historically caused serious discomfort. In law, unnatural offense (or crime) against nature is not uncommon in place of sodomy. Indeed, Arthur Leff gives abominable and detestable crime against nature as a "rather enthusiastic euphemism . . . found in many 19th-century (and some current) statutes, referring to a not fully specified range of sexual crimes." Arthur A. Leff, "The Leff Dictionary of Law," 94 Yale L.J. 1855, 1866 (1985).

Euphemisms are often subtle. Incident appears in place of accident in a U.S. statute limiting total liability to $200 million for a single "nuclear incident," presumably because incident is vaguer and sounds less alarming. Today revenue enhancement (= tax increase) and investment (= increased government spending) are commonly used by American politicians reluctant to call things by their more understandable names.

In the mock-heroic style that was popular in the 19th century, euphemisms were quite common. Among some writers, the style persisted well into the 20th century. In the following sentence, for example, a judge uses an elaborate euphemism for the hymen: "[The statute] further says to the libertine, who would rob a virtuous maiden, under the age of 18 years, of the priceless and crowning jewel of maidenhood, that he does so at his peril." Bishop v. Liston, 199 N.W. 825, 827 (Neb. 1924). Perhaps the judge didn't mean to be so literal as to think of the hymen, but the phrasing certainly suggests it.

Again, some subjects cry out for euphemisms or circumlocutions. Explicitness or directness would be undesirable to almost everyone here: "Five balloons containing marijuana were properly admitted [into evidence] since they derived from a source independent from an allegedly unconstitutional digital rectal search of the inmate, namely, from the tip of a reliable informant." United States v. Caldwell, 750 F.2d 341 syll. (5th Cir. 1984). Still, the final phrase could advantageously be changed because tip verges on losing its metaphorical quality in that particular context.

All in all, though, one can hardly disagree with the assessment that euphemisms are irrational and quaintly uncandid: "They are only intelligible when both parties are in on the secret, and their silly innocence masks a guilty complicity, which is why they almost invariably wear a knowing, naughty-postcard smirk. At the close of the taboo-breaking century, they ought to have become comically redundant." Neil Powell, "How to Put It Properly," TLS, 3 Sept. 1993, at 32. Even so, they thrive as much today as ever. Cf. DYSPEHISM. See CLASS DISTINCTIONS.

In the end, too, they leave a linguistic garbage-heap in their wake. Once a euphemism becomes standard, it loses its euphemistic quality: "This is the usual destiny of euphemisms; in order to avoid the real name of what is thought indecent or improper people use some innocent word. But when that becomes habitual in this sense it becomes just as objectionable as the word it has ousted and now is rejected in its turn." Otto Jespersen, Growth and Structure of the English Language 230 (9th ed. 1952). Hence the vocabulary regarding unpleasant things remains in constant flux.

The only solution would be for people to be less squeamish in their use of language. And that’s not likely to happen—not in AmE, at any rate—without a cultural upheaval.

Among the better treatments of the subject are John Ayto, Euphemisms (1993); Keith Allan & Kate Burridge, Euphemism and Dysphemism (1991); Judith S. Neaman & Carole G. Silver, Kind Words: A Thesaurus of Euphemisms (2d ed. 1990); R.W. Holder, A Dictionary of American and British Euphemisms (1987); D.J. Enright, Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism (1985); Hugh Rawson, A Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk (1981).

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

- **Stage 1:** Rejected
- **Stage 2:** Widely shunned
- **Stage 3:** Widespread but . . .
- **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but . . .
- **Stage 5:** Fully accepted

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
euphemistic is sometimes subject to word-swapping with euphonic (= involving a pleasant combination of sounds)—e.g.:

- “With many plans, you can either buy a high option or low option (euphoniously [read euphemistically] termed ‘standard option’), depending on your view of your needs and your budget.” Victor Cohn, “Asking Pertinent Questions About HMOs,” Wash. Post, 3 Nov. 1987, Health §, at 16.


- “In the euphonious [read euphemistic] language of pilots, the model made an uncontrolled landing, or, as an NAL spokesman said, ‘The trial objectives were not achieved during flight.’” Winn L. Rosch, “High-Speed Planes May Take Off Soon,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 18 July 2002, at C2.

For a similar error, see euphuism.

**Language-Change Index**

**euphonious** misused for euphemistic: Stage 1

euphonium (= a brass instrument similar to a baritone horn, being somewhat smaller than a tuba) forms the plural euphoniums, not euphonia. In music circles, the plural form euphoniums is commonplace, but some writers use the pretentious Latin plural—e.g.: “The performance edition used on this occasion did call for two Wagner tubas, a.k.a. euphonia [read euphoniums], or baritone horns, and they added to the general richness and resonance of sound.” Donald Dierks, “Symphony Does Right by Talmi, Bruckner,” San Diego Union-Trib., 1 Dec. 1990, at E11. See plurals (8).

The word euphonia, though not recorded in most dictionaries, refers to a kind of bird found in North and South America (the plural being either euphonia or euphonias)—e.g.: “Rare hummingbirds, honeycreepers and singing euphonias . . . are endangered and seen only sporadically in Florida during annual migrations.” Julie Kay, “Jewels of the Sky,” Miami Herald, 30 Sept. 1995, at B2.

**Language-Change Index**

**euphonia** used for euphoniums: Stage 1

EUPHONY. See sound of prose.

euphuism (/yoo-fyoo-iz-am/) derives from John Lyly’s play entitled Euphues (1578), in which the characters speak in an affected, highly ornate style. The term now denotes a convoluted, embellished prose style. But it’s sometimes misused for euphemism—e.g.:

- “Twice, in 1987 and 1991, under duress to win at a more brisk clip, Brewer bought extra time by overhauling his staff—a time-honored euphuism [read ruse] for transferring blame.” Jim Bailey, “Parker Doesn’t See Red over Coaching Ups, Downs,” Ark. Democrat-Gaz., 1 June 1994, at C5. (Because the writer refers to a nonverbal evasion, euphuism wouldn’t be a good replacement. See double bobbles.)


A close synonym is gongorism (/ga-gor-gom/), after the style of the Spanish poet Luis de Góngora y Argote (1561–1627). This word is only for those who dabble in sesquipedality.

Unlike its corresponding noun, the adjective euphuistic is rarely misused. Here it appears correctly:


- “For some, the result is, in a word of Hardwick’s Elizabethan time, euphuistic: elegant but given to symmetry, antithesis, alliteration, and other stylistic devices.” Hugh Aldersey-Williams, “History Lesson,” Architectural Record, Mar. 1996, at 92.

For a similar error, see euphemistic.

**Language-Change Index**

**euphuistic** misused for euphemism: Stage 1
eurythmics (= the practice of moving the body to rhythms, esp. those of music, as a method of teaching or interpretation), a term dating from the 1920s, is traditionally so spelled. It takes a singular verb <eurythmics is helpful in reinforcing language acquisition>. Although the standard spelling of the word (ironically) has no internal rhythm—because the Greek term on which it is based is eurythmos—there is a variant spelling *eurythmics* (a spelling that surged to predominance in the late 1980s, alas). E.g.: “The workshop she attended Thursday focused on eurythmics [read eurythmics]—using body movements to interpret music.” Kendra Martinez, “Music Teachers Use Bodies at BSU Workshop,” Idaho Statesman, 25 July 1997, at B2. (Cf. rhythmic.) The rock band popular in the 1980s got the name right: Eurythmics.

Eurythmy (developed by Rudolf Steiner and Marie von Silvers, also in the 1920s) is primarily about the movement as therapy, and may or may not involve music. It is likewise spelled with one h even though it is all about rhythm. Cf. rhythmic.

Current ratio (eurythmics vs. *eurythmics*): 1:2

euthanasia. A. And mercy killing. These synonyms are widespread, the former perhaps being more connotatively neutral. Mercy killing usually applies to people exclusively, while euthanasia applies equally to animals.

B. And physician-assisted suicide. In euthanasia, the doctor may take an active role in the death, as by administering a fatal dose of a drug. In physician-assisted suicide (sometimes shortened to assisted suicide), the doctor supplies the means of death, but the patient takes the decisive step.
**euthanize; *euthanatize**. These terms, meaning “to subject to euthanasia,” are used most commonly in reference to pets. If we must have such a word, the longer version might seem the better candidate because it is properly formed, strictly speaking, and is older, dating in the *OED* from 1873. But in modern writing, *euthanize* greatly predominates and has become standard—e.g.:

- “Because the dog’s vaccinations were not current, it was *euthanized*.” *Central Mass. Digest,* Telegram & Gaz. (Worcester), 14 Sept. 1996, at A2.
- “After witnessing a significant decline in his condition over the past few weeks, zoo officials decided to humanely *euthanize* him Tuesday morning.” “Denver Zoo Mourns Death of Lion Rajah,” *Denver Post,* 26 Aug. 2015, at A2. (On the split infinitive in this example, see *split infinitives.*)

See *-ize.*

Current ratio: 54:1

**evacuable.** So formed—not *evacuitable. See *-able (d) & -atable.*

Current ratio: 7:1

**evacuee.** See *-ee & refugee.*

**evadable.** So spelled—not *evadible. See *-able (a).*

Current ratio: 13:1

**evaluable.** So formed—not *evaluatable. See *-able (d) & -atable.*

Current ratio: 80:1

**evangelical; evangelistic.** Today the older term *evangelical* (fr. ca. 1531) is so closely tied with fundamentalist, proselytizing Christians that it should not be applied more generally. *Evangelistic* (fr. ca. 1845), though also redolent of Christian associations, may be used more broadly to mean “militantly zealous.”

**evasion; evasiveness.** *Evasion* (= [1] the deliberate avoidance of doing what one should, or [2] an instance of deliberately not answering a question or not talking about something) is always an act. *Evasiveness* (= the tendency not to answer questions directly or not to talk about things that need to be discussed) is always a quality.

**even, adv.** gives rise to syntactic problems similar to those arising from *only.* It should be placed directly before the word it modifies. Note, for example, the difference in meaning between *this summer is even hotter and wetter* and *this summer is hotter and even wetter.* See *only.*

**evening.** What period of a day is evening? According to most dictionaries, it is the later part of the day through the early part of the night or (not much more specifically) the period between sunset and bedtime or darkness. In many places, *evening* begins when the workday is over, around 5:00 PM. But in some regional dialects, *evening* can mean the entire time after 12:00 noon until dark.

**event.** The AmE phrase is usually in *the event that* [+ clause]—an equivalent of *if* in the event that *they fail.* The British generally write in *the event of* [+ noun phrase] (usually a ZOMBIE NOUN)—as Americans often do in *the event of failure.* Either phrase is typically inferior to *if.*

In BrE, *in the event* also means “in (the) result” or “in the end,” a usage likely to result in a *miscue* for American readers—e.g.: “In *the event,* the Miami communiqué will be notably less Washington-centered than when it was first drafted.” “High Hopes in Miami,” *Economist,* 10 Dec. 1994, at 15.

**eventuality** is a needless pomposity for several everyday words, each of which is more specific: *event, possibility, outcome, contingency, consequences,* or *result.* E.g.:

- “Mindful of the fact that their chief executive will one day have to replace his battered old Mercedes with a new one, [the board has] made provision for that expensive *eventuality* [read event or outcome].” John Naughton, “In *This Week’s Supermarket Sweep,* the Prize Is £621,000 a Year,” *Guardian,* 25 Aug. 1996, at 2.
- “This is the way the world ends—with humans evolving into billions of electronic navel-gazers? Without navels, even? Ironically, the film cumulatively argues against such an *eventuality* [read an outcome or a possibility].” Arthur Salm, “Aaack! to the Future,” *San Diego Union-Trib.*, 13 Sept. 1996, at E11.

The phrase *in the eventuality* is especially pretentious. E.g.: “Some speculate that building so close to the base—against the Air Force’s recommendations—would threaten the base in the *eventuality* of [read in the event of or if there are] future military closures.” Sybil Fix, “Air Crash Rift Widens over Mall,” *Post & Courier* (Charleston, S.C.), 6 Aug. 1995, at A1. See *event.*

**eventuate** is “an elaborate journalistic word that can usually be replaced by a simpler word to advantage.” George P. Krapp, *A Comprehensive Guide to Good English* 231 (1927). E.g.:

- “According to [John] McEuen, the new album is based on the thought-provoking premise that Nashville and country music had never *eventuated* [read happened or developed].” Jack Hurst, “*King of the Ode,*” *Chicago Trib.*, 7 Sept. 1995, at B10.
- “The expected public resentment of Clinton—which Mari Will said would give Dole an easy time of it in the primaries—has not *eventuated* [read occurred or materialized].” Garry Wills, “*Dole Is Part of Republican Collapse,*” *Times Union* (Albany), 13 Sept. 1996, at A14.

**ever. A. Superfluous.** For phrases in which *ever* is superfluous, see *rarely ever & seldom ever.*
B. *Ever for every*. Clipping *every* to *ever* is typical of dialect—e.g.:

- "Shaquille O’Neal needs a breather *ever* [read *every*] once in a while." Michael Murphy, "Look Out Below," *Houston Chron.*, 7 Nov. 2000, Sports §, at 1.
- "Reading a book and then *ever* [read *every*] so often glancing out the window is a magnificent experience and when combined with an occasional nap it is pure heaven." John Douglas, "Joy of Train Travel Not Fully Appreciated," *Grand Rapids Press*, 19 Dec. 2001, at A1.


**Language-Change Index**

1. *ever* misused for *every*: Stage 1
2. *everbody* for *everybody*: Stage 1

**Everglades**, a place name thought to have been coined in 1823 from *glide* or *glade*, meaning "opening in the forest," predominantly takes a singular verb—e.g.:

- "With so little else happening in the Legislature this year of redesigning, the *Everglades* is a priority." "Money for the 'Glades," *Palm Beach Post*, 4 Mar. 2002, at A16.

But some writers ill-advisedly make it plural—e.g.:

- "Though the *Everglades* are [read *is*] unique, they remain [read *it remains*] a mystery," Randy Schultz, "A Watershed for Rescuing Everglades," *Palm Beach Post*, 19 Aug. 2001, at E1.
- "Widely viewed as useless swamp 50 years ago, the *Everglades* are [read *is*] now the focus of the largest ecosystem-restoration effort ever." Phyllis McIntosh, "Reviving the Everglades," *Nat’l Parks*, 1 Jan. 2002, at 30.

Likewise, the city of Port Everglades takes a singular verb—e.g.:. "Port Everglades is working on a security plan." Steven Thomma et al., "Six Months After Terrors Struck the United States, Americans Are . . .," *Miami Herald*, 10 Mar. 2002, at 1.

**Language-Change Index**

*Everglades are for Everglades is*: Stage 3
  Current ratio (*The Everglades is vs. *The Everglades are*): 3:1

ever since. This is the standard phrase. *Every since* is dialect—e.g.:. "Her mother . . . took her to Jazzercise classes in Los Alamos and she’s been a devotee *ever since* [read *ever since*]—except for her high-school years when taking Jazzercise wasn’t cool.” John Knoll, "Popular Dance Class Returns to Pojoaque," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 31 July 2002, Pojoaque §, at 4.

**Language-Change Index**

*every since for ever since*: Stage 1
  Current ratio (*ever since vs. *every since*): 280:1

ever so often. See every so often.

every. A. Meaning "all." With an abstract noun—as opposed to a count noun—the word *all* is more apt than *every.* E.g.: "Now both the law enforcement community and, apparently, the judiciary, are going to the opposite extreme by giving the Freemen *every leniency* they can [read *all the leniency they can*]:" "Make the Freemen Obey the Law," *Times Union* (Albany), 12 Aug. 1996, at A6.

B. Meaning "complete" or "utmost." To say that you have *every confidence* in something isn’t logical, but it’s now an established casualism—e.g.:

- "I have *every confidence* [or *am quite confident*] that our own attorneys . . . are perfectly capable of researching the applicable statutes and case law on this issue." Letter of Henry A. Pulkowski Jr., "Moon Director Questions ACLU in Lawsuit," *Pitt. Post-Gaz.*, 2 June 1994, at W2.
- "At yet another level, they are being told that you have *every confidence in* [or *are quite confident of*] their physical recovery." Lou Makarowski, "Hurt Athletes Need Support in Recovering," *Houston Chron.*, 29 Sept. 1996, at 21.

C. *Each and every*. See each and every.

everybody. See everyone (A), (C) & pronouns (d).

everybody else’s. See else’s & possessives (i).

everybody . . . they. See everyone (A), concord (b), pronouns (d) & sexism (b).

every day, adv.; everyday, adj. One tries to accomplish something *every day,* but an *everyday* feat would hardly be worth accomplishing. The two are often confused—e.g.:

- "But what of the phrase ‘per stirpes,’ symbolic here of the hundreds of Latin and law French words still used *every day* [read *every day*] by fully modernized American lawyers whose penchant for foreign languages probably extends no further?" Richard Weisberg, *When Lawyers Write* 99 (1987).
- "We are confronted *everyday* [read *every day*] with having to decide exactly what they cover." Ronald Wardhaugh, *Proper English: Myths and Misunderstandings About Language* 21 (1999).

**Language-Change Index**

1. *everyday* misused for the two-word adverbial phrase *every day*: Stage 2
   Current ratio (*happens everyday* vs. *happens everyday*): 10:1
2. *every day* for the adjective *everyday*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (*everyday experience* vs. *every day experience*): 55:1

everyone. A. Singular or Plural? Today it is standard BrE to use everyone and everybody with a singular verb but a plural pronoun—e.g.:

• “The compilation of the OED made it possible for everyone to have before them the historical shape and configuration of the language.” R.W. Burchfield, Unlocking the English Language 169 (1989).

• “Everybody in the ground that day couldn’t take their eyes off it.” Keith Duggan, “If Tyrone Overturn Logic It Will Be Hart’s Greatest Achievement,” Irish Times, 22 Aug, 2015, Sport §, at 12.

Here’s a statement of the BrE view: “Jane Austen wrote ‘every body’ as two words and considered the phrase as singular; we now write one word, ‘everybody,’ and consider it as plural, equivalent to ‘all people.’ Hence the entry in the Dictionary under ‘agreement’ gives ‘Everybody knows this, don’t they?’ as an example of notional concord, obviously rightly: we would not accept ‘Everybody knows this, doesn’t he or she?’” Paul Dean, “More Grammatical than Thou,” TLS, 22 Apr, 1994, at 8.

But many Americans continue to think of this usage as slipshod, everybody requiring a singular. After all, they reason, nobody—not even Paul Dean—would say everybody know instead of everybody knows. An early usage critic remarked insightfully (while disapproving): “The use of this word is made difficult by the lack of a singular pronoun of dual sex . . . . Nevertheless, this is no warrant for the conjunction of every and them.” Richard Grant White, Every-Day English 420–21 (1884). A goodly number of Americans now take the same stand, thereby making a happy solution elusive.

So although every student . . . they would pass unnoticed in the British press, it still gets a sic from Newsweek: “‘The question is, how do we change education to give every student what they [sic] need to compete in a more complex . . . world?’” Joe Klein, “Michigan’s to give every student what they [sic] need to compete.” Everybody knows this, don’t they? as an example twice as often as , which is probably more everyone context. In practice, changeable, euphony governs the choice in any given sense; if it does, everyone everybody everyone time. “If you’re unsure about whether the single word everyone everybody everyone everybody (a), concord (b), pronouns (d) & sexism (b).

Everyone else. See else’s & possessives (i).

*everyone . . . not, in place of not everyone, is just as illogical as *all . . . not. E.g.: “But if richness needs gifts with which everyone is not endowed [read not everyone is endowed], simplicity by no means comes by nature.” W. Somerset Maugham, “Lucidity, Simplicity, Euphony” in The Summing Up 321, 322 (1938). (Otherwise, the sense is that no one is endowed with gifts.) See illogic (b). Cf. all (b).

Language-Change Index

*everyone . . . not for not everyone: Stage 2
Current ratio (not everyone is vs. *everyone is not): 6:1

everyone . . . they. See everyone (A), concord (b), pronouns (d) & sexism (b).

every other. A. Illogical Use. In sentences involving a comparison, every other is sometimes used illogically in place of all others; that is, *more than every other member collectively is inferior to more than all other members collectively. When the sense is of taking things collectively, the plural is needed. Otherwise, the literal sense suggests undoing a dismemberment (especially in the second and third examples below, because the reference is to people)—e.g.:


• “Amis got more attention in the States than any other literary novelist this year. It was more attention, you could argue, than every other serious novelist [read all other serious novelists] put together.” David Streitfeld, “Book Report,” Wash. Post, 30 July 1995, Book World §, at 15.

• For recent readings by such literary stars as A.S. Byatt, Jamaica Kincaid, Graham Swift and Robert Coover, Comstock probably traveled farther than every other member [read all other members] of the audience put together.”


See illogic (b).

A similar problem often arises with the phrasing every other . . . except—e.g.:

• “Wake [Forest] has beaten every other ACC opponent [read every ACC opponent] (except Florida State) at least twice since ’83.” Larry Keech, “’Noles Rarin’ to Go Against Pack,” News & Record (Greensboro), 19 Sept. 1996, at C3.

• “Cuba has paid compensation to every other country with claims there except the United States [read every country with claims there except the United States].” James Rosen, “Tougher Embargo of Cuba Lamented,” Sacramento Bee, 24 Feb. 1997, at A4.
For those sentences to make any sense, Wake Forest must be one of its own opponents, and Cuba must be a country with claims in Cuba.

**Language-Change Index**

*every* other misused for all other: Stage 3

**B. Ambiguous Use.** The phrase *every other* can give rise to an ambiguity: when you say *every other person you see*, does that mean all the people you see or half the people you see (every second person)? When there is a remote possibility of misunderstanding, or even of a miscue, the best practice is to rewrite—e.g.:

- "When I was a junior—even my first semester as a senior—I swore I wouldn’t fall prey to the evils that seemed to hit every other person [read everybody or half the students] [during] their last semester of high school." Julia O’Malley, "Sliding into a Senior Slump," Anchorage Daily News, 8 Mar. 1996, at E1. (On the use of the *every *person . . . their, see *everyone*.

- "If a user visits Yahoo!, the screen will be the same as it is for every other person who reaches [read everybody else who reaches] the site." Bob Cook, "Thunderstone Rolling Out," Crain’s Cleveland Bus., 3 June 1996, at 7.

- "Just as remarkable is the vivid sense she provides of every other person [read everybody else in the room, from Miguel struggling to hold her up to her cheerful midwife and nonchalant doctor." Robert Hurwitt, ‘More than Ever, ‘Family Secrets’ Worth Sharing," S.F. Examiner, 3 Oct. 1996, at C5.

*everyplace, *anyplace, *someplace. These forms are considered vulgarisms for everywhere, etc. An exception occurs when the words are separated (*every place, any place, some place*) to mean ‘each (any, some) location.’ See *someplace & *noplace.

**every so often; ever so often.** The first, by far the more common idiom since the early 1900s, means “occasionally” <we go to Lockhart for barbecue every so often>. The second—a quaint phrasing in the manner of *everywhere*< you’re extremely thoughtful to call me ever so often>. These forms are considered vulgarisms for everywhere, etc. An exception occurs when the words are separated (*every place, any place, some place*) to mean ‘each (any, some) location.’ See *someplace & *noplace.

**every time.** Two words. But many writers try to solidify the phrase—e.g.:

- “Then this past Saturday night against Fresno State, Cooper had the Tiger faithful perched on the edge of their seats *every time* [read *every time* he touched the ball].” Hunt Archbold, “Lizard’ Slikers His Way into AU Playing Picture," Montgomery Advertiser, 11 Sept. 1996, at C1.


- “He may have been one of the most celebrated talents in football’s greatest team, but *everytime* [read *every time*] he watches a re-run of the Golden Years video that was produced in their honour, he blushes a little.” Michael Clifford, “Shooting Stars,” Irish Daily Mail, 18 Aug. 2015, at 53.

**Language-Change Index**

*everytime for every time: Stage 1

Current ratio (*every time* vs. *everytime*): 163:1

**Evidence. A. And testimony.** These words overlap but are not always interchangeable. *Testimony* is a species of *evidence*; it refers only to evidence received through the medium of witnesses. *Evidence*, the broader term, includes all means by which a fact in issue is established or disproved; hence *evidence* may include documents and tangible objects. The word *evidence* has also long been used in the sense “the law of evidence,” generally dealing with what is and is not admissible at trial.

**B. And proof.** Strictly speaking, the two words are not synonymous. Unlike *evidence*, the word *proof* applies to the effect of the evidence, not to the way in which truth is established.

**C. As a Count Noun.** *Evidence* is not generally taken to be a count noun; hence the plural form is unusual at best. E.g.: “Yet in spite of all these *evidences* of judicial humility in these areas, it would be an error to assume that the judiciary had lost self-confidence altogether as a result of its chastening experience in the 1930’s.” Robert G. McCloskey, *The American Supreme Court 190* (1960). See COUNT NOUNS AND MASS NOUNS.

**Evidence, v.t.; evince.** These words, favorites of lawyers, are often inferior to *show* or *express or indicate. Properly, to *evidence* something is to serve as proof of its truth, existence, or occurrence. Justifiable uses of this verb are typically in the PASSIVE VOICE—e.g.: “The highway environs southbound are fairly litter-free. The inescapable conclusion, *evidenced* by the clutter of takeout coffee containers, is that sloppy folk on their way to work in the morning drain their cups, roll down the windows of their vehicles and heave out the empty containers.” Peter M. Knapp, “Slobs Littering Route 3 Ought to Clean Up Their Act,” Patriot Ledger (Quincy, Mass.), 28 Sept. 1996, at 19. And when these folks get to work, many of them start speaking and writing.

In other situations, a different verb would be preferable—e.g.:

- “A puppy was hit three days ago by a motorist who slowed down and then continued without *evidencing* [read *showing*] any further concern.” Letter of Frances J. Jessup, “A Plea to Enforce Speed Limits,” *Columbian* (Vancouver, Wash.), 18 July 1996, at B6.

- “The cakes are much in demand, as *evidenced* [read *demonstrated*] by the crowds at several local Asian markets last weekend.” Gail Tirone Finley, “Mooncakes Ready for Big Chinese Fest,” *Houston Chron.*., 26 Sept. 1996, City §, at 1.

- “Plus, *evidenced* by his popularity in NBA-sanctioned propaganda, Kemp could be on the verge of major marketing breakthroughs.” Elliott Almond, “Sonic Training Camp—Kemp Won’t Report, Cites Frustration,” *Seattle Times*, 1 Oct. 1996, at C1. (Read: And as his *popularity* in NBA-sanctioned propaganda shows, Kemp could be on the verge of major marketing breakthroughs. In the original sentence, the absence of *as* before *evidenced* makes the sentence ungrammatical; also, coupling the informal plus with the formal *evidenced* is jarring.)

*Evince* properly means “to show, exhibit, make manifest,” but has been objected to as “a bad word
and unnecessary... a favourite with callow journalists” (U&O at 113). In fact, the word can usually be replaced to good advantage—e.g.:

- “Amazingly, we evince more anger at [read get angrier over] Bob Dole’s simple mention of a clinically proven fact (i.e., that smoking isn’t always addictive) about a legal but unhealthy product than we do at [read over] Mr. Clinton’s confession to violating the drug laws (without, of course, ever taking a deep breath).” John Kolbe, “Lost: Our Moral Outrage,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 25 July 1996, at A15.

- “Bad as things were, though, the crowd seemed quite content with the situation—which itself is testament to the kind of charisma Pearl Jam evinces [read displays] in concert.” J.D. Considine, “Bad Gets Lost in a Crowd,” Baltimore Sun, 26 Sept. 1996, at E1.


Sometimes, as H.W. Fowler noted, evince is misused for evoke, get, receive, or some other everyday term—e.g.: “Plans for NATO enlargement still receive majority support from the German public and elites. But a heightened German role, or the absorption of costs for an extension east, evinces [read gets or receives] less support.” Daniel Nelson, “Germany Faces Dilemma,” Defense News, 8 July 1996, at 21.

evidentially for evidently is a pretentious error—one that would not occur if the user weren’t trying to inflate the term. E.g.: “Just tossing out that he [Jerry Jones] could hire anybody to coach this team to win the Super Bowl bothered me. It bothered my ego. I put together a team that won two Super Bowls. Evidentially [read Evidently], he doesn’t appreciate that.” Gary Myers, “Johnson Has Little to Sweat While Chilling in Florida’s Sun,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 27 July 1995, at C8 (quoting Jimmy Johnson, the football coach).

Although this error might seem analogous to using partially for partly, the word evidentially (the adverb corresponding to the adjective evidential and the noun evidence) has a technical legal sense that makes it an erroneous alternative to evidently—not a valid parallel to an existing term, as is the case with partially.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

| evidentially | misused for evidently: Stage 1 |

**evidentiary; evidential.** What is the adjective corresponding to the noun evidence? In AmE, it’s evidentiary—but in BrE it’s predominantly evidential. For a possible technical differentiation, see Garner’s Dictionary of Legal Usage 336 (3d ed. 2011).

Evidentiary is sometimes misspelled *eviden-ciary—e.g.:

- “Allen contends he has solid evidence but had hoped not to present it until an evidenciary [read evidentiary] hearing.” Mike Manzo, “Attorney Asks Judge to Reopen Drug Case,” Union Leader (Manchester, N.H.), 31 Aug. 1994, at 5.

- “In the wake of the Bernardo conviction, Rosen’s talk of an appeal has centred [on] trial judge Mr. Justice Patrick LeSage’s comments to the jury prior to their deliberations and his rulings on evidenciary [read evidentiary] issues.” Scott Burnside & Alan Cairns, “It’s Over . . . or Is It?” Toronto Sun, 9 Sept. 1995, at 22.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

| evidentiary | misspelled *evidentiary: Stage 1 |


| ratios | current ratio: 1,563:1 |


| evince | evidently. The pronunciation /e-v-i-dont-le/ is preferred over /e-v-i-dent-le/- the latter evidently occurring only in AmE. But when the word is said with emphasis, the accent naturally shifts to the penultimate syllable. |

| evince | See evidence, vi. |

**evoke; invoke.** The difference between these words is fairly subtle—and therefore is sometimes lost on even the most careful of writers. Evoke = (1) to call to mind or produce (memories, emotions, etc.) <t>he photographs evoked feelings of disgust>; or (2) to elicit or draw forth <the commencement address evoked laughter and applause>. Invoke = (1) to call on (a higher power) for blessing, guidance, or support <Homer invoked the Muse in each of his epics>; (2) to cite as an authority <the newspaper’s reply invoked the First Amendment>; (3) to solicit; entreat <the rebels invoked the aid of the U.S. military>; (4) to summon by incantation; conjure <the wizard invoked a host of evil spirits>; or (5) to put into effect; implement <after the bombing, the governor invoked tighter security measures>.

The words’ etymologies provide a useful way to remember their basic senses. Evoke is derived from the Latin evocare, meaning “to call out”; invoke is derived from the Latin invocare, meaning “to call on.” Both words are used properly in this sentence: “The senator’s speech, which invoked the names of statesmen ranging from Thomas Jefferson to Martin Luther King, evoked both hoorays and boos.”

The most common mistake in using these words is substituting evoke for sense 1 or 2 of invoke. This error occurs especially in the phrase evoke the name of, but also in other phrases—e.g.:


For an illogical use of this prefix, see *ex-felon.

Some copyeditors have learned to use an en-dash when a hyphenated combining form (such as ex-) combines with a compound having a space: ex–brain surgeon, and the like. The compounds tend to read somewhat better this way. (See PUNCTUATION (H.).) Still, it’s always best to look for a solution that won’t make the reader do a double take.

ex, n., is a CASUALISM in the sense “a former spouse or lover,” The plural of ex is exes, and the possessive is ex’s—but be aware that many readers will find these forms odd-looking.

exacerbate (= to make worse) seems to be following the course of its traditional synonym, aggravate. That is, writers sometimes use it as a fancy substitute for irritate, perhaps influenced by exacerbate—e.g.: “Louis Lyons, former curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard, and James Boylan, editor of the Columbia Journalism Review, are exacerbated [read irritated] by you know—which both say they hear too often over radio and TV.” Newsweek Editors, “Up Tight About Hang-Ups,” in Coming to Terms with Language: An Anthology 68, 69 (Raymond D. Liedlich ed., 1973).

Meanwhile, the word exasperate (traditionally “to irritate thoroughly” but archaically “to make harsher”) is often confounded with exacerbate. Yet the differentiation between the words has been complete for many generations. Using exasperate in its obsolete sense is now poor usage—e.g.:

• “In most cases, players want to do the right thing. And in 99.9 percent of each of those cases, you can find so-called ‘friends’ who exasperate [read exacerbate] the problem.” George Robinson, “Pacman Needs to Get New Friends,” Leaf-Chron. (Clarksville, Tenn.), 19 June 2007, at C1.


exact same. This expression, which sprang into currency after 1950, is a lazy truncation of exactly the same. Although the exact same is acceptable in informal speech, it’s not an expression for polished prose—e.g.:

• “There is not one briefcase, however. There are several; they’re the exact same [read exactly the same] shade of pale aqua, and they all get swapped by characters skulking in and out of various dressing cubicles.” David Richards, “All Roads Lead to Mother in a Game of Spy Versus Spy,” N.Y. Times, 5 Dec. 1994, at C11.

• “He buys her the same clothes Madeleine wore, takes her to a beauty salon to have her hair and makeup done just like Madeleine’s, even puts her in the exact same [read the same or identical] high heels.” Joanna Connors,
• “Whenever the goon says something wrong, take the next available occasion to say the exact same [read same] thing yourself” Mary Newton Brudner, The Grammar Lady 60 (2000).

And because exactly the same is a phrase of pinpoint precision, to qualify the idea by saying *almost the exact same is doubly bad—e.g.: • “Yes, No. 4 Alabama (10–0) and No. 6 Auburn (9–0–1) play almost the exact same [read almost the same or the same] brand of football.” J.A. Alande, “It’s Showdown Time for Alabama, Auburn,” Wash. Post, 19 Nov. 1994, at H6.
• “In a characteristically un-didactic history lesson, Thomas preceded the 1913 ‘Rite’ with two works of almost the exact same [read almost the same] age: Webern’s Six Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6 (1909) and the Adagio from Mahler’s uncompleted 10th Symphony (1910).” Joshua Kosman, “‘Rite’ Not Quite Right,” S.F. Chron., 27 Sept. 1996, at C1.

For a similar example involving exact, see just exactly.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
the exact same for exactly the same: Stage 2 Current ratio (exactly the same vs. the exact same): 6:1

exalt; exult. To exalt is to rejoice exceedingly. To exult; exult.


These errors seem to result from confusion with words such as exhalate, exhort, and (even more strongly) exhaust. In the last two words, the -h- isn’t pronounced, and the vowel in the second syllable of exhaust is generally sounded just as it is in exalt.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
exalt misspelled *exhalt or *exhaust: Stage 1 Current ratio: 3,999:5:1

example; exemplar; *examplem; exemplification.
Example, of course, is the general term. Exemplar = an ideal or typical example. E.g.: “The artist [Carl von Marr], regarded as his era’s foremost exemplar of German academic realism, was born to German immigrants in Milwaukee in 1858 and died in Munich in 1936.” James Auer, “West Bend Gallery Buys Massive Oil,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 30 Nov. 1995, at 8. The Latin *examplem is usually a needlessly variant of example—e.g.: • “From Caesar’s murder on, however, he is an exemplum [read example] both in compelling minor detail and in his sure awareness of the historic scale of the events he is helping to shape.” Alistair Macaulay, “Julius Caesar—Theatre,” Fin. Times, 6 July 1995, at 23.
• “Most of the town, and especially Byron, stand in awe of Maars, who is an exemplum [read example] of the community’s most cherished values—generosity, tolerance, self-reliance and unflagging determination.” David W. Madden, “A Farm Boy Returns as a Man,” S.F. Chron., 13 Aug. 1995, Sunday Rev §, at 10.

In the specialized literary sense “a moralizing tale or parable; an illustrative story” (OED), exemplum is justifiably used—e.g.: “Here is an exemplum vérité that the Franciscan nuns at Nativity grade school in Washington told my brothers when they were preparing to take their First Communion: ‘There was a wicked little boy in the grip of the Devil. When he went to Communion, he did not swallow the Host, but deliberately concealed it in the corner of his mouth. He went to his hideout with his gang, put the Host on the ground and hammered a nail through it. The Host spurted blood. The boys ran back and confessed . . . .’” Maureen Dowd, “‘The Moral of the Story Is . . . ,’” N.Y. Times, 24 Dec. 1995, § 4, at 9.

Exemplification = (1) the act or process of serving as an example <by way of exemplification>; (2) a case in point; an illustration <that exemplification is rather far-fetched>; or (3) (in law) an attested copy of a document with an official seal. In sense 2, the word is usually just a lofty synonym of example—e.g.: “A single episode may be noted as a fair exemplification [read example] of this.” Herbert S. Gorman, “Hopeless in Chandrapore,” N.Y. Times, 6 Oct. 1996, § 7, at 38.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
exemplification misused for example: Stage 1 example where, long thought to be stylistically inferior to example in which, is now the predominant phrasing in AmE and BrE alike. Some editors mourn this linguistic fact. But it’s a fact. See where.

exasperate. See exacerbate.

ex cathedra; ex officio; *ex officis. Ex cathedra = (1) adv., from the chair or throne; with authority; (2) adj., authoritative. Following is a literal adverbial use: “A doctrine concerning faith or morals can be declared infallible by an ecumenical council of the church, consisting of all the bishops and the pope, or by the pope alone speaking officially from the papal throne (ex cathedra).” Dave Condren, “Pope’s Stance on Women Fuels Debate,” Buffalo News, 1 Dec. 1995,
at B1. Increasingly today, *ex cathedra* has connotations of a peremptory attitude—e.g.: "The Attorney General's letter asserts *ex cathedra* and without citation of a single authority that . . ." Peter Shane & Harold Bruff, *The Law of Presidential Power* 205 (1988). The phrase is pronounced /eks ka-thee-dra/ or occasionally /eks kath-a-dra/.

*Ex officio* (= by virtue of one's office) may likewise be both adjective and adverb <the chairman is an ex officio member of all standing committees> <the chairman became a member ex officio>. A widespread misconception has it that by definition, an ex officio member of a deliberative body may not vote. That isn't necessarily so; nothing forbids a body from allowing an ex officio member to vote. But it is a common parliamentary practice. *Ex officio* should be neither hyphenated nor spelled as one word. The phrase is pronounced /eks a-fish-ee-oh/ or (rarely) /eks a-fik-ee-oh/. *Ex officis* is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio (ex officio vs. *ex officis*): 514:1

**exceed.**

**exceed. A. In the Phrase *exceed more than.*** This phrase is a common REDUNDANCY—e.g.: • “The county attorney of Charles County, Md., said its losses exceed more than [read exceed] $1.3 million from derivatives trades.” *Derivatives Put in Role of Fall Guy,* Ark. Democrat-Gaz., 10 Oct. 1994, at D1.

• “Volchkov will only begin to get his salary, which cannot exceed more than [read exceed] $875,000 a year under the NHL's cap, if he makes the club this season.” Rachel Alexander, “First-Round Selection Volchkov Signs Contract,” *Wash. Post,* 21 Sept. 1996, at H9.

• “What’s considered affordable by experts is fluid, but it is typically defined as housing costs that do not exceed more than [read exceed] 30 percent of an individual’s monthly income.” Kirsten Crow, “City’s Need for Housing Grows,” *Corpus Christi Caller-Times,* 2 Aug. 2015, at A1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*exceed more than for exceed: Stage 1

Current ratio (exceed 10 vs. *exceed more than 10): 169:1

**B. And accede. See accede.**

**exceedingly. A. And exceeding, adv.** *Exceedingly* (= extraordinarily) is often used as a mild hyperbole roughly equivalent to *quite* or *very.* It doesn't usually present any problems, but it does have an old-fashioned by-form, *exceeding* (<exceeding kind>). Instead of this ARCHAISM, use *exceedingly*—e.g.: • “The Jets have also rushed the ball exceeding [read exceedingly] well this season.” Terry Price, “Jets,” *Hartford Courant,* 3 Nov. 1991, at C11.


**B. And excessively.** An antiquarian book dealer sends out a catalogue in which seven of the books are described as "excessively rare." He means *exceedingly.* While excessively imparts the idea of undesirable surplus, exceedingly takes the quality stated to its zenith.

**excel.** So spelled—not *excell.* Cf. *dispel, expel & extol.*

**Current ratio: 90:1
excellence; excellency.** The differentiation between these terms is essentially complete. *Excellence* = the quality of being excellent. *Excellency* has been so narrowed in meaning that it functions today almost exclusively as a title for a high dignitary in government or the church <Would you like another, Your Excellency?>. This narrowing in sense had largely been accomplished by 1900.

**except, prep. & conj. A. As Preposition and Conjunction.** When *except* begins a phrase (with no finite verb) rather than a clause, it is a simple preposition not followed by the relative pronoun that <all people except farmers owning more than 500 acres> <no one must leave the room except with permission>. But when *except* as a conjunction introduces a clause (with a finite verb), it should be followed by that <call vice presidents are to receive a 10% bonus in compensation, except that no bonus on previous bonuses is allowed>. If a pronoun follows a prepositional *except*, the pronoun should be in the objective case, not the nominative—e.g.: “Everyone has been accounted for except he [read him].” If a pronoun follows a conjunctive *except* and serves as the subject of the clause's verb, it should be in the nominative case—e.g.: “He’s generally easygoing, except that he doesn’t tolerate laziness.” See PRONOUNS (A), (B).

**B. Excepting.** Except in the phrase not excepting, this word should not be used as a substitute for *except for* or *aside from*—e.g.: • “But rarely in the post World War II era, excepting [read aside from or with the exceptions of] the Netherlands during the ’70s and England’s championship team of 1966, do the outsiders make it past the semifinals.” Javier Solano, "History Favors the Latin Teams," *Orlando Sentinel,* 15 June 1994, at D10. (The interruptive phrase in that sentence might be improved a little by enclosing it in em-dashes. See PUNCTUATION (g). But it needs more work than that: the *Netherlands* aren’t an exception to the post–World War II era. The parts of the sentence are misassembled.)

• "But he remains unbeaten in 10 global championship sprint finals over the past seven years, excepting [read not including] the false start that ruled him out of the 100m final at the 2011 World Championships in Daegu." Martha Keiner, “Cheater Beater Bolt,” *Daily Mail,* 24 Aug. 2015, *Sport* §, at 78.

It’s true that *excepting* is one word, not two, and that it might be considered an acceptable dangling modifier (or “disguised conjunction”). (See DANGLERS (e.).) But many knowledgeable readers will disapprove of it as a dangler. And in any event, it’s less natural-sounding than the edited versions—which add one more word but no extra syllables.
exception, vb., = (1) to exclude; omit <present company excepted>; or (2) = to object; take exception <l except to that statement>. Sometimes, in one of the grossest errors that a published writer can commit (or a copy-editor miss), except is misused for accept—e.g.:

- “Why would these industries offer government officials gifts, unless it is to influence decisions in their behalf? Why do we need a full-fledged investigation? They either excepted [read accepted] the gifts or they didn’t!” “Officials Reap Profits of Their Influence,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 7 Sept. 1994, at A38.

- “On Monday, the phone starts ringing with heart-breaking stories about a father and son or daughter who just wanted to get in on a good hunt and excepted [read accepted] an invitation from a host they thought they could trust.”


### Stage 1: Ubiquitous but...

### Stage 2: Widely shunned.

### Stage 3: Rejected.

### Stage 4: Stage 5: Widespread but...

### Stage 6: Exceptionable as doublespeak for handicapped: Stage 3

### Stage 7: Exception proves the rule, the.

This phrase is the popular rendering of what was originally a legal maxim, “The exception proves (or confirms) the rule in the cases not excepted” (exceptio probat regulam in casibus non exceptis). Originally, exception in this maxim meant “the action of excepting”—not, as is commonly supposed, “that which is excepted”—so the true sense of the maxim was that by specifying the cases excepted, one strengthens the hold of the rule over all cases not excepted.

At least two spurious explanations of the exception proves the rule exist. One is that because a rule does not hold in all instances (i.e., has exceptions), the rule must be valid. This misunderstanding of the phrase commonly manifests itself in the discourse of those who wish to argue that every rule must have exceptions. A more sophisticated, but equally false, explanation of the phrase is that prove here retains its Elizabethan sense (derived from the Latin) “to test,” so that the sense of the phrase is that an exception to a rule “tests” the validity of the rule. This erroneous explanation appears, of all places, in Tom Burnam, A Dictionary of Misinformation 79 (1975).

By the way, the FMEU1 entry on this phrase is perhaps the only one in which the great H.W. Fowler is all but incomprehensible.

### B. Meaning “physically or mentally handicapped.”

The problem with using the word as a euphemism in this way is that it can result in ambiguity: exceptional can mean either “having above-average intelligence” (i.e., gifted) or “having below-average intelligence” (i.e., retarded). In passages such as the following, exceptional is symptomatic of doublespeak: “The Resource Directory also lists state and federal agencies that can assist parents with exceptional children.”


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exceptional as doublespeak for handicapped: Stage 3

### Exception proves the rule, the.

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### Exclusion Points.

See punctuation (1).

### Excludable; *excludible; *excludible. The standard form is excludable. See -able (A). Cf. includible.

### Exculpate; exonerate. Whereas the former has the primary sense “to free from blame or accusation,” the latter means literally “to free from a burden,” and only by extension is it synonymous with the former. See exonerate.

### Exculpatory; *exculpative. The latter is a needless variant. Cf. culpable & inculpable.

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exemplary punishment

execute, n. See alibi.

execute me; pardon me. Traditionally, execute me was used for minor offenses such as bumping into someone; pardon me was reserved for more serious situations requiring a more explicit apology. Today, the terms are interchangeable, execute me being slightly less formal. Sorry is even less so.

When the word me receives the stress, either pardon me or excuse me is used either as a mild challenge of someone else or as a polite waving off of someone else’s apology. When the first word is stressed in either phrase and an interrogative inflection is given, the sense is typically “What did you say?”

executor (= someone who is appointed in a will to administer a deceased person’s estate) is the standard spelling. *Executer is an obsolete variant. The word is pronounced with the accent on the second syllable: /ig-zek-ya-tor/. See trustee (b).

Current ratio (executor vs. *executor): 109:1

executrix. See sexism (d).

exegesis; epexegetics; eisegeges. Exegesis (/eks-a-jee-sis/), the usual term, means “explanation or exposition (as of a word or sentence).” The other two are rare. Epexegetics = the addition of a word or words to convey more clearly the meaning implied, or the specific sense intended, in a preceding word or sentence (OED). Eisegeges (i/-so-jee-sis/) = the interpretation of a word or passage by reading into it one’s own ideas (OED). But surely reading into—or some like phrase—is clearer.

Each of these terms forms the plural by changing the final syllable to -es; hence exegeses, epexegetes, and eisegeges.

exemplar. See example.

exemplary has two almost contradictory connotations: exemplary damages (better known as punitive damages) make an example out of a wrongdoer, whereas exemplary behavior is model behavior. Exemplary is sometimes misunderstood as meaning “severe” in phrases such as exemplary punishment. The meaning is always that the accompanying noun should set an example for others' behavior.

exemplification; *exemplum. See example.

exempli gratia. See e.g.

exert. See assert.

execute (/ek-see-ant/) [L. “they leave”], an Elizabethan stage direction, means that two or more actors leave the stage. (The corresponding singular in Latin is exit “he or she leaves.”) The phrase execute omnes means that all leave. Most people first see it in a Shakespeare play. And they often seem at once confused by it and tempted to use it—e.g.:


Of course, Shakespeare would never have used the word for a single player.

One reason people mistakenly use execute for one person may be that, in Elizabethan texts, it sometimes appears as if one person leaves the stage. Although Execute executioners is clear at the beginning of Act 4, Scene 1 in King John, Execute alone—at the end of that scene—isn’t. Hubert delivers a line to Arthur, and the direction Execute immediately appears. A reader who didn’t understand what Hubert said, that Arthur was to stick close by, might think that only Hubert left the stage at that point. But then Arthur isn’t in the next scene (he must have left!). Alas, readers don’t tend to keep stage directions as much in mind as they do dialogue.

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execute misused for exit: Stage 1

*ex-felon is an illogical expression—except, perhaps, in reference to a pardoned offender—because a convicted offender does not lose the status of felon merely by serving out a criminal sentence. Once a felon, always a felon. But ex-convict is quite all right, convict now being viewed as a close synonym of prisoner. The phrase *ex-felon was little used until the early 1960s.

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*ex-felon in the sense “a felon who has completed a sentence”: Stage 3

*exhale; *exhaust. Each is a misspelling of exalt. See exalt.

exhaustible. So spelled—not *exhaustible. See -ABLE (a).

Current ratio: 299:1

exhibit a tendency is wordy for tend. The verbose phrase occurs sometimes in the singular, sometimes in the plural—e.g.:

• “Patients with the disorder exhibit tendencies [read tend] to attack their therapists or others who are trying to help them, McEvoy said.” Warren Hastings, “Court Bars Disciplined of Psychologist,” Union Leader (Manchester, N.H.), 21 Mar. 1992, at 6.

• “Ruzimatov (now also deputy artistic director of the Kirov) still exhibits the tendency to flaring nostrils and tiresome rodomontade [read tends to flare nostrils and engage in tiresome rodomontade].” Sophie Constanti, “Kirov Ballet: London Coliseum,” Independent, 12 July 1995, Reviews §, at 12.


In the second example quoted, the suggested revision concededly uses as many words as the original, but the
result achieves a more logical parallelism by aligning the infinitives (to flare and (to) engage) rather than the nouns (nostrils and rodomontade). See buried verbs.

exhilarate is so spelled—not *exhilarate. Remember its etymological connection with hilarious.

Current ratio: 71:1

*exhorbitant. See exorbitant.

exigency; *exigence. The form ending in -cy is standard; the other is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 4:1

exigent; *exigeant. The first is the standard term meaning "requiring immediate action." *Exigeant is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 14:1

existence—often misspelled *existence—is commonly misused for inception, especially in the phrase *since its existence. E.g.:

• “It was an evenly matched series. They just had a little more pitching depth than us,” said player/coach Jeff Thompson, a former Pitt catcher who has served that role for Canonsburg since its existence [read beginnings],” David Assad, “Canonsburg Hopes Pitching Can Lead It to a Championship,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 11 June 1995, at W11.

• “Riyadh-based The Arab Investment Company (TAIC) has moved from a modest beginning to the pinnacle of its glory in 20 years since its existence [read inception],” Furqan Ahmed, “TAIC Moves On in Field of Investments,” Moneyclips, 10 Aug. 1995.

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*since its existence for since its inception: Stage 1

Current ratio (since its inception vs. *since its existence): 70:1

exit has been an acceptable verb since the early 17th century <they exited from the building about 3:00 AM>. Those who object to it on grounds that one does not “entrance” a building have a misplaced prejudice. But when used transitively, as opposed to intransitively with the preposition from, the verb typifies police talk—e.g.:

• “As traffic came to a standstill in both directions, these men exited their vehicles and became involved in a brief foot pursuit,” Letter of Master Police Officer Robert W. Mathieson, “Virginian-Pilot” (Norfolk), 26 July 1996, at 7.


exodus means “a mass departure or emigration.” Hence the common phrase *mass exodus is a redundancy, perhaps a venial one influenced by mass migration—e.g.: “On the streets, buses lined the curb, waiting for the mass exodus [read exodus] of fans after the game.” Kevin Mayhood, “Loyal Indians Fans Soak Up Playoff Atmosphere,” Columbus Dispatch, 4 Oct. 1995, at B2. As a corollary to that point, one person’s leaving does not make an exodus—e.g.: “Jones’ exodus [read exit] has sparked a discussion among university staffers and the deaf community over what went wrong with the training program.” Lynn O’Shaughnessy, “Student Concern Helped to Oust Leader at CSUN Center for Deaf,” L.A. Times, 27 Oct. 1985, § 2, at 8.

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*mass exodus for exodus: Stage 3

ex officio. See ex cathedra.

exonerate, in the sense “to free from responsibility or blame,” takes a person as an object. E.g.:


• “‘Young Sam’ is 50 and has spent much of his life trying to exonerate his father,” James Bradshaw, “Sheppard’s Attorneys Barred from Testifying,” Columbus Dispatch, 18 Nov. 1997, at C3.

The term is sometimes misused in either of two ways. First, it’s sometimes applied to a thing as opposed to a person, in the sense “to rule out (something) as a cause”—e.g.: “The cruise control and the electronic fuel injection system were exonerated [read ruled out as causes] when a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration study concluded in 1989 that there was no defect.” Helen Kahn, “Jury Clears 300ZX of Sudden Acceleration,” Automotive News, 1 Oct. 1990, at 39. Second, it’s sometimes misused for condone (= to overlook or disregard [an offense])—e.g.: “Included is a shocking segment in which Florida State football players essentially exonerated [read condone] Phillips’ conduct” Milton Kent, “After Ratings Famine, Browns Have a Feast Against Steelers,” Baltimore Sun, 30 Nov. 1995, at D2. Cf. exculpate.

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1. exonerate misused to mean “to rule out”: Stage 1

2. exonerate misused for condone: Stage 1

exorbitant (lit., “having departed or deviated from one’s track [orbit] or rut”) is sometimes mistakenly spelled *exhorbitant—perhaps because it is confused with exhort. E.g.: “The developers and tenants, however, insist the costs are far from exorbitant [read exorbitant].” Geeta Anand, “Mission Main Funds in Jeopardy,” Boston Globe, 6 May 1997, at B1.

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exorbitant misused for exorbitant: Stage 1

Current ratio: 87:1

exorcise (= to purge of something spiritually bad, esp. evil spirits) is so spelled in AmE. The preferred BrE...
spelling is *exorcize*. These preferences are the opposite of the usual ones (see "-ize"). The word is best pronounced /ek-sor-siz/ to distinguish it from *exercise*.

The malapropism of using *exercise* for *exorcise* conjures up an image of devils doing aerobics (or, if they are zombies, anaerobics)—e.g.:

- “The Barons *exercised* [read *exercised*] the demons that have sometimes plagued them when they faced Edison’s David Huff.” Ted Apodaca, “Barons Ride into Sunset,” *Orange County Register*, 9 May 2002, Sports §, at 1.

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*exorcise* misused for *exercise*: Stage 1

Current ratio (*exorcise* the evil vs. *exercise* the evil): 38:1

**exordium** (= a formal introduction to a writing) forms the plurals *exordiums* and *exordia*. The former might be considered preferable, but the two still vie for preeminence. See PLURALS (B).

Current ratio (*exordia* vs. *exordiums*): 2:1

**expatriate**; *expatriate*; *expatriot*. The latter is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio (*expatriate* vs. *expatriate*): 165:1

**expandable**; *expansible*; *expandible*. The first is the standard term. The second and third are NEEDLESS VARIANTS. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 227:16:1

**expatriate**; *expatriate*; *expatriot*. *Expatriate* (/eks-pay-shu-ayt/) means (1) “to wander”; or (2) “to discourse on (a subject) at length.” *Expatriate* (/eks-pay-tree-ayt/) means (1) “to leave one’s home country to live elsewhere”; or (2) “to banish; exile.”

*Expatriate* (/eks-pay-tree-it/) is also a noun meaning “a person who lives permanently in a foreign land.” It is sometimes mistakenly spelled *expatriot*, a form based on a misunderstanding of the root word. In fact, *expatriate* (L. ex- “out of” + patrie “native land”) is a fairly neutral word, but the mistaken form *expatriot* appears to attach some opprobrium—e.g.:

- “As they sat around San Diego’s Balboa Park, discussing the issue, the expatriates [read *expatriates*] realized that a large number of their town’s population of 3,500 lived in and around San Diego County.” Alfredo Corchado, “Importing Changes,” *Dallas Morning News*, 23 Sept. 1996, at A1.

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*expatriate* misspelled *expatriat*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 332:1

**expect** is informal or colloquial for *think* or *suppose*, as here: “I *expect* that it will take three weeks,” instead of “I think it will take three weeks.” Most properly, *expect* means “to look forward to and rely on.” See *anticipate*.

**expectancy**; *expectation*. Despite an overlap in actual use, the differentiation is clear-cut. *Expectancy* = that which is anticipated or forecast; something expected <a life expectancy of 70 years>. *Expectation* = the act or state of anticipating the occurrence of something <an expectation of high profits>. The most common error is to misuse *expectation* for *expectancy*—e.g. “The impairment must adversely affect life *expectation* [read *expectancy*] and not just the quality of life.” “Cash in the Magnificent 70s,” *Fin. Times*, 19 July 1997, at 21.

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*expectation* misused for *expectancy*: Stage 1

**expectorate** is a genteelism for *spit*, convenient for the writer fond of INELEGANT VARIATION, as in the first and second examples below—e.g.:

- “Carrey . . . spits so copiously that he covers himself and two other characters with dripping mucus. Of course, it wouldn’t be an Ace Ventura movie if he only *expectorated* [read *spat*]. First he has to snort long and loudly, in order to gather his mucus supply, which he seems to be drawing not only from the sinus area but from every inner bodily crevice.” Roger Ebert, “Call of the Vile,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 10 Nov. 1995, at 43. (For more on the past tense of *spit*, see *spit.*)
- “Brad Ausmus, the Padres’ leadoff man, adjusted his batting helmet and *spit* [read *spat*]. Catcher Dan Wilson *expectorated* [read *then spat*] between the bars of his mask and rifled the ball back to the mound.” David Casstevens, “Why, He’s the Spitting Image of . . . ,” *Ariz. Republic*, 1 Mar. 1996, at C1.

Sometimes, though, it can be used for good comical effect—e.g.: “Well, there is the rule against spitting in public places, which has been *expectorated* from the governmental maw on the grounds that it was widely violated and might ruin spring training if applied vigorously to ballplayers.” “Getting Rid of Ridiculous Rules,” *Tampa Trib.*, 30 June 1996, at 2.

**expedient** and *expeditious*. (The former is usual; *expeditious* is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.)

Current ratio: 11:1

**expediency**. A. And *expediency*. *Expediency* is usual; *expediency* is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 11:1

**B. And expedition.** *Expediency* (= consideration of what is politically convenient) is sometimes confounded with *expedition* (= promptness, haste). (The corresponding adjectives *expedient* and *expeditious* are likewise misused. See *expeditious*.) Mark Olshaker completed his book on the Unabomber 13 days after the capture of the suspect (later convicted), Theodore Kaczynski. But because the book’s coauthor was a former FBI agent, Olshaker had to submit the book to the FBI for a standard but prolonged review. On
the subject of the delay in publishing caused by the FBI’s review of the book, Olshaker was quoted: “If this is the F.B.I.'s idea of expediency [read expedition], then I can see why it took them 18 years to catch the Unabomber.” Doreen Carvajal, “The Long Unabom Manhunt Becomes a Paperback Sprint,” N.Y. Times, 2 May 1996, at A1.

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expediency misused for expedition: Stage 1

expedient. See expeditious.

*expeditious. See expeditious.

expedite. See spelling (A).

expedition. See expediency (B).

expeditious; expedient, adj.; *expediential. Expedi-
tious = quickly accomplished, prompt <an expeditious
decision>. Expedient = (1) desirable, advantageous <a
surprisingly expedient device for controlling a difficult
problem>; or (2) based on self-interest <the regent's
decision was politically expedient>. *Expediential is a
needless variant.

Expedient as a synonym for expeditious has long
been considered obsolete. Oddly, though, it persists
where expeditious would be better, probably in part
because of the sound of speed in the middle of expedi-
ent. In the following examples, notice that expedient
(= self-interested) suggests something rather different
from expeditious (= prompt):

- “Ask them if they got what they ordered. Did the builder
respond to their problems in an expedient [read expediti-
ous] fashion? Were the repairs satisfactory?” Sharon L.
Warzocha, “‘Walk-Through’ Is Buyer's Last, but Vital,
- “Clearly the government will have to act as expeditiously
[read expeditiously] as possible to deliver on housing and
jobs for blacks living in substandard conditions in the
towns and squatters' camps. ““A Peaceful Election
Bodes Well for New Era,” Dallas Morning News, 4 May
1994, at A32.
- “The people who work there are the friendliest and most
expedient [read expeditious] humans in the world.” Shan-

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expedient misused for expeditious: Stage 1

expel. So spelled—not *expell. Cf. dispel, excel &
extol.

Current ratio: 163:1

expend is a formal word that often seems less
appropriate than spend—e.g.:

- “It also provided procedures to document the threat and
do something about it before businesses expended [read
spent] time and money expanding and relocating.” “Con-
trolling Pollution,” Knoxville News-Sentinel, 21 Mar. 1996,
at A14.
- “Cosmic bowling is not the first time Brunswick has
expanded [read spent] time and energy giving bowling a
face lift.” David Young, “Brunswick Pins Down a Strategy,”
- “Accelerators and government chest-thumping about
entrepreneurship expend [read spend or, in this case, per-
hase waste] scarce tax dollars on public relations, notably
fancy websites and social-media campaigns, to remind
taxpayers how their money is being put to magnificent use
in 'innovation hubs.'” Neil Seeman, “‘Accidental’ Entre-
preneurs,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 22 Aug. 2015, at B5.

expense. v.t. In general use, this is an overblown sub-
stitute for spend and ought to be avoided. In account-
ing, though, it is a handy bit of jargon, distinguishing
a business operating cost whose benefit is immediate
rather than long-range from a capital purchase whose
benefit will continue over several years. E.g.:

- “If these products go into production, revenues could go
off the chart because, unlike Hollywood, characters and
concepts were expended at the time of their creation and
not amortized over time.” Stephen Pounds, “Big Entert-
ainment’s Big Plans,” Palm Beach Post, 30 June 1996,
at E1.
- “Goodwill is an intangible or artificial asset that can be
written off or expended over a number of years.” David
Shook, “High Court Ruling on Thrifts May Cost Taxpay-
ers $20 Billion,” Patriot Ledger (Quincy, Mass.), 2 July
- “The company has now expended $625 million to cover
the cost of the Ignition Compensation Fund, which has found
124 deaths caused by the defect.” Greg Gardner, “Color
GM Greener, UAW More Hopeful,” Detroit Free Press, 24

The word in this sense should be confined to account-
and contexts—not used as an overblown synonym for

expensive. Because the word means “high-priced,” the
phrase *expensive prices is a redundancy—e.g.:

- “Some travelers report expensive prices [read high prices]
in larger cities like Split and Zagreb where hotel rooms are
booked by United Nations and NATO officials and jour-
nalists.” Jim Simon, “Rebounding in War’s Wake,” Austin
- “We settled for a reserve chardonnay at the too expen-
sive price [read unduly high price] of $6.50 a glass.” M.F.
Onderdonk, “Winery Is Delicious Setting for a Meal at
Williamsburg Tavern,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 6 Oct.
1996, at F1.
- “Unsurprisingly, Manhattan soars with the most expen-
sive prices [read highest prices] in the city.” Amber Jamie-
son, “Realty $oar Points,” N.Y. Post, 16 Aug. 2015, News
§, at 2.

*experimentalize is a needless variant of experi-
ment on or experiment with—e.g.: “The sometimes
desperate attempt to experimentalize [read experi-
ment with] social topics resulted in laboratory experi-
ments that were sometimes rather poor caricatures of
the social phenomena to be investigated.” George
expediting could be viewed as growing exponentially. This word is not synonymous with rapid. Growth is exponential when the rate of growth increases over time. But a savings account with compound interest could be viewed as growing exponentially in a sense: the percentage growth of the balance over the original principal goes up every year, and at an ever-increasing rate. If the rate is 5% at simple interest, though, the balance will not increase rapidly. Yet writers frequently use exponential and exponentially as hyperbolic equivalents of rapid and rapidly—e.g.,

- “The exponential growth of spam also has spawned a number of software programs designed specifically to rid your inbox of junk mail.” David Einstein, “There’s No Sure Way to Eliminate Spam from Your Mailbox,” S.F. Chron., 13 Dec. 2001, at B4. (Note the redundancy in that sentence: all computer programs are software, and vice versa, so software programs is ill-advised.)

**explicable** should have the acute accent on the final letter to prevent confusion with the verb expose. E.g., “Investigative reports, following in the tradition of the muckrakers, are always looking for an expose [read exposé].” See **diacritical marks & garner’s law**.

**ex post facto** is slightly pompous but fairly common when used for **after the fact**. The phrase does have legitimate uses in the sense "retroactive" <ex post facto laws>. *Ex post for ex post facto is an odd ellipsis without literary legitimacy—e.g.: “As a rule, therefore, courts will not engage in ex post inquiries [read ex post facto inquiries] regarding the substantive fairness of contract terms.” Maureen B. Callahan, Note, “Post-Employment Restraint Agreements,” 52 U. Chi. L. Rev. 703, 704 (1985). Yet another strange shortening omits the ex—e.g.: “Finally, her charge that after rejecting his overtures she then was discriminated against in her lower-level state job seems a post facto [read an ex post facto or an after-the-fact] concoction by her lawyers.” Albert R. Hunt, “Politics & People: Jones v. Clinton,” Wall Street J., 29 May 1997, at A19.

The phrase was formerly spelled *ex post facto on occasion, but this spelling is archaic. Some writers hyphenate the term when it functions as a **phrasal adjective** <ex-post-facto reasoning>, but the hyphens are unnecessary in this **set phrase**.

In law, ex post facto and retroactive are distinguishable. Based on the historical usage of ex post facto law, the U.S. Supreme Court interprets the constitutional ban on them as applying specifically to crimes and punishments, not to civil statutes. That is, a person may not be convicted of an act that was not illegal when it was done. Nor may a person be sentenced to a harsher punishment than that which applied when the act was done. In some circumstances, though, a civil statute may apply retroactively.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *ex post for ex post facto: Stage 1*
2. *post facto for ex post facto: Stage 1*

**expound; propound.** Expound = to explain. Propound = to set forth; to put forward for consideration.
Both are best used transitively. In the best usage, one expounds an idea or doctrine—rather than expounding on it. Likewise, one propounds questions to a jury.

**express, adj.; expressed.** Both words are antonyms of implied, but as different parts of speech. As an adjective meaning “specific, definite, clear,” the word should be express—e.g.:  

- “The court found that although Criado was an at-will employee, ITT had created an expressed [read express] limitation on its right to fire any employee who followed the code of conduct.” Lisa Jenner, “Employment-at-Will Liability,” *HR Focus*, Mar. 1994, at 11.  

Express, then, is closely allied with explicit; implied, as the antonym, is closely allied with implicit. See implied & implicit.

As a verb, expressed is a past-tense or past-participial form of the verb express—e.g.: “Not only did he say good things, but he also said the right things and expressed the right concerns.” “Valvanò’s Toughest Challenge,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 29 Jan. 1989, at F3.  

**Express,** *adj.* (a). The first is the usual form in AmE, the second in BrE (closing up, in English, the Latin phrase *ex tempore*). The others are needlessly variants. **Express.** See express.  

**expressible.** So spelled—not *expressable.** See -ABLE (A).  

Current ratio: 98:1  

**expresso.** See espresso.  

**expropriate.** Though dictionaries are split between *extendable* and *extendible,* the *-able* spelling is much more natural-looking and much more common. It ought to be preferred. *Extensible,* surprisingly enough, has been the most common of these three adjectives since about 1800. It is especially common in metaphorical uses <extensible markup> and technical ones <extensible membranes>. See -ABLE (A).

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**exquisite.** *A. Pronunciation.* The word is better pronounced with the first syllable accented (/ek-skwiz-it/); in AmE, however, stressing the second (/ek-skwiz-it/) is acceptable.  

**Language-Change Index**  

**exquisite pronounced /ek-skwiz-it/ rather than /ek-skwiz-it/: Stage 5**

**B. Use.** Although there is historical justification for using *exquisite* (= acute) in reference to pain, modern readers are likely to find this use macabre at best, for they generally understand the word as meaning “keenly discriminating” <exquisite taste> or “especially beautiful” <an exquisite vase>. For many readers, the obsessionable sense is merely a misuse—e.g.: “Steve R., a sign painter, suffered such exquisite [read excruciating] pain in his ankle that he could barely walk.” Louise Continelli, “Learning to Control Chronic Pain,” *Buffalo News*, 6 Sept. 1994, Lifestyles §, at 1.

**extacy.** See ecstasy.  

**extant (= still existing) is preferably pronounced /eks-tant/, not /ek-stant/—but the latter pronunciation is at least acceptable in AmE.**

**extemporaneous; expemore, adj.; *extemporary; extemporal.** The first is the usual form in AmE, the second in BrE (closing up, in English, the Latin phrase *ex tempore*). The others are needlessly variants.

**extemporaneously; expemore, adv.** In AmE, the latter is the Latin-lover’s (or Anglophile’s) needlessly variant of the former. Like the adjective, the adverb *extempore* is usual in BrE.

**extemore, adj.; *extemporary.** See *extemporaneous.**

**extemorize.** See *temporize (B).**

**extendable; extendible; extensible.** Though dictionaries are split between *extendable* and *extendible,* the *-able* spelling is much more natural-looking and much more common. It ought to be preferred. *Extensible,* surprisingly enough, has been the most common of these three adjectives since about 1800. It is especially common in metaphorical uses <extensible markup> and technical ones <extensible membranes>. See -ABLE (A).
extension. So spelled—not *extension. For a similar misspelling (*dissention for dissension), see dissent, n.

Current ratio (extension vs. *extension): 997:1

extenuate (= to lessen the seriousness of [something bad] by partial excuse) should be used only of the fault that is minimized, not of the person who committed it. The OED cites improper uses (so labeled) such as “The pursuer’s steward . . . extenuated himself calmly enough,” in which the word is used as if it meant “to extenuate the guilt of; to plead partial excuses for” (OED).

extenuating circumstance (= a fact or situation that makes one’s actions seem more understandable and less blameworthy) is sometimes confused with attenuating circumstance (= an intervening event, including the passage of time, that weakens the connection between two other events). Both are usually legal phrases.

The first phrase is far more common than the second. In American legal contexts, an extenuating circumstance may reduce the severity of punishment. By extension, it denotes any situation that ameliorates some negative outcome that one expects or fears—e.g.: “Citing extenuating circumstances, officials said two players who do not technically meet Little League requirements as Harlem residents can play anyway.” Stephanie Saul & Joshua Robin, “Harlem League requirements as Harlem residents can play anyway.” Stephanie Saul & Joshua Robin, “Harlem

In European courts, attenuating circumstance is used in the same sense that extenuating circumstance is used in U.S. courts—e.g.: “According to precedents from the Nuremberg war crimes trial, a defense of following orders from higher authorities can be considered an attenuating circumstance for crimes committed in wartime.” Edward Cody, “French Court Asked to Sentence ‘Torturer’ Barbie to Life in Prison,” Wash. Post, 1 July 1987, at C1.

But in U.S. law, attenuating circumstance is used only when the prosecution is trying to get evidence admitted despite its connection with “tainted” evidence—material obtained by unconstitutional means. If the connection is direct, the second piece of evidence is suppressed. But if the connection is attenuated (weak or weakened), the second piece of evidence is admissible—e.g.: “In this case there were no attenuating circumstances to cure the lingering infirmity of the warrantless residential arrest.” “Police Version of Events Disbelieved; Arrest in Home Is Deemed Unlawful,” N.Y.L.J., 28 May 1996, at 25.

Because the terms sound similar, writers occasionally use attenuating where extenuating is the intended word. And here the problem seems even worse, attenuating being misused for aggravating: “The attenuating [read aggravating] circumstances that contributed to this staggering number of executions don’t help soften the shocking fact that we’re tops in our country and that we surpass, on a per capita basis, two nations that are notorious for their disregard for human life.” Raoul Carubelli, “Notorious Number,” Daily Oklahoman, 2 Jan. 2002, at A6. See double bobbles.

Language-Change Index

attenuate misused for aggravate: Stage 1

external. See extraneous.

extinguishment; extinction. Both words are nouns corresponding to the verb extinguish. Extinguishment usually refers to the process <extinguishment of the fire> and extinction to the resultant state <extinction of a species>. In financial contexts, it is common to refer to the extinguishment of debt.

extol (= to praise highly) is so spelled—e.g.: “Now [Justin] Raimondo runs a Web site called antiwar.com, in which he extols the good old days of the America First Movement.” Ronald Radosh, “The Red and the Brown,” Boston Globe, 13 Oct. 2002, at D1. The word is sometimes misspelled *extoll. Cf. dispel, excel & expel.

Occasionally the word is misused as if to mean “condemn highly”—e.g.: • “Unfortunately, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is publishing a new book in December, Guide to Your Child’s Sleep, that extols [read warns about] the dangers of the family bed. Fortunately, I know better, but I grieve for the new parents who will be sorely confused by this nonsense.” Peggy O’Mara, “It’s None of Their Business,” Mothering, 1 Nov. 1999, at 6.

• “The lyric extols [read decries] some of the evils in the world, but [Scott] Krippayne adds that what he thinks probably grieves God most is if we ‘grow numb to injustice.’” Deborah Evans Price, “Higher Ground”; Billboard, 19 May 2001, at 51.

• “She says hello to everyone she passes, extols [read condemns] the evils of development to those who will listen and marvels over the great blue herons and egrets as if she’s seeing them for the first time.” Kimi Yoshino, “Victory Lap of Sorts for Supporters of Bolsa Chica Wetlands Restoration,” L.A. Times, 19 Nov. 2001, Cal. §, pt. 2, at 4.

The word is pronounced /ik-stohl/.

Language-Change Index

extol misused for condemn or decry: Stage 1

*extorsive. See extortionate.

*extorter. See extortionist.

extortion; bribery. These terms are sometimes confused.

Extortion = (1) the corrupt obtaining of something of value by illegal means, such as force or coercion; or (2) the offense committed by a public official who illegally obtains something of value by using his or her office. Bribery = the giving or promising of something of value to an officer in return for corrupt behavior. If the briber takes the initiative, it is bribery; if the bribee takes the initiative, it is extortion.

extortionate; *extortionary; *extortive; *extorsive. Extortionate (= [1] given to or characterized by extortion; or [2] [of prices] exorbitant) has been the
standard term since the late 18th century. The others are needless variants. E.g.:

- "Phanor Arizabalaeta, considered No. 5 in the [Cali] syndicate, was convicted and sentenced for extorsive [read extortionate] kidnapping Tuesday by a regional judge in Cali, the chief prosecutor's office said." "Datelines," Deseret News (Salt Lake City), 16 Apr. 1997, at A4.
- "But last Saturday, the first day the museum was open to the public, attendees paid an extortionary [read extortionate] fee for an experience that, for many, was probably not all that different from their first sexual encounter—lots of buildup, and just like that, it's over." Kevin Canfield, "That Empty Feeling After New York's MoSex," Hartford Courant, 10 Oct. 2002, at D1.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 718:22:14:1

**extortionist; *extortioner; *extorter.** From 1750 until the 1960s, *extortioner* was standard and held the field. In 1968, *extortionist* surpassed it in AmE (in frequency of use in print sources, that is), and in 1990 the same thing happened in BrE. *Extortionist* is now standard. The others await their ransoms.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 19:12:1

**EXTRA-** (= lying outside the province or scope of) is a prefix that, during the 20th century, has formed hundreds of new adjectives—mostly for learned or literary purposes. The prefix has been adopted by many writers to form neologisms not yet found in unabridged dictionaries. These writers usually do no harm and, in fact, occasionally coin useful words. Following are four representative examples of 20th-century neologisms using this prefix—which, by the way, usually takes no hyphen:

- "This means that he studies telepathy, clairvoyance and other extrasensory phenomena, although, he explains, 'I don't have any parapsychological powers.'" Lynne Ames, "About Westchester," N.Y. Times, 4 Apr. 1982, §, 11, at 2.
- "In a 1966 HBR article, Felix Kaufman implored gen-

intrinsic

• extraneous

- *extraneous; extrinsic; external.* These words are closely related. *Extraneous* = (1) not essential or inherent <she used her discretion in adding some extraneous ingredients>; (2) not relevant <he talked at length about extraneous issues>; or (3) coming from outside <extraneous matter>.

**Extrinsic,** which shares senses 1 and 3 of *extraneous,* primarily means "not inherent"; it is the usual antonym of *intrinsic* (= belonging to the essential nature of something). E.g.: "[In] American culture, in [de Tocqueville's] view, . . . artistic standards would be determined not by the intrinsic quality of the art but by the extrinsic size of the audience," Robert Brustein, "The Decline of High Culture," New Republic, 3 Nov. 1997, at 29.

**External** means simply "outer, exterior." It's the usual antonym of *internal*—e.g.: "Just as controversy embroiled its birth, the state of Israel is again racked by internal divisions and external dilemmas with its 50th anniversary fast approaching." Storer H. Rowley, "Anniversary Prompts Soul-Searching," Chicago Trib., 29 Nov. 1997, at 4.
extraordinary is preferably pronounced with five syllables (/ek-stro-ði-nor-eel/), not six (/ek-stror-ði-nor-eel/). See pronunciation (b).

extricate; extract. One extracts (= draws forth) something from a person or a thing. One extricates (= removes) a person (or, rarely, a thing) from a tangled encumbrance or situation.

extricative refers to a monetary amount the correct word is ant.

extrovert (= one whose interests are outwardly directed for the most part, often tending toward social activities) is now accepted as the standard spelling. *Extravert, though modeled directly on the German loanword, has been nothing but a variant in English since the mid-1920s.

This is unfortunate in a way, because extrovert is a morphological deformity, the -o- having come from a misguided attempt at paralleling introvert. (See introvert.) The Latin prefixes are intro- and extra-. But it’s now too late: the forms are set in English.

exuberant. A. And exorbitant. Exuberant = (1) having extremely high spirits; gushingly enthusiastic; or (2) flamboyant; overelaborate. Exorbitant = exceeding a reasonable or appropriate amount. Although some dictionaries record an extra sense for exuberant (also “extreme” or “very great”), when the adjective refers to a monetary amount the correct word is exorbitant—e.g.:


- “Empty stands translate to fans saying we are not going to pay exuberant [read exorbitant] prices to watch whiny high-priced, watered-down talent.” Gregg Ebertt, “Empty Seats Tell Story of Baseball,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 8 May 1997, at B4.


B. Misspelled. Exuberant is fairly commonly misspelled *exuberant—e.g.:

- “The little Church of the Resurrection on the Catherine Canal, with its nine domes and its enamels, mosaics, and gilding in the exuberant [read exorbitant] Russian seventeenth-century style, strikes one as a curiosity imported from abroad.” Clarence Brown, Mandelstam 10 (1973).


C. Exuberant misspelled *exuberant. Exuberant misspelled *exuberant: Stage 1 Current ratio: 449:1

exult makes the noun exultation. But there are two needless variants: *exultance and *exultancy. E.g.:

- “There is a quality of complete technical proficiency, every movement controlled and finished, and an exultance [read exultation] in dance for its own sake—even before it is harnessed to the service of choreography.” Mary Clarke, “The Gift of Graft,” Guardian, 3 Mar. 1994, Features §, at 7.

- “There is no place like it, no place with an atom of its glory, pride, and exultancy [read exultation].” Alexander Wolff, “Last Spring, the Newly Unretired Michael Jordan Lit Up Manhattan,” Sports Illustrated, 13 Nov. 1995, at 108.

For the difference between exult and exalt, see exalt.

eying; *eying. The first is the preferred spelling.

eye of the storm. This allusion refers to the center of a tropical storm, which is remarkable for its calm winds and blue skies. Writers usually employ the phrase accurately to denote serenity in the midst of chaos—e.g.: “In Eye of Storm, [Tony] Dungy Calmly Sails to Victory.” Headline, Baltimore Sun, 5 Feb. 2007, Sports §, at D1.

But often, the sense is just the opposite, denoting a state of chaos at the center of a raging controversy—e.g.: “Fast forward to the 2000 presidential election, with Harris in the eye of the storm [read center of the controversy]—vilified as a witch, praised as a hero, both of which were undeserved.” Thomas Tryon, “Katherine Harris’ Own Party Had a Key Role in Her Swift Descent,” Sarasota Herald-Trib., 12 Nov. 2006, at F1.

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   eye of the storm misused to mean “center of controversy”; Stage 1

eyes peeled. The phrase is so spelled, though some erroneously make it *eyes peeled—e.g.:

- “The mug can be lifted to the mouth, a necessity during or, better, fixed on the television and not watching where soup may be dripping.” Jo Northrop, “Filling Mugs with Meals,” Wash. Post, 26 Jan. 1983, at E10. (Fixed is the better choice because the cliché [eyes peeled] means “watchful, not focused.”)


- “They will keep your eyes peeled [read peeled or, better, glued] to the sky as they perform their formation flying routine.” “Radio Control Flying Circus to Land at Butler County Airport,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 2 July 2015, at S6.

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   *eyes peeled for eyes peeled: Stage 1 Current ratio (eyes peeled vs. *eyes peeled): 72:1

eyewitness is spelled as one word, not two. Avoid *eyeball witness—e.g.: “Eyeball witnesses [read Eyewitnesses]” can estimate the speed of a car in an accident or the value of the family home or other owned real estate. For the most part, however, the law confines people to testimony about what they actually

Sometimes, of course, the folksy phrase can be humorous—e.g.: “A number of readers wrote to assure me that horned toads when threatened can indeed shoot blood from their eyes. The trick was seen by eyeball witnesses—early Spanish explorers to modern scientists.” Kent Biffle, “Hunting the Toad?” Dallas Morning News, 29 Apr. 2001, Texas & SW §, at A45.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*eyeball witness* for *eyewitness*: Stage 1
Current ratio (*eyewitness* vs. *eyeball witness*): 4,009:1

eyrie (= [1] the nest of a predatory bird, esp. one built on a crag or precipice, [2] the brood within such a nest, or [3] by extension, a human habitation, whether hovel or fortress, in a high place) has long been the standard spelling in all varieties of English. In the 18th century, the spelling was *aery*, or sometimes *eery*. In the 19th and 20th centuries, *aerie* became fairly common, especially in AmE. Although *eirie* has predominated almost universally since about 1850 in English-language print sources, American lexicographers have tended to list the main headword at *aerie*. But so does the OED, which notes that “the spelling *eirie* seems to have been introduced by [Henry] Spelman” in a glossary of 1664 “to support his notion of its derivation from egg.” Yet because no etymology for this word is certain—*W11* suggests a relation to the Vulgar Latin *agrüm* “nest”—the lexicographers have avoided the *eirie* spelling. As the OED remarks under *E*, this is “now the commonest spelling.” Regardless of the spelling, the word is either /air-ee/ or /eerr-ee/.

Current ratio (*eirie* vs. *aerie* vs. *aery* vs. *eery*): 10:5:3:1

**F**

**facade** is pronounced /fә-sahd/. Today the cedilla beneath the -c- (facade) is usually dropped. See DIACRITICAL MARKS.

**facet**, vb., makes **faceted** and **faceting** in AmE and BrE alike. Facetted and facetting are secondary variants. See SPELLING (8).

**face up to.** See PHRASAL VERBS.

**facile** /fas-әl/. Always meaning “easy” in one sense or another, this word may connote either proficiency or shallowness. The writer must achieve clarity through context. Sometimes the word connotes the ease that comes with artistic mastery—e.g.: “Nicolai Dobrev played the jester, a noble baritone with a facile instrument.” Keith Powers, “Teatro Lirico Shines in Performance of Dark Verdi Comedy,” Boston Herald, 30 Mar. 2002, Arts & Life §, at 26. More often, it connotes tiniteness or oversimplification—e.g.: “But most mental health experts say closure is no holy grail, only rendered so by people seeking facile solutions to complex problems.” Samar Farah, “Lots of People Are Looking for It. But What Exactly Do They Hope to Find?” Christian Science Monitor, 28 Mar. 2002, Features §, at 13.

**facilitate** (= to aid, help, ease) is a FORMAL WORD to be used sparingly because it is often jargonistic. So is the agent noun **facilitator** (= helper; teacher; seminar leader), as the telltale quotation marks in the following examples suggest:

- “Poking fun at a system that calls teachers ‘facilitators’ and uses the euphemism ‘extensions’ for homework is just too easy,” Mark Pino, “Celebration’s a Spot for Fun in a Fishbowl,” Orlando Sentinel, 20 Dec. 1996, Osceola §, at 1.
- “The seminar’s two ‘facilitators’—doctors who are present only to nudge the deliberations in certain directions—ease the students through the various options, trying to get them to understand that it is not enough for a doctor to simply diagnose DKA caused by patient noncompliance.” Jim Atkinson, “So Much to Learn, So Little Time,” Texas Monthly, Jan. 1997, at 118.

As H.W. Fowler and others have noted, it’s better to write that an action rather than the actor is facilitated (FMEU1 at 164). Hence The return of refugees must be facilitated by the international community, not *Refugees must be facilitated in their return by the international community.* Of course, using active voice facilitates framing a better sentence: The international community must facilitate the return of refugees. See PASSIVE VOICE.

**facilitator.** See VOGUE WORDS.

**facility.** This word is surplusage in phrases such as jail facility and museum facility—e.g.: “Airports that aren’t well-served by airline clubs or that don’t have major hotel facilities [read hotels] nearby will put in conference rooms of their own, he predicted.” Carol Smith, “Companies Meet Each Other at the Airport,”
L.A. Times, 20 July 1995, at D5. And sometimes the word is a euphemism for building—e.g.: "The Fort Lauderdale development firm that bought the rest of the mall complex 16 months ago—including the main mall facility [read building], a nearby strip shopping center and the former Sam's Wholesale Club building—is studying redevelopment plans." Catherine Crowner, "'Demalling' for Economic Survival," Fla. Times-Union, 28 Oct. 1996, at 10. On the variation between facility and building in that sentence, see inelegant variation.

Not only is facility often unnecessary; it has also become virtually meaningless. The word is so abstract that it refers to just about anything, from an Olympic village to a toilet.

facsimile transmission. See fax.

fact, adj. See factual.

fact, n. A fact of the matter. This flotsam phrase occasionally serves well in speech—to fill up space while the speaker thinks of what to say next—but generally has no justification in writing.

Current ratio (fact is that vs. *fact of the matter is that): 8:1

B. Fact that. It is imprudent to say, as some have, that this phrase should never be used. At times it cannot reasonably be avoided <they ignored the fact that all the elections had been against them>. One writer has suggested that because will usually suffice for the fact that. Vigilans [Eric Partridge], Chamber of Horrors 63 (1952). Yet rarely, if ever, is a good substitute for that phrase (as opposed to the longer phrase because of the fact that)—e.g.: "The fact that singer-songwriters like Sarah McLachlan and Jewel have managed to break through the homogenized slop that record companies are distributing does not mean that music or women have been liberated." Letter of Elizabeth Van Rij, "'The Gals Take Over,' Time, 11 Aug. 1997, at 5.

When the fact that can easily be avoided, it should be—e.g.: "Aniston, who still admits a yen for Big Macs and mayo-on-white-bread sandwiches, objects to the fact that [read the way] 'Hollywood puts pressure on women to be thin.'" Samantha Miller & Craig Tomashoff, "Jennifer's Prime Time," People, 11 Aug. 1997, at 98. (See flotsam phrases.) But sometimes it's all but inescapable—e.g.: "He has learned to laugh again at little ironies, such as the fact that he, unlike several of his rescuers, did not get poison ivy that day." Don Colburn, "Robert Griffith Lost One Leg in a Construction Accident on August 17th," Wash. Post, 23 Sept. 1997, at Z12.

C. In actual fact. Apart from being a moderate pomposity for possibility as this phrase is a redundancy: all facts are actual, just as they are all true (see (e)). When one is uncertain of the truth of allegations, then there might be "alleged facts," as opposed to "actual facts." Aside from that situation, though, shun the phrase in formal prose. Teall's 1940 ruling still holds:

Open to challenge in writing supposed to be done with skill and deliberation, the expression [in actual fact] is entirely pardonable in ordinary conversation or in familiar writing. It is used to emphasize the reality of the stated fact. The word 'fact' has become very weak." Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work 277 (1940).

D. In point of fact. This phrase is verbose for in fact or actually—e.g.: "In point of fact [read In fact], as Michael Waller notes on today's Op-ed page, Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin specifically warned Vice President Gore in a letter against rushing the process with other countries before ratification by the two most important signatories, Russia and the United States." "Don't Rush the Chemical Weapons Treaty," Wash. Times, 4 Mar. 1997, at A20.

E. *True facts. This is a common redundancy, especially in legal writing—e.g.: • "Two Sandwich teachers accused of showing a sexually explicit foreign film to a class of seventh-graders say they have done nothing wrong and are being fired from their jobs without the true facts [read facts or truth] of the incident being revealed." Tom Farmer, "'2 Teachers Who Showed Racy Movie Crying Foul,'" Boston Herald, 20 Nov. 1997, at 18.

• "But it's a true fact [read fact] that my maternal grandmother was sent to her grave by the egg salad at a Methodist church picnic." C.W. Gusewelle, "Don't Try to Snuff Out Stuffing," Kansas City Star, 25 Nov. 1997, at B2.

• "Has he forgotten that Japanese schoolchildren are still not being taught the true facts [read truth] of what happened in the Far East during that dreadful period in history?" Campbell Thomson, "Japan Must Stop the Airbrushing of History If Progress Is to Be Made," Herald (Glasgow), 7 July 2015, at 15.

Writers debase the word when they qualify facts with an adjective like true or incorrect. We ought to be able to rely on the facts being facts, instead of having to wonder whether the writer failed to describe what kind of facts they are. Cf. (c) above.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*true facts for facts: Stage 2
Current ratio (the facts vs. *the true facts): 136:1

factional; factious; fractious. These words are confusingly similar. Factional = of, relating to, or involving a faction or factions. E.g.: "Factional fighting has dragged the people of Somalia's capital back to the darkest days of the civil war in 1992." Greg Barrow, "300 Killed in Somalia's Week of War," Guardian, 20 Dec. 1996, at 12. Factious = given to faction; acting for partisan purposes. E.g.: "Louisiana Democrats are factious as well. Their division is largely along racial lines." Jack Wardlaw, "GOP Renewal," Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 18 Aug. 1996, at B7. Fractious = refractory, unruly, fretful, peevish. E.g.: "Perhaps . . . [Jewish and Christian] cultures and traditions are not really that far apart. After all, we all get frayed and fractious at Christmas." "Let Children Sing Carols and Light the Menorah," Independent, 20 Dec. 1996, at 17.

factitious; fictitious. Both have the basic sense "artificial." Factitious = (1) produced artificially by human
intervention; not natural; or (2) produced by contrivance; sham. Sense 1 tends to be confined to technical contexts—e.g.: “Factitious panniculitis, caused by self-injury, constitutes a real prospect when the patient appears to have undue secondary gain from the ailment.” Henry Schneiderman, “Young Woman with Spots on Shins,” Consultant, July 1996, at 1501. Sense 2 appears in nonspecialized writing—e.g.: “At first I thought the comment was factitious, but the anger and emotion on his face indicated otherwise.” Jim Monaghan, “‘Last Man Standing’ Campaign Tactic Is Killing Colorado Politics,” Denver Post, 2 Nov. 1996, at B7.

Factitious = imaginary; not real. For the difference between fictitious and its two close allies, fictional and fictive, see fictional.

Factitious disorder. For this phrase as a euphemism for malingering, see euphemisms.

Factlet. See factoid (b).

Fact of the matter. See fact (A).

Factoid. A. Contradictory Senses. Factoid = (1) an assertion that, although widely accepted as factual, is not or may not be true; or (2) an isolated, usu. surprising fact; an interesting bit of trivia. Sense 1 dates from the early 1970s. A decade later, sense 2 arose with the launch of USA Today. Some people object to this sense because the -oid suffix generally denotes a resemblance to something but not the thing itself (e.g., a humanoid isn’t human; an asteroid isn’t a star; an ovoid is shaped like—but isn’t—an egg; etc.).

Norman Mailer seems to have coined the term in his 1973 biography Marilyn to mean “a fact that has no existence before appearing in a magazine, newspaper, or other mass-media outlet.” It was this original sense that the speaker here quoted had in mind: “‘Washington at the moment is full of factoids, unsubstantiated statements repeated often enough that they take on the color of facts,’ said Malcolm Wallop, a Wyoming Republican.” Susan F. Rasky, “Decision on Tower as Elusive as Facts,” N.Y. Times, 13 Feb. 1989, at B6.

But in the early 1980s the term was appropriated by USA Today for the kind of easy-to-digest news element that is the hallmark of that paper and later media such as CNN Headline News. The transformation in the public’s perception of the word factoid was almost instantaneous, as this quotation—made a week after USA Today began publishing—attests:

To read USA Today is to subject oneself to information overload. In charts, boxes, graphs, lists, roundups, maps, it subjects the reader to a bombardment of facts. That most of them are of absolutely no moment is not the point; USA Today understands that Americans love information, statistics, trivia—that they mistake data for knowledge, gossip for news—and it offers all in abundance. Reading it is a numbing, exhausting experience, so relentless is the onslaught of factoids.


Today sense 2 is nearly universally and must be accepted as standard—e.g.:

- “It’s filled with interesting factoids: ‘Beadin’ A Path to Buffalo’ is covered with 75,000 glass beads; the ‘Penny for Your Thoughts’ used 20,300 pennies; and ‘Chia Buffalo’ drinks more water than a live buffalo ever would.” Paula Voell, “Just Buffalo,” Buffalo News, 21 Nov. 2000, at D1 (referring to various works of art).


- “Factoid: One part per million equates to one second in 11 1/2 days. One part per billion equates to one second in 32 years. And one part per trillion is the same as one second in 32,000 years.” San Diego Union-Trib., 13 Dec. 2000, at F2.

FACTOID

Factoid in reference to an interesting fact: Stage 5

Factlet

123:1 Factor, n., traditionally means “an agent or cause that contributes to a particular result.” By slipshod extension, it has taken on the sense “a thing to be considered; an event or occurrence.” It’s often a symptom of verbosity—e.g.: “The index rates suppliers according to factors including [read by their] flexibility and their importance to the business.” John Riley, “Top Suppliers Score Low in TIF User Poll,” Computer Weekly, 20 May 1999.

not *factota. (See PLURALS (b).) But some writers use the Latin plural as an affectation—e.g.:

- “The presence of the factota [read factotums] of the new world order on Egyptian soil will be seen as approval . . . of Cairo’s indiscriminate war against its own Islamic extremists.” “Sharm School,” New Republic, 1 Apr. 1996, at 8.
- “All of [read All] the attempts were made by factota [read factotums] who didn’t reveal they were working on a book for Sommers.” Alex Beam, “Atlantic Piece Takes Swipe at Harvard Prof,” Boston Globe, 19 May 2000, at D1.

The word is pronounced /fak-tuh-tam/.

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*factota* for *factotums*: Stage 1

Current ratio (factotums vs. *factota*): 19:1

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**fact that.** See fact (n).

**factual; fact, adj.** In phrases such as fact(ual) question, the longer form is preferable. The phrase question can be slightly jarring; more important, it can mislead readers. In the following sentence, for instance, the use of factual would have circumvented the reader’s thinking either that fact is a noun or that existence of fact is an unhyphenated PHRASAL ADJECTIVE: “The court held that the existence of fact issues [read existence of factual issues] made summary judgment inappropriate.” “Individual Rights,” Conn. Law Trib., 23 Aug. 1993, at L9.

The sentences that follow illustrate the better usage:


Notably, factual has two meanings: (1) “of or involving facts” <factual issue>; and (2) “true” <a factual depiction>. Sense 1 is the one that appears in phrases such as factual finding and factual question. Sense 2 appears in phrases such as factual account and factual narrative—e.g.: “All in all, ‘The Woman Behind the Myth’ offers a good factual account of Evita’s life—but no great insight.” A&E’s ‘Evita’ Combines Woman with Myth,” Charleston Gazette, 19 Dec. 1996, at D8.

**faecal.** See fecal.

**faerie** = (1) fairytale; or (2) a fairy. Sense 1 is archaic, sense 2 unnecessary except as a fancy spelling. Because the word isn’t generally needed, the variant spelling *faery* (to be avoided) merits only the barest mention.

**faint, vb.; feint, vb.** Both verbs are pronounced /faynt/. To faint is to lose consciousness suddenly after experiencing a temporary decrease of blood to the brain <he faints at the sight of blood>. To feint is to make a movement signaling one action before taking another <the boxer feinted with his left and then struck with his right>.

**fair. A. And fare.** Properly an adjective or noun, fair is sometimes misused for the verb fare (= [1] to experience good or bad fortune or treatment; or [2] to happen or turn out)—e.g.:

- “While [Tim] Couch didn’t fair [read fare] too badly at Cleveland’s recent mini-camp, the most impressive rookie was running back Madre Hill.” Alex Marvez, “Enshrining Elway Will Have to Wait,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 2 May 1999, at C24.

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Fare misused for fare: Stage 1

Current ratio (fared well vs. *faired well*): 23:1

**B. Bid fair.** For the past tense of this PHRASAL VERB, see bid (A).

**Fairbanksian; Fairbanksian.** The first is standard. The second is a variant form for the noun—but it is standard as an adjective <Fairbanksian weather>. See DENIZEN LABELS.

**fait accompli (= something accomplished and not now changeable),** from French, makes the plural faits accomplis. E.g.: “But in the view of the palace, by presenting her demands as faits accomplis, Diana was limiting Charles’s room to bargain.” Jerry Adler & Daniel Pedersen, “Diana’s Battle Royal,” Newsweek, 11 Mar. 1996, at 20. See PLURALS (b).

The singular and plural forms are pronounced identically: /fay t a-kom-plee/ or /fet a-kom-plee/.
1965, those associated with that team have used the /fall/ pronunciation. And the /fawl/ version has largely fallen into disuse except by some fans of movies such as The Maltese Falcon and Star Wars (with Han Solo's Millennium Falcon).

*falderol. See folderol.

fall through the cracks. The cracks in this idiom are the openings between slats, as on a boardwalk. Things can fall through the cracks, but nothing can fall between them, because that's where the slats are. Yet the idiom is often mangled into the illogical *fall between the cracks—e.g.: • "But Mr. Ball argued that the program reaches a segment of the population that normally falls between [read through] the cracks.” Sally Brady & Leslie Koren, "Jail Not Sole Option for Drunkards," Wash. Times, 21 Dec. 1998, at C7.

• "King said her priority is helping students in regular classes, who she said often fall between [read through] the cracks.” "In Brief," Wash. Post, 27 Mar. 2002, at B3.


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*fall between the cracks for fall through the cracks:

Stage 3

Current ratio (fall through the cracks vs. *fall between the cracks): 3:1

false, in a phrase such as false statement, is potentially ambiguous, since the word may mean either "erroneous, incorrect" or "purposely deceptive.”

On false as a noncomparable adjective, see adjectives (b).

False Comparison. See illogic (b).

falsehood; falseness; falsity. Falsehood = (1) an untrue statement; a lie (many falsehoods were uttered during the campaign); or (2) the act or practice of lying <truth and falsehood became difficult to distinguish>. Falseness = (1) the quality of being untrue <the speech carried an air of falseness>; or (2) tendency to lie; deceitfulness <falseness of character>. Falsity is synonymous with sense 1 of either word (although more commonly with falseness), but it appears too frequently to be labeled a needless variant.

fanatic; fanatical. Fanatic is either a noun or an adjective; fanatical is exclusively an adjective. For purposes of differentiation, it would be best to reserve fanatic for its noun sense. In actual usage, however, this distinction isn’t always followed—e.g.: • "The words zealot, assassin and thug all derive from historic fanatic [read fanatical] movements within, respectively, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism.” Robin Wright, "The Extremists," L.A. Times, 6 Nov. 1995, at A12. (In that sentence, historic should almost certainly be historically—that is, movements that have historically been fanatic—unless the sense is historic movements that have been fanatical, in which case the original is poorly worded.)


• "If the people who are fanatic [read fanatical] about such things start passing laws and regulations that prevent the rest of us from pursuing our consumer preferences for less chic but also less expensive food, that's quite something else.” William Watson, “The $2 Tomato,” Nat'l Post (Can.), 18 Aug. 2015, at 11.


Current ratio: 3:1

*fantasm. See phantasm.

fantasy; *phantasy. The first has been the preferred spelling in both AmE and BrE since the late 19th century.

Current ratio: 20:1

far be it from . . . Because from is a preposition, and the next word in the phrase is the object of that preposition, what follows must be in the objective case—e.g.: "Oh, far be it from we [read us] mere mortals to question a good thing.” “Hello-ooo, Thanks for Giving Us Poolside,” Peoria J. Star, 16 Nov. 2001, at A4. See pronouns (b). See also subjunctives.

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*far be it from we for far be it from us: Stage 1

*far distance is a redundancy. In most contexts, each word implies the other. A more idiomatic phrasing is always available—e.g.: • "Unlike a methadone clinic where people travel from far distances [read long distances] for heroin-addiction treatment, the community health clinics would be regular doctors’ offices.” Meredith Carlson, “Clinics Will Be Tough Sell with New Britain Council,” Hartford Courant, 2 Dec. 1994, at B1.

• “Down on the field, he could see Tampa Bay Coach Jon Gruden snarling as always with his mouth simple to read even from such a far distance [read distance].” Les Carpenter, “In New Orleans, a Reassuring Voice,” Wash. Post, 25 Sept. 2006, at E11.

• “In Morocco, a goatherder gives a hunting rifle to his sons and, while practicing in the hills, one of the boys fires at a tourist bus winding down the road in the far distance [read distance].” David Ansen, “As the World Burns,” Newsweek, 30 Oct. 2006, at 64.

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*far distance for long distance: Stage 2

Current ratio (long distance vs. *far distance): 6:1
fare. A. As a Noun. Because this word, in one of its senses, means “food,” the phrase *food fare* is a silly redundancy—e.g.:  

- “It takes little effort to incorporate pears into your holiday and *winter food fare* [read food or fare or cooking].” Bob Longino, “A Pear For All Seasons,” Atlanta J.-Const., 13 Nov. 1997, at H1.
- “Adam Leu said the original idea was to have light *food fare* [read fare] for those using the play area.” Jeff Barron, “More than a Restaurant,” Lancaster Eagle-Gaz. (Ohio), 26 July 2015, at M2.

B. As a Verb. See fair (A).

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*food fare* for *fare*: Stage 1

**far-flung; far-fetched.** These adjectives are, literally speaking, etymological opposites—*far-flung* literally meaning “flung (i.e., cast) a long distance” and *far-fetched* meaning “fetched (i.e., retrieved) from afar.” Of course, both terms are now used almost exclusively in their figurative senses. *Far-flung* means “wide-spread” or “remote”; *far-fetched* means “improbable” or “strained.”

Some dictionaries make *far-fetched* a single word, without the hyphen. Although that may signal the future of this term, it isn’t now the predominant form in any variety of literary English.

**farrago** (= a confused or jumbled mixture; hodge-podge) is pronounced /fə-ray-go/ or /fə-rah-go/ and makes either of two plurals: *farragoes, farragos.* Although -oes is the traditional plural, it has given way to -os in the 1950s in AmE and in the 1960s in BrE. See plurals (d).

Current ratio (farragos vs. farragoes): 2:1

**far-reaching.** One of our most overburdened adjectival phrases, this otiose metaphor should be used cautiously. The phrase should always be hyphenated—e.g.: “In a move with *far-reaching* significance in the battle over American military bases in Japan, the Supreme Court here ruled unanimously today that the central Government has the authority to seize private land so that it can be used by United States forces.” Nicholas D. Kristoff, “Japanese Court Rules Government Can Seize Land for U.S. Bases,” N.Y. Times, 29 Aug. 1996, at A17.

**farther; further.** Both are comparative degrees of *far.* *Further* is much more ubiquitous than *farther* in everyday speech and writing. But the two have undergone some degree of differentiation. In the most punctilious usage, *farther* is thought to refer only to physical distances, *further* only to figurative distances—e.g.:  

- “[Chad] Johnson has taken the florid displays of flanking ego even *farther,* briskly predicting victories, à la his idol Muhammad Ali, and once sending Pepto Bismol to an opposing secondary before a game.” Karl Taro Greenfield, “It’s Good to Be Chad,” Sports Illustrated, 30 Oct. 2006, at 58.

In BrE, *farther* is typically both physical and figurative, whereas *further* is generally physical only. But some writers fail to observe the point—e.g.: “In a move [that] goes *farther* [read further] than anything the Conservatives have proposed, a Labour government will set up a new, independent watchdog, the General Teaching Council.” Charles Reiss & Howard Smith, “Labour Will Sack the Bad Teachers Says Blair,” Evening Standard, 26 July 1994, at 17.

The superlatives—*farthest* and *furthest*—follow the same patterns. *Furthest* is a fairly rare equivalent of *farthest* (not *furthest*)—e.g.: “The National Park Service administers the monument located about 65 miles northwest of Gillette, in Wyoming’s *furthest* [better: *farthest*] corner of Crook County.” Christopher Smith, “Tribes Say Devils Tower Is No Name for a Pious Peak,” Salt Lake Trib., 4 Sept. 1996, at A1. Sometimes it is used where it shouldn’t be—e.g.: “That was the *furthest* [read *furthest*] thing from [the company’s] mind.” Eli Setencich, “Co-op Is Reaping Fruits of Generosity,” Fresno Bee, 30 Sept. 1996, at B1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX  
1. *further* for physical distances: Stage 4 Current ratio (traveled farther vs. traveled *further* in AmE): 2:1  
2. *farther* for figurative distances: Stage 2 Current ratio (read *farther* vs. *read* further): 19:1

**fascia** (/fash-ee-a/ or /fash/-a/ or /fash-/) = (1) a flat strip or band, such as an architectural joint covering or a piece of molding around a doorway; (2) a distinct band of color, esp. in a multicolored spectrum; or (3) a thin layer of tissue that encases or connects muscles, organs, and bones. Pl. *fascias or fasciae.* The plural *fasciae* (/fash-i-ee/) is much more frequent in anatomy (sense 3), *fascias* in all other senses. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (fasciae vs. fascias): 5:1

**fascitis.** See plantar fasciitis.

**fast.** For the use of this word in opposite senses, see contronyms. For the needless variant *fastly,* see fastly.

**fasten**, like *glisten, listen,* and *often,* has a silent -t:- */fas-an/.*

*fastly,* an obsolete form, now exists only as a non-word, since fast serves as both adverb and adjective.
Even so, writers occasionally perpetrate sentences with phrases such as *the fastly held rule and *fastly becoming so. In the first, firmly would serve better; in the second, fast. Journalists have gone quite far with this unnecessary adverb—e.g.:

- “The new owner said he is keeping the original building, even though it may have been less expensive to build a new one, in order to preserve one of the few remaining ties to the past in the fastly changing northwest suburbs.” Jim Michalski, “Fan Helps Keep Pizza Parlor Alive,” Chicago Trib., 4 July 1989, at D2.
- “And thus, with election time fastly [read fast] approaching, it may have to pay the consequences of accepting Mao’s forecast.” James Hill, “Taiwan’s Fate Belongs to Beijing,” Phoenix Gaz., 15 Mar. 1996, at B11.

Two of these examples involve phrasal adjectives—fast-changing and fast-expanding—but there is no more need for the -ly adverb in those phrases than anywhere else. For other adverbs with a superfluous -ly, see adverbs (c).

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| fastly for fast: Stage 1 | Current ratio (is fast becoming vs. *is fast becoming): 859:1 |

**Fatal; fateful.** Though both are etymologically tied to the noun fate, they have undergone differentiation. Fatal means “of, relating to, or involving death;” while fateful means “producing grave consequences.” The most common mistake is to use fatal for fateful, but sometimes one would be presumptuous to suggest any change, so close is the call: “Like Henry Kissinger and other modern scholars, Mr. Gelb considers the fatal turning point not Munich in 1938, but the failure by France and Britain to oppose German reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936,” John Lehman, “The ’Heroic’ Retreat Was Really a Rout,” Wall Street J., 9 Oct. 1989, at A6.

But most times when no immediate death results, fateful is the better choice—e.g.:

- “McCarron made a fatal [read fateful] decision to try and put out. His ball caught a tuft of kikuya and trickled to 8 feet above the hole—a brutal turn of events.” Brian Murphy, “McCarron’s Loss Mattaíec’s Gain,” S.F. Chron., 18 Feb. 2002, at C2 (losing a golf tournament may be brutal, but it’s not the end of the world). (For more on try and in this quatation, see try and.)


- “In the United States, if we deny a sports team the chance to trounce its foe absolutely and unequivocally, we call for the head of the official who makes the fatal [read fateful] decision,” Letter of William O. Beeman, Providence J-Bull., 14 July 2002, at F9.

In some circumstances a writer using fatal must be careful not to create an absurdity—e.g.: “Monday’s bombing was the first fatal suicide bombing in Israel since Oct. 10, when a 71-year-old woman was killed in an attack in Tel Aviv.” Craig Nelson, “14 Perish After Suicide Bombers Turn Packed Bus into an Inferno,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 22 Oct. 2002, at A1. (A possible revision: Monday’s explosion was the first suicide bombing in Israel that killed any bystander . . . .)

On fatal as a noncomparable adjective, see adjectives (b).

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fateful misused for fateful: Stage 1 fatalism; determinism; necessitarianism. Fatalism = (1) the philosophical view that the future is fixed regardless of human attempts to influence it; or (2) an attitude of submitting oneself to fate. Critics of this view—in either sense—complain that “it encourages ignorance, sloth, and vice.” Thomas Mautner, A Dictionary of Philosophy 147 (1996).

Determinism = (1) the view that every fact in the universe is guided by the law of causation—i.e., that every effect derives from its causes; or (2) the idea that people do not exercise free will but are instead the product of their genetic, physical, and psychical conditions. In sense 2—the rarer sense—determinism is a type of fatalism. But sense 1, known also as necessitarianism or causal determinism, is distinct from fatalism because it “still leaves room for the possibility that human action may be causally effective in ensuring that this happens rather than that.” Antony Flew, A Dictionary of Philosophy 119 (2d ed. 1984). Although determinists don’t disavow free will, they deny the existence of chance: they concede merely that “our ignorance of the laws or all relevant antecedent conditions makes certain events unexpected and, therefore, apparently happen ‘by chance.’” The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy 198 (Robert Audi ed., 1995). Cf. free will.

fateful. See fatal.

Father Christmas. See Santa Claus.


**Language-Change Index**

| father-in-law: Pl. fathers-in-law | Current ratio: 7:1 |

fathom (= a six-foot length [1.83 meters] for measuring depth in water) predominantly forms the regular plural fathoms in all varieties of World English <five fathoms deep>. Through about 1830, fathom predominantly formed its own plural <five fathom deep>, but this usage has sunk.
fault, at; in fault. See at fault.

fauna, a singular word with a collective implication, refers to the animal life in a particular region. Hence fauna should take a singular verb, not a plural, and may be referred to as a fauna—e.g.: “At the Lascaux cave, lying to the west of this site but which had a similar fauna at the time, he said, the images were overwhelmingly of bison and horses, but here bears and rhinos—animals that man did not usually hunt or eat—predominated.” Marilise Simons, “Prehistoric Art Treasure Is Found in French Cave,” N.Y. Times, 19 Jan. 1995, at A1, A5.


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fauna misused for flora: Stage 1

fau pas [Fr. “false step”] is both the singular and the plural spelling. But the singular is pronounced /foh pah/ or (less good) /foh pahz/, and the plural is pronounced /foh pahz/ or (less good) /foh pahz/.

favor; favour. Until the 1840s, favour was the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. During that decade, favor became the predominant spelling in AmE—as did favorable and favorite. BrE still favors favour, favourable, and favourite. See -or; -our.

fax, n. & vb. This term is now all but universal, in the face of which facsimile transmission is an instant archaism—and a trifle pompous at that. Fax, which is now perfectly appropriate even in formal contexts, first appeared in the mid-1970s—e.g.: “In the past two years, fax installations have more than doubled from fewer than 50,000 to more than 100,000 units.” “The Office of the Future,” BusinessWeek, 30 June 1975, at 48. The verb dates from the mid-1980s—e.g.: “The prints are then faxed from the regional centers.” PJH, “Data Detectives Use a New Technique to Match Fingerprints,” Data Communications, Feb. 1984, at 56.

The noun plural is faxes.

Some writers mistakenly put the word in all capitals, as if it were an acronym. It isn’t. It’s just a clipped form with a slight change in spelling: write fax, not *FAX.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
fax as n. & vb.: Stage 5

fay. See fay.

faze; phase. Faze = to disconcert; daunt. Phase, vb., = to carry out (a plan, program, etc.) in stages. Phase for faze is an increasingly common blunder—e.g.:


“The Bath side were unphased [read unfazed], emerging comfortable six-wicket victors after the visitors were dismissed for only 138.” “Cricket Munden and Ollis Give Brislington the Perfect Start,” Bristol Evening Post (U.K.), 3 Aug. 2015, at 46.

The opposite error (faze for phase) also occurs, but more rarely—e.g.: “All that while shooting guard Art Mlotkowski, shadowed all over the court by Northport senior Rob Sanicola, was fazed [read phased] out of the offense.” John Valenti, “Northport Beats Copiague,” Newsday (N.Y.), 26 Feb. 1995, at 13.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. phase misused for faze: Stage 2
   Current ratio (didn’t faze him vs. *didn’t phase him): 8:1
   2. unphased for unfazed: Stage 1
   Current ratio (unfazed by vs. *unphased by): 36:1
   3. faze misused for phase: Stage 1
   Current ratio (being phased out vs. *being fazed out): 422:1

fearful; fearsome. In a perfect world, there would be strict differentiation here: fearful would be confined to the sense “full of fear, afraid”; fearsome would be reserved for “causing fear, horrible.” Alas, the world isn’t quite so perfect, and there is considerable overlap.

feasible = (1) capable of being accomplished; (2) capable of being used or handled to good effect; or (3) reasonable, likely. Sense 3 is a classic example of slipshod extension. The extended sense is ambiguous. Does someone who says that a cure for cancer is feasible mean that a cure can definitely be found (if we work hard enough to find it) or that a cure might one day be found (but not necessarily)?

To avoid this problem, it’s best to reserve feasible for senses 1 and 2. When sense 3 is the intended meaning, possible or probable is the better choice. Cf. viable.

The word is sometimes misspelled *feasable. See -ABLE (A).

feature. The classic book popularly known as “Strunk & White” cautioned against using this word, citing the following example: “A feature of the entertainment especially worthy of mention was the singing of Miss A.” William Strunk Jr. & E.B. White, The Elements of Style 47 (3d ed. 1979). The authors advise: “Better use the same number of words to tell what Miss A. sang and how she sang it.” This sound advice is disparaged in MWDEU, which states:
This advice [in Strunk & White] seems a bit naive; it is distinctly possible that the example is a minor masterpiece of tact. If Miss A. happens to have more friends than talent, it may be better not to tell what she sang and how she sang it. We may have the same political avoidance of judgment in this example:

A feature of the program was a panel discussion in which visitors from other institutions shared the benefits of their own, related experience—Calvin H. Plimpton, Amherst College Bulletin, November 1967

MWDEU at 436.

Of course, this is pure folderol. Almost any passage in need of editing can find an apostrophe for its original form, but Strunk and White were urging authors to sharpen their ideas. And even without sharpening, the final quotation cited in MWDEU could use a good edit—During a panel discussion, visitors from other institutions shared the benefits of their experience—which also trims the sentence from 23 words to 14.

February is still preferably pronounced /feb-ə-ro-ər-əl/ or, in BrE, /feb-ə-ro-ə-ree/—preferably not /feb-ə-yoo-ə-ree/ or /feb-ə-yə-ree/.

fecal; faecal. Meaning “of, relating to, or consisting of waste from the bowels,” the word fecal is so spelled in AmE, faecal in BrE. Before 1800, fecal was the universal spelling, and in AmE it has persisted. It is also a frequent variant in BrE. Since 1900 or so, World English has tended toward fecal.

feces (BrE faeces). When it comes to subject–verb agreement, this noun can be tricky. Though plural in form and labeled plural in dictionaries, the word feces is often treated as a mass noun and construed with a singular verb—e.g.:• “In each of those instances, the pool had to be closed after feces was found in the water.” Cory Haven, “Things May Be Looking Up for Plymouth Community Pool,” South Bend Trib., 9 July 2002, at D1.
• “Mr. Gorman said studies have shown that goose feces contain more than 100 types of bacteria, many of which are resistant to antibiotics.” Linda Salsow, “Canada Geese: It’s Love and Hate,” N.Y. Times, 14 July 2002, 14LI 8, at 3.
• “Overcash chose the class over self-study because at MUSC, students also learn the slang terms their future patients will be using. ‘You can’t ask a person how their baby’s feces is if they don’t know the word for feces.’” Wevonneda Minis, “Speaking the Language,” Post & Courier (Charleston, S.C.), 5 Aug. 2002, at D1.

It makes some sense to equate feces with excrement.

When the stuff appears in discrete pieces, feces is used as a count noun and takes a plural verb. E.g.: “Before dogs were domesticated, they ate a much more varied diet, including the bones of their prey. Therefore, their feces were much harder and dry.” Jill Bowen, “Problem Anal Glands Need Vet Treatment,” Roanoke Times, 21 July 2002, at NRV18.

Some writers, however, use a plural verb for the mass-noun sense, probably on grounds that the word derives from a Latin plural (faēces). This usage has been somewhat more common than the singular applications from the late 18th century on, but only just. E.g.:• “Colton said dog feces have [read has] been one of the worst sources of coliform bacteria contamination for at least two years.” Lane Lambert, “Quincy May Ban Dogs from Parks,” Patriot Ledger (Quincy, Mass.), 23 Apr. 1997, at 1.
• “Barnes said inspectors don’t know how long the pigeon feces have [read has] been in the water holding tank.” Justo Bautista & Michael Casey, “New Water Problems at Senior Complex,” Record (N.J.), 1 July 1997, at A1.

See COUNT NOUNS AND MASS NOUNS.

federal. See national.

federalism. In U.S. politics, this word is a double-edged sword. It is used by proponents of a strong central government to denote a system in which the national government has broad powers to compel states to conform to policies set by Congress (e.g., the Federalist Party of the Founders), and by opponents of a strong central government to denote a system in which the states are sovereign entities free to set their own policies subject only to strict construction of the U.S. Constitution (e.g., today’s Federalist Society).

Nowadays the word is employed both by the left (e.g., in arguments against Department of Justice opposition of state laws sanctioning the medical use of marijuana) and by the right (e.g., against enforcement of statutory civil–rights actions on behalf of state employees). In polemical contexts (where it most often appears), the word has become fairly hazy and ambiguous.

federation. See confederation.

feed > fed > fed. So inflected. *Feeded is a solecism—e.g.: “It was a friendly family environment that Brown needed and feeded [read fed] off.” Robin Miller, “Today, Indy Says Goodbye to One of Its Favorite Friends,” Indianapolis Star, 10 Mar. 1997, at C1. See IRREGULAR VERBS.

Language-Change Index

*fedeed as a past-tense form: Stage 1 Current ratio (fed the vs. *feeded the): 9,542:1

feel. A. For think. Feel is a weak and informal substitute for think, believe, maintain, or submit. E.g.: “We feel [read believe] that the plan should be summarized in considerable detail.” When the idea is phrased on an emotional rather than a cognitive level, the resulting sentence seems to minimize the thoughts being

**B. Feel bad; *feel badly.** When someone is sick or unhappy, that person feels bad—not badly. In this phrase, feel is a linking verb, which takes a predicate adjective instead of an adverb. In modern print sources, feel bad outranks *feel badly* by a 9-to-1 margin. Although most professional writers know this point of usage, a few get it wrong—e.g.:

- “Manager Dusty Baker’s attention was divided. He felt badly [read bad] for Dunston and was depressed over a ninth-inning rally gone sour.” Nick Peters, “Giants, Dunston Suffer a Blow,” Sacramento Bee, 5 Aug. 1996, at D1.

Not to excuse these errors, but they may result from the misplaced fear that *feel bad* somehow suggests wickedness or personal evil.

But the same error crops up even with adjectives other than bad. Here it’s miserable: “Every couple of years, the American Bar Association’s monthly magazine publishes an article detailing how miserably [read miserable] many lawyers feel.” Judson Hand, “Writer Judson Hand Signs Off from Column,” Asbury Park Press (Neptune, N.J.), 27 Nov. 1997, at A33. See adverbs (d) & hypercorrection. Cf. badly (a).

**Language-Change Index**

*feel badly for feel bad: Stage 2

Current ratio (feel bad vs. *feel badly): 9:1

**C. Feel like.** To avoid using like as a conjunction, writers usually need to change to feel as if. E.g.: “But on a combined income of $60,000, McDonald and his wife Cindy, who have five children, feel like [read feel as if] they’re just scraping by.” Marc Levinson, “Living on the Edge,” Newsweek, 4 Nov. 1991, at 23. See like (c).

On the other hand, the familiar casualism expressing a preference is perfectly grammatical (<i>like feel as if</i> pizza tonight>). The object of the preposition like in this example is the understood gerund eating (which functions as a noun), and the object of that gerund is the noun pizza. So the expression, while a casualism, is not at all substandard.

**feet.** See foot.

**feign; feint.** These words, though deriving from the same French verb (*feindre* “to touch or shape”), have undergone differentiation in English. To feign is either to make up or fabricate <i>she feigned an excuse</i> or to make a false show of <i>he feigned illness</i>. To feint is to deliver a pretended blow or attack designed to confuse an opponent momentarily. Feint is also, in its older (but still current) sense, used as a noun meaning either a sham or a pretended blow or attack (i.e., the act of feinting).

**feint.** See faint.

**feldspar** (= a crystalline mineral found in igneous rocks) has been the standard spelling since about 1890. *Felspar,* a variant, predominated for most of the 19th century, but shortly before 1900 the etymologically superior spelling—closer to the German loanword Feldspat—replaced it.

**fellatio** (= oral sex performed on a male) is pronounced /fә-la-see-oh/—not /fә-lah-tee-oh/.

*fellow collaborator.** See collaborator.

**felo-de-se.** See suicide (A).

**female,** adj.; feminine; woman(ly); womanlike; womanish; effeminate. These adjectives all share the sense “of, relating to, or involving women.” Female is a neutral term usually used to indicate the sex of a person (or an animal or plant), in contrast with male <i>a female cadet</i> <i>my female coworkers</i>. Feminine typically refers to what are traditionally considered a woman’s favorable qualities <i>feminine grace</i>. Womanly often carries these positive connotations as well <i>womanly intuition</i>, but it’s also used to distinguish an adult female from a girl <i>her womanly figure</i>. <i>Woman</i> is sometimes used attributively where female would be more natural <i>a woman lawyer</i>. Womanlike (the rarest of these words) is synonymous with womanly, though perhaps a bit more neutral <i>womanlike features</i>. Finally, womanish and effeminate are now almost always used in a derogatory way in referring to men who supposedly lack manly qualities <i>his womanish laugh</i> <i>his effeminate gestures</i>.

In this era of political correctness, the use of any of these terms can be offensive in certain contexts. Cf. male. See sexism.

**Feminine Endings.** See sexism (d).

**Feminine Pronouns Used Generically.** See sexism (b).

**femininity; *feminity.** Both terms date from the 14th century. But femininity, which matches the syllables in masculinity, has been standard for so long that the other may rightly be considered a simple misspelling.

Current ratio: 139:1

**femur** (= thigh bone) makes the Latinate plural *femora* in technical writing but the normal plural *femurs* in everyday contexts. Of course, it is rare to need the plural in everyday contexts. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (*femora vs. femurs*): 1.2:1
eral (= [1] of, relating to, or involving a wild beast; or [2] formerly domesticated but now having become wild) is traditionally pronounced /fer-әl/, but /fer-әl/ is now common in AmE and BrE alike.

ferment, n. & vb. To ferment /fәr-ment/ something is to cause it to undergo a physical change in composition through enzymatic effervescence, especially as sugar is converted into alcohol (fermentation). As a noun, ferment /fәr-ment/ denotes (1) a yeast or enzyme that causes fermentation, or (2) a situation of great unrest, trouble, or excitement in a country or region, esp. caused by political change.

ferret, v.i., makes ferreted and ferreting in both AmE and BrE. See spelling (b).

fervent; fervid; perfervid. These adjectives describe three gradations of ardor or zeal (listed also in order of word frequency in print sources). To be fervent is either to show warm feelings or to be strongly devoted to something. To be fervid is to have those qualities in a stronger degree. And to be perfervid is to be fanatically zealous. The prefix per- is an intensifier here.

festive; festal. Festive (= [1] of, relating to, or involving a feast or festival; or (2) joyful, merry <a festive mood>. Festal, a rarer word, shares only sense 1 of festive and is probably the better word in that sense. Today it is used primarily in connection with religious observances <festal vespers> <festal liturgy>, but not exclusively so—e.g.: “Six Degrees presents a ceremonial tapping of the Paulaner Oktoberfest keg by Former Seattle Seahawk Blair Bush, Oct. 12, 7 p.m.” “Food Notes,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 11 Oct. 2000, at E2.

Festschrift (= a collection of writings forming a volume presented by the authors as a tribute to a [usu. senior] scholar), a German loanword, forms the plural Festschriften and Festschrifts. The German plural predominates in English-language contexts, just as the German capitalization is retained. For the reasons given at plural (b), it would be understandable if one preferred the anglicized Festschriften.

Current ratio (Festschriften vs. Festschriften): 3:1

fetch (= to get and bring to) was once a fully respectable word. It appears, for example, in the King James Version of the Bible: “Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel” (1 Kings 17:10). But in AmE (much more than in BrE), the word has undergone depreciation. One linguist who noted this trend in the 1960s posited two possible reasons: “Perhaps the command latent in it is resented as undemocratic. Or maybe its use in training dogs to retrieve has made some people feel that it is an undignified word to apply to human beings.” Bergen Evans, “But What’s a Dictionary For?” in The Ways of Language 77, 86 (Raymond J. Pflug ed., 1967). For whatever reason, the word now has associations of hick talk, perhaps in part because it was commonly used in the 1960s television show The Beverly Hillbillies. It also rings of racism, a connotation dating at least from the vaudeville and film career of Lincoln Perry (1902–1985), better known by his stage and screen name of Stepin Fetchit.

Oddly, though, when used in the monetary senses “sell for” and “bring in,” the word carries no negative baggage—e.g.:

- “If Quintiles shares were fetching their all-time high of $56 plus, Gillings would have had to offer more than $6.6 billion to acquire the company,” David Ranii, “Is Quintiles Going Up or Down?” News & Observer (Raleigh), 22 Oct. 2002, at D1.

Nor is the participial adjective fetching (= attractive, alluring) in any way stained by the connotations that its root word carries—e.g.: “She wrapped her unfailling soprano around two of Sondheim’s most fetching and wrenching ballads, ‘In Buddy’s Eyes’ and ‘Losing My Mind’.” Peter Marks, “Kennedy Center’s Sondheim Treat to N.Y.,” Wash. Post, 23 Oct. 2002, at C1.

Because fetch means “to go get and bring back,” the phrase *go fetch is a REDUNDANCY—e.g.:


FETUS

fetus (= [1] an outdoor gala, or [2] a major celebration) is normally so written, without the traditional circumflex over the first -e- (see diacritical marks). The word is pronounced either /fәt/ or /fet/ (the latter being the French pronunciation).

Current ratio (fet vs. *foetid): 7:1

fetid /fәt-id/ (= emitting an offensive odor; stinky) is a FORMAL WORD <brown fetid water at the bottom of the creek>. The pronunciation /feet-id/ is a nonstandard variant. The obsolete variant spelling *foetid has not been predominant in BrE print sources since the late 17th century. It has always been a recessive spelling in World English. The corresponding noun is fetor /fәt-or/ (= stench).

Current ratio (fetid vs. *foetid): 7:1

FETUSES

fetus; *foetus. The first has been the standard spelling in AmE since 1910 and in BrE since 1970. *Foetus is now but a variant spelling. Pl. fetuses. See plural (b).

Current ratio: 6:1
fey. See temperature (b).

feverish; *feverous. The first is standard; the second is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 185:1

few. See couple (b).

fewer; less. Fewer emphasizes number, and less emphasizes degree or quantity. *Fewer number and *fewest number are illogical tautologies, since fewer means "of smaller number." E.g.: "The fewest number of people use the library between 4:30 and 7:00 P.M." (Or, better, read: The fewest people use the library between 4:30 and 7:00 P.M.) See less (A) & (b).

*One fewer isn't much of an idiomatic possibility, while one less is <one less bell to answer>. Probably in an attempt to be refined, the writer here incorrectly avoids using the word less: "Texas Tech officials emerged from a second full day before the NCAA Committee on Infractions having to deal with one fewer [read one less] allegation, Chancellor John Montford said Saturday." Doug Hensley, "NCAA Drops One Allegation," Amarillo Globe-Times, 26 Apr. 1998, at C1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. *fewer [or fewest] number for smaller [or smallest] number: Stage 3
   Current ratio (smallest number vs. *fewest number): 3:1
2. *one fewer for one less: Stage 3
   Current ratio (one less vs. *one fewer): 12:1

*few in number is a common REDUNDANCY—e.g.: "They were once prized for their tasty bacon, but when new breeds came along that were cheaper to raise and produced more bacon, the Tamworths declined and they are now few in number [read scarce or uncommon]." Ray Moseley, "Duo Fleeing for Their Lives," Chicago Trib., 16 Jan. 1998, at 6.

fey, adj.; fay, n. Fey derives from the Old English fege ("doomed to die") and carries the related sense "in an unusually excited state (like one about to die)." By an old SLIPSHOD EXTENSION, the word came to mean "whimsical, otherworldly, enchanting, eccentric," perhaps from confusion with fay (see below). This shift in meaning was noticed as early as 1950: "Construed to mean 'elfin' by most literate people, [fey] is defined as 'fated to die'; its popular meaning has only recently crept into a single dictionary. Confronted with this lag, editors say that the citation slips have not yet shown sufficient evidence to justify the new sense." Felicia Lamport, "Dictionaries: Our Language Right or Wrong" (1950), in Words, Words, Words About Dictionaries 64, 65 (Jack C. Gray ed., 1963). Today the word's original meaning is all but forgotten. E.g.: An upsurge of book sales in cyberspace could have dramatic effects on the fortunes of the already fay and contradictory world of book publishing." Even Before Books," Wash. Post, 4 Aug. 1997, at A18.

Fay (= a fairy or elf) is always a noun—e.g.: "And a key mythological figure is Melusina, a fay from an ancient fairy tale who is half-woman, half-serpent." Norman Weinstein, Book Rev., Parabola, 22 Sept. 1995, at 116. One writer mistakenly says that fay is an adjective meaning "elfin" or "elflike." See Kenneth G. Wilson, The Columbia Guide to Standard American English 193 (1993). See elfin.

Adding to the confusion is the name of King Arthur's nemesis, Morgan Le Fey. Originally, fay referred to the fact that Morgan brought Arthur's doom by bearing him a son predestined to destroy his father. But as the legend changed and was embellished with time, Morgan became less human and more magical. Today her name is alternatively spelled Fey and Fay, and she is almost always portrayed as a sorceress: more a fairy than a human.

fez (= a brimless thimble-shaped hat) forms the plural fezzes—not *fezes. See PLURALS (a).

Current ratio: 3:1

fiancé; fiancée. A fiancé is male, a fiancée female. The better pronunciation is /fee-ahn-say/ (approximating the French). The middlebrow AmE pronunciation is /fee-ahn-say/. (See CLASS DISTINCTIONS.) In AmE—unlike BrE—the accents are usually retained. See DIACRITICAL MARKS.

Fiancé is sometimes misused for fiancée—e.g.: • "An undercover FBI agent posing as an immigrant looking for a wife was told he could be happily married to an American woman for $6,000. The agent had an appointment to meet his fiancé [read fiancée] and get a marriage license yesterday but he broke the date." Helen Peterson, "L.I. Matri-Money Ring Busted," Daily News (N.Y.), 11 Apr. 1997, at 10.
• "Howard has been dumped by the fiancé [read fiancée] he adored." Richard Corliss, "Caution: Male Fraud," Time, 18 Aug. 1997, at 61.

This error may result from an effort to avoid gender-specific endings. But to a traditionalist, this is one context in which a person's sex makes a difference. Calling a man's fiancée his fiancé, or calling a woman's fiancé her fiancée, raises a new issue in the reader's mind: is the writer referring to a same-sex marriage?

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
fiancée for fiancé (and vice versa): Stage 2

fiasco (= a complete failure) forms the plural fiascos or (less frequently) fiascoes. See PLURALS (d).

Current ratio: 2:1

fiber is the AmE spelling; fibre is BrE. See -er (b).

fibroma (= a benign tumor made up of fibrous tissue) formerly made the classical plural fibromata, but the homegrown plural fibromas had become predominant in AmE by 1935 and in BrE by the late 1950s. See PLURALS (b).

Current ratio: 12:1

fibula (= the outer of the two bones between a vertebrate's knee and ankle), perhaps because it appears
mostly in technical contexts, predominantly forms the Latinate plural *fibulae* /fɪb-yə-lee/ in AmE and BrE alike—*fibulas* being a variant. Cf. *tibia*. See PLURALS (b).

Current ratio: 8:1

**fictional; fictitious; fictive; *fictionary.** Although these forms overlap to a great degree, they have undergone some useful DIFFERENTIATION. *Fictional* = of, relating to, or having the characteristics of fiction. E.g.:

- “Despite widespread public criticism of the movie’s [i.e., Oliver Stone’s *JFK*] speculative and *fictional* nature, it sparked a furor in 1992 that led to the creation of the records review board.” Mark Wrolstad, “Open to Debate,” *Dallas Morning News*, 19 Nov. 1994, at A31.

- “It’s not hard to understand the retro appeal of a *fictional* hero such as Dirk Pitt.” Valerie Takahama, “When Sea Calls, Author Answers,” *Orange County Register*, 17 Nov. 1996, at F35.

_Fictitious* = (1) false, counterfeit; or (2) imaginary.


_Fictive* = having the capacity of imaginative creation <*fictional* talent>. Apart from this narrow sense, _fictive_ is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of both _fictional_ and _fictitious_—e.g.:

- “But when an earthly reality hovers too near a _fictional_ [read _fictional_] one, it sends a shadow onto the landscape that can dominate, even supersede the imagination.” Gail Caldwell, “The Munro Doctrine,” *Boston Globe*, 3 Nov. 1996, at D15.

- “When the real rocks are exhibited alongside the _fictional_ [read _fictitious_ or, better yet, _fake_] ones, it is impossible to tell them apart.” Richard Dorment, “The Arts: Perfection in the Everyday,” *Daily Telegraph*, 13 Nov. 1996, at 21.

- “Its interviewees were drawn largely from the Princeton area, near the _program’s_ _fictive_ epicenter [read _fictional program’s setting_]—and, consequently, included a high concentration of frightened listeners.” Robert Nason, “When Earthlings Panic,” *Weekly Standard*, 17 Aug. 2015, at 34 (referring to Orson Welles’s 1938 “War of the Worlds” broadcast). (The italicized phrasing raises at least three issues solved by the rewording. See epicenter.)

*Fictionary* is an unusual NEEDLESS VARIANT of *fictional*—e.g.: “A man who will occasionally paint other persons—_even fictional_ [read _fictional_] persons—as worse than they really are may not unnaturally be expected to depict himself as somewhat better than he is.” Grant M. Overton, _Why Authors Go Wrong and Other Explanations_ 2 (1919).

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fictitious misused for fictitious or _fictional_: Stage 1

**fiddle.** It’s often thought that _fiddles_ are the instruments of country-and-western musicians, _violins_ those of orchestral musicians. In fact, though, many great violinists refer to their _fiddles_, perhaps as a type of Dysphemism.

**fiduciary.** _Adj. & n.; fiducial.** Adj. For all ordinary purposes, use _fiduciary_ as both adjective <_fiduciary relationship>_ and noun <_as trustees, they are fiduciaries_. _Fiducial_ is mostly confined to physics and mathematics. A _fiducial line_ or _point_ is one used as a base—as a boiling point is in thermometry. A _fiducial edge_ is the thin edge of a ruler or scale against which a line is drawn.

**field.** The phrase _the field of_ is vague and often unnecessary—e.g.:


Cf. _area_.

**field day.** See _heyday_ (b).

15 minutes of fame (= a brief period of public exposure or recognition) paraphrases a 1968 Andy Warhol comment that “in the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.” Writers sometimes mar the allusion by shortening the promised time by 14 minutes and 45 seconds—e.g.:


Occasionally, *15 seconds* is more literal and appropriate than the original witticism—e.g.: "Between innings, fans were featured on the JumboTron. . . . Everyone was getting face time. Well, not exactly face. One teenage boy was ready for his *15 seconds of fame* and mooned the in-house camera, his cheeky smile splattered above the scoreboard." Troy E. Renck, "I'm Just Moonstruck by It All," *Denver Post*, 20 Apr. 2008, at CC16.

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*15 seconds of fame* for *15 minutes of fame*: Stage 1

Current ratio (fifteen minutes of fame vs. *fifteen seconds of fame*): 25:1

**fifth** is pronounced /fifth/. Whether the version without the medial -f- (/fith/) is a mispronunciation, a hasty pronunciation, or a casual pronunciation is debatable. But one thing is certain: it's not as good. See pronunciation (b).

**Fifth Amendment.** The idiom is *take the Fifth,* not *plead the Fifth* (a solecism very much on the rise since about 1950)—e.g.:

- "He was advised to keep silent and plead [read take] the Fifth Amendment." Kevin Diaz, "$4 Million Award's a Start Toward a Clean Slate," *Star Trib.* (Minneapolis), 22 Oct. 1994, at A1.
- "[P]rosecutor Daniel Saunders announced to the court that he'd been notified by [Bertram] Fields' then attorney, famed trial maven John Keker, that Fields planned to plead the Fifth [read take the Fifth] if called as a witness." Rachel Abramowitz, "Can We Get a Witness?" *L.A. Times*, 21 Apr. 2008, at E1.

**Language-Change Index**

*plead the Fifth* for *take the Fifth*: Stage 3

Current ratio (took the Fifth vs. *pleaded the Fifth* vs. *pled the Fifth*): 10:3:1

**figure** is pronounced /fi-gәr/ in AmE and /fi-gәr/ in BrE.

**filet mignon.** The plural of this phrase is *filet mignons* (or, more stuffily, *filets mignons*). (See plurals (b).) The plural of this phrase is *filet mignons* (or, more stuffily, *filets mignons*). (See plurals (b).) The plural of this phrase is *filet mignons* (or, more stuffily, *filets mignons*). (See plurals (b).) The plural of this phrase is *filet mignons* (or, more stuffily, *filets mignons*). (See plurals (b).)

**filter.** *vb.*; ✳*filtrate,* *vb.* The latter is a needless variant—e.g.:


Of course, *filtrate* is perfectly proper as a noun meaning "a liquid that has been filtered"—e.g.: "It pumped untreated hog slurry into the system, where a chemical and separation process was to result in clear *filtrate* and biosolids—matter high in nutrients that could be used as garden or crop fertilizer." Anne Fitzgerald, "Odor Control: Smell of Money," *Des Moines Register*, 2 Feb. 1997, at 1.

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*filtrate* misused for the verb *filter*: Stage 1

Current ratio (filtered vs. *filtrated*): 232:1

**filtrable.** So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—preferably not *filtrable.*

Current ratio: 13:1

**filtrate.** See filter.

**finable.** So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—preferably not *fineable.* See mute e.

Current ratio: 4:1

**final, adj.** See adjectives (b).

**final analysis, in the.** See in the final analysis.

**final destination.** See destination.

**finalize** = (1) vt., to complete; bring to an end; put in final form; or (2) v.i., to conclude. Coined in the mid-19th century, *finalize* flourished as a *vogue word* in the late 20th century, a favorite of jargonmongers. For that reason alone, many writers avoid it. But the word's advantage is that it has the compactness of a single word, as opposed to most of its equivalents: *make final, put into final form, and bring to an end.* Today few people object to it, and it is all but ubiquitous—e.g.:

- "The show was taped for future broadcast, but theater officials have yet to finalize an air date and network contract." Victoria Dawson, "First Lady of Ford's," *Wash. Post*, 22 June 1987, at B1.

Still, *complete* is a better choice when it will suffice, as in the last example quoted above. See -IZE.

**Language-Change Index**

*finalize*; Stage 5
final outcome; final result; final upshot. Each of these is a common redundancy, since outcome, result, and upshot are all generally understood as final. It may be, however, that because modern technology—whether in instant replays on television or in computer calculations—allows us to view all sorts of preliminary results, some further qualification is considered desirable. But that's merely an excuse, not a sound rationale. And besides, writers often use the wordy phrases even when they don't mean them—e.g.:

- “They both said the process won’t be as important as the final result [read result],” Tom Bell, “State Lawmakers Differ on Need for Tax-Reform Panel,” Portland Press Herald, 16 Jan. 2003, at B1.

Cf. destination.

Sometimes, however, final result or a similar phrase is needed to contrast something with preliminary estimates—e.g.: “Compuware now expects to earn 6 to 7 cents a share for the fiscal third quarter; analysts were expectin a profit of 9 cents a share. . . . Compuware will announce its final results for the quarter on Jan. 22.” “Compuware Lowers Earnings Estimate,” N.Y. Times, 10 Jan. 2003, at C3. Cf. end result.

Like its cousins, final upshot is a minor redundancy, since the word upshot implies finality—e.g.: “Just what the final upshot [read upshot] of the postgame outburst will be remains to be seen.” “Rose Shoves Ump Again in Brawl,” San Diego Union-Trib., 16 Aug. 1989, at D2.

Financier; financier. Financier = someone whose business is lending money. Financer = someone who finances a particular undertaking. The differentiation should be encouraged, but not everyone bothers with it—e.g.: “But the bank, which used to be a major financer [read financier] of Third World projects, finds itself now a relatively minor factor in dollar terms.” R.C. Longworth, “World Bank Looking to Overlooked Needs,” Chicago Trib., 1 Nov. 1996, Bus. §, at 2.

Many dictionaries, including the OED and W2, inaccurately list financer as obsolete. Others, such as RH2 and W3, simply omit it. But it does appear with some frequency—e.g.:

- “The e-commerce company moved closer to its Austin financiers and then closed last year as the demand for Internet services plummeted during the dot-com crash.” “Knoxville Entrepreneur Tries New Austin-Based Business,” Knoxville News-Sentinel, 9 Dec. 2002, at C1.
- “For years, R.J. Reynolds Co. was the largest private financier of tobacco-related research at NCUS.” Catherine Clabby, “NCSU to Map Out Tobacco,” News & Observer (Raleigh), 12 Dec. 2002, at A1.

Current ratio: 32:1

Fine-toothed comb; fine-tooth comb. The latter spelling has long been more than twice as common as the former. Because fine-toothed comb better reflects the literal meaning—a comb with teeth set close together, rather than a comb with fine (very thin) teeth—that spelling might be thought preferable even in figurative senses <she went over the contract with a fine-toothed comb>. See adjectives (f). But print sources favor fine-tooth comb. Cf. iced tea, skim milk & stained glass.

Finicky is the preferred spelling—not *finnicky. Finical is a pedantic variant that is seldom used today, though it was fairly common till about 1820. Anyone who uses it is likely to be thought of as being, well, finical.

Current ratio (finicky vs. finical vs. *finnicky): 175:37:1

Finis (= end, conclusion) is a 15th-century Latin loanword that was early anglicized as /fin-is/, and English-language dictionaries have long recorded this pronunciation. In the late 20th century, however, many people mistook the word for a gallicism of recent vintage and started saying /fee-nee/. Today this nouveau pronunciation threatens to drive out the traditional one.

*fiord. See fjord.

Fir. The name of the evergreen tree is occasionally misspelled fur, creating an odd mental image—e.g.:

- “One of the most visible signs of the strong winds was the toppling of an almost 80-foot fur [read fir] tree near a Congress Street home in Fairfield.” Greg Clarkin, “Scrambling

* “Eileen Meert plants a canaan fir [read fir] tree Saturday as Josh Hickman, center, digs a hole and Domien Meert fertilizes the hole at Meert Tree Farm in Festus.” “A Growing Knowledge of Trees,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 12 Apr. 2006, Bus. §, at A12 (photo caption).

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fir tree, fir tree

Current ratio (fir tree vs. *fur tree): 124:1

fire; terminate; let go; lay off. Fire has the sense of dismissing an employee for cause, such as for inadequate performance or moral turpitude. The word implies abruptness and forcihleness and is therefore viewed as being derogatory. A common euphemism is terminate; another is let go.

Lay off means "to dismiss (an employee), often temporarily, because of slow business or the seasonal nature of some work, such as agriculture." Because fire is shorter, headline writers are often tempted to substitute it (wrongly) for lay off or (BrE) make redundant—e.g.: Robert Naylor Jr., “Amtrak to Cut Routes, Fire [read Lay Off] 5,500 Workers,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 15 Dec. 1994, at A13. Although lay off is a common euphemism for fire, the distinction is a useful one.

firefighter. See sexism (c).

firmament. The firmament is the sky, the canopy of stars (as people once envisioned it). It was "firm" because it was thought to be a fixed and immutable dome. Today the word is often used in a metaphorical sense to mean the constellation of "stars" (celebrities or key people) in a certain field. But sometimes writers seem misled by the "firm" portion of the word, using firmament as if it meant ground or foundation—e.g.:


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

first-come, first-serve for first-come, first-served

Stage 3

Current ratio (first come first served vs. *first come first serve): 3:1

first annual. This phrase expresses a promoter's wish, not a fact. An event that is held or occurs once a year is an annual event. But its first occurrence is not annual because it didn't happen the previous year. The AP Stylebook sensibly recommends mentioning that the organizers plan to hold the event annually.

first-come, first-served. As a phrasal adjective, this term has obligatory hyphens. It sometimes appears with the comma (recommended), and sometimes without, as first-come-first-served (also acceptable). When a noun doesn't appear at the end, and the phrase is simply used as a statement, a comma comes between the two parts, which are unhyphenated: first come, first served.

The past-participial served is required in this phrase. The first people to come are the first who are served (not the ones who serve). But some writers erroneously use serve—e.g.:


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first-come, first-served for first-come, first-served

Stage 3

Current ratio (first come first served vs. *first come first serve): 3:1

first edition. This phrase is ambiguous: it means one thing to an author or publisher and quite another to a book collector or antiquarian bookseller. To an author or publisher, first edition refers to any printing of the first unrevised version of a book. In this sense, a first edition of H.W. Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage could be any one of the several printings from 1926 to 1965 (when the second edition, as revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, was published). To a book collector or used-book seller, only the first printing (in the first year of publication) is a first edition.

*first iteration. See reiterate.

firstly, secondly, thirdly, etc. are today considered inferior to first, second, third, etc. Many stylists prefer first over firstly even when the remaining signposts are secondly and thirdly. See enumerations (a).

first name. See names (d).

FIRST PERSON. A. Generally. Immature writers use I and me at every turn. It's therefore a customary rite
of passage for every grade-school student to write an essay without ever using first person. As a writing exercise, this is useful.

Yet it arguably does much harm as well. Many students come to believe that in writing, there’s something inherently wrong with first person. So even later in life, they go to great lengths to avoid it, as by using phrases such as the present writer, the author, and so on. It leads them to passive voice and to zombie nouns. If you’re the actor, the belief runs, omit the actor. It all leads to abstracritis.

But graceless circumlocutions serve no real stylistic purpose and are inferior to the straightforward pronouns I and me. Late in his career as a writer, Jerome Frank confessed that he had long shunned the first-person pronoun, preferring the writer to I on the assumption that the indirect phrasing signified modesty. With age he became wiser and concluded: “To say I removes a false impression of a Jovian aloofness.” Courts on Trial vii–viii (1950).

Of one common set of self-obscuring devices—it is suggested that, it is proposed that, and it is submitted that—Fred Rodell observed, “Whether the writers really suppose that such constructions clothe them in anonymity so that people cannot guess who is suggesting and who is proposing, I do not know.” “Goodbye to Law Reviews—Revisited,” 48 Va. L. Rev. 279, 280 (1962). We do know, however, that these phrases often make sentences read as if they had been “translated from the German by someone with a rather meager knowledge of English.” Ibid.

None of this should suggest that every personal opinion should include the word I. Most opinions are transparently personal and need no direct mention of the writer—e.g.: “Though Einstein is routinely lionized as a great scientific mind, Newton was the most original thinker that science has ever produced.” No moderately sophisticated reader would assume that this statement is anything more than an opinion. And it is much more convincingly stated without inserting this statement is anything more than an opinion. And a moderately sophisticated reader would assume that this statement is anything more than an opinion. And it is much more convincingly stated without inserting the phrase in my opinion. See I personally, myself & superstitions (1).


It is certainly eccentric to see a solo writer using we and our when no one else is involved—e.g.: “We do not propose in this little volume to treat of these changes in their chronological sequence—to show, for instance, in what respects the English of Chaucer differs from that of Alfred, the English of Shakespeare [sic] from that of Chaucer, and the English of the nineteenth century from that of the sixteenth. Information of this kind must be sought for in regular histories of the English language. Our purpose is merely to give some idea of the causes by which the more remarkable changes in the language were brought about.” Henry Bradley, The Making of English 14 (1904; repr. 1951). The first-person I and My would surely sit more comfortably in those sentences—and probably would have even in 1904. See they (b).

fisc (= a governmental treasury; exchequer) has been predominantly so spelled in AmE and BrE alike since the 18th century. *Fisk is a variant spelling. The adjective form is fiscal.

Current ratio (fisc vs. *fisk): 4:1

fish; fishes. The Evanses wrote in 1957 that the plural fish is of recent vintage and opined that “the life expectancy of a new irregular plural, such as fish, is not very long.” DCAT at 179. But the OED cites fish as the plural form as long ago as 1300. Today, fish is the firmly established plural. Fishes appears rarely, at least outside ichthyology. When it does appear, it usually refers to more than one species—e.g.:

• While two Asian fishes have recently made news for their ability to survive in the wilds of America, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said last week it plans to restrict the sale of one of their cousins, a carp used on Southern fish farms to eat disease-carrying snails.” David Mercer, “Farmers Fret over Plans to Limit Carp,” Ark. Democrat-Gaz., 6 Aug. 2002, at D1.

Fish does take the regular -es ending to form the plural possessive—e.g.: “A Yozuri Crystal Minnow seems to be the fishes’ preference.” David Sikes, “Island Time,” Corpus Christi Caller-Times, 4 Aug. 2002, at B14. And the plural form fishes persists in idioms such as The Godfather’s “Luca Brasi sleeps with the fishes,” as well as the biblical allusion “loaves and fishes.”

*fisk. See fisc.

fission. The standard AmE pronunciation today is either /fish-an/ or /fiz-ah-n/. The second now predominates (probably to parallel the sound of the correlative term fusion /fyoo-zhan/), even though the first corresponds to analogous words such as mission. Cf. rescission (b).

fist bump; fist pump. A fist bump is a greeting made by bumping knuckles. A fist pump is a celebratory gesture made by holding out a fist with the elbow
cocked and jerking down (or sometimes up or away from the body). Although the terms are sometimes confounded, this writer got both right: ‘She looked at the stands and saw the Wolf Pack and gave them a fist pump.’ Andrew came over to her and said, ‘Crab legs with all the trimmings.’ Micala smiled and gave her trainer a fist bump.” D.K. Barnes, *High Country Dreams* 104 (2005).

**fisticuffs** (= a fistfight), though singular in sense (a single fistfight being *fisticuffs*), is plural in form. Still, one refers to *fisticuffs*, not *a fisticuffs*—e.g.: “The city’s famously combative District Attorney, Terence Hallinan, who got into a *fisticuffs* [delete *a*] with a trade-union leader at Mr. Davis’s last birthday celebration, said the party-givers’ biggest error might have been to invite a pair of political columnists from The San Francisco Chronicle.” Tim Golden, “Political ‘Party’ Goes So Far, Even San Francisco Is Aghast,” *N.Y. Times*, 10 May 1997, at 1, 15. Often found in the idiom to *trade fisticuffs*, the word carries a quaint tone.

**fist pump.** See **fist bump**.

**fistula** (= an abnormal opening into a natural canal or hollow organ) has predominantly formed the plural *fistulas* in AmE since about 1940, but the Latinate plural *fistulae* (*fis-*cha-lee/) has been standard in BrE since the mid-19th century. See **PLURALS** (b).

Current ratio (*fistulas vs. fistulae* in World English): 2:1

**fit > fitted > fitted** (traditionally); **fit > fit > fit** (more modernly in AmE). Just since the mid-20th century, AmE has witnessed a shift in the past tense and past participle from *fitted* to *fit*. Traditionally, *fit* would have been considered incorrect, but it began appearing in journalism and even scholarly writing as early as the 1950s. David S. Berkeley, “The Past Tense of ‘fit’,” *30 Am. Speech* 311 (1955).

This casualism now appears even in what is generally considered well-edited American journalism, especially where the *fit* is not a physical attachment but a match—e.g.:

- “This ‘modified Münchausen syndrome,’ in FBI terminology, occurs in someone who wants to be a hero so badly that he creates emergencies so he can rescue people. J ewell, a police wannabe, fit this profile and also had the characteristics of people who use pipe bombs—white single men in their 30s or 40s with a martial bent” James Collins, “The Strange Saga of Richard Jewell,” *St. Petersburg Times* § 239 (2006).

And the traditional form remains with prefixed derivatives (e.g., *outfitted*, *retrofitted*). Although *fitted* may one day be extinct as a verb form, it will undoubtedly persist as an adjective <fitted sheets>.

Anthony Burgess considered the past *fit* to be one of the prime differentiators between BrE and AmE: “A British reader of American expository prose feels totally at home until he comes to ‘fit’ as a past tense (‘This fit his theory’) and the past participle ‘gotten,’ which has disappeared from Britain (except in dialectical forms, where it often appears as ‘gotten’).” Anthony Burgess, *A Mouthful of Air* 280 (1992). See **IRREGULAR VERBS**. Cf. **knit**.

**Language-Change Index**

*fit* as a past-tense form: Stage 5

**fjord; *fiord.** In modern sources, *fjord*—the preferred spelling—greatly outnumbers *fiord*.

Current ratio: 3:1

**flaccid. A Pronunciation.** *Flaccid* is preferably pronounced /flak-sid/, not /flas-id/. All the traditional pronunciation guides have said so—and they’re right. The /ks/ pronunciation is common in words with a *-cc* preceding an *-i, -e*, or *-ee*, such as accession, accident, succeed, and vaccination. As one authority explains: “When *cc*- preceeds *e* or *i*, the first *c*- is pronounced *k*—, the second *s*, as in accede, accelerate, accept, accessible, flaccid, succint, etc.” Norman Lewis, Dictionary of Modern Pronunciation 76 (1963). The one set of exceptions to that rule involves Italian words and names commonly used in English (the *-cc* having a /ch/ sound): carpaccio, carpacciu, Gucci, Puccini, etc. Cf. **accessory (b)** & **succint**.

Over a long period, many pronunciation authorities have listed only /flak-sid/, not even mentioning /flas-id/. See, e.g., John H. Bechtel, Handbook of Pronunciation and Phonetic Analysis 53 (1900); Andrew
Meanwhile, the second edition of the
It labels /flak/ obelizes /-id/ with the mark “÷” (suggesting that W10 all right, but only as a secondary variant.
(1993) Webster's New World Dictionary (1961) and in other W3 middle)—started gaining some (grudging) acceptance in the -c-
flaccid some have tried to rationalize as a kind of sensory

The limp, flabby pronunciation of the word—which which some have tried to rationalize as a kind of sensory

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the misspelling *flacid* (on the analogy of placid) has arisen—e.g.:


• “The succulent shellfish practically melted on the tongue, but the tempura coating was oddly flacid [read flacid].” Cynthia Kilian, “A Win, Win Situation,” N.Y. Post, 12 May 2002, at 55.

• “We few, we unhappy few, grimace through the molasses-on-grits Southern accents, shake our heads at the historical revisionism and snort at the static dullness of this endless, flacid [read flacid] adaptation of another historical novel about America’s defining moment.” Roger Moore, “This Civil War Epic Is God-Awful and Generally a Waste,” Orlando Sentinel, 21 Feb. 2003, Cal. §, at 20.

• Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). •flagrant ( = glaring) is occasionally confused with fra-

See malapropisms.
For more on the use of flagrant, see blatant.

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flai; flay. To flail (1) to beat or thrash (something), or (2) to move in a thrashing motion, esp. to whip one's arms about wildly—e.g.: “[H]e start off stiff, his body virtually twitching with nervous energy, and then gradually his arms would start to move, then flail, his movements becoming wilder until he seemed to be tearing open.” Jonathan Hayes, “Joy Division: More Unknown Pleasures,” *N.Y. Observer*, 10 Sept. 2001.

To flay is (1) to rip the skin or hide off (something), or (2) to deprive (a person) of property by extortion or exaction—e.g.: “David Faber uses his take-no-prisoners approach to disembowel investment banking firms, expose methods of corporate deceit, flay the conspiring accounting firms, and generally lay bare how investor billions are made and lost (mostly lost) through greed and incompetence.” Book Rev., “Best Stock Pickers Do Their Own Homework,” *Pitt. Post-Gaz.*., 21 July 2002, at E2.

*Flay* is sometimes misused for *flail*—e.g.:

- “If you really and truly are that outdoorsy, spending many weekends *flaying* [read *flailing*] about in mud, water or over yonder dale, then the versatility of the Explorer is well worth the deficit in ride and handling.” David Booth, “Pseudo-ute v. Sport-ute,” *Nat'l Post*, 29 Sept. 2000, at E2.

- “He was nicknamed ‘the human locomotive’ because of his ungainly style—arms *flaying* [read *flailing*], head rolling, and his tongue hanging out.” Larry Stewart, “The Irish,” *Nat'l Post*, 21 Dec. 2000, at D2.


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flair. See flare.

flak; flack. *Flak* (orig. referring to fragments of artillery shells, esp. those used for anti-aircraft guns, built to explode into destructive pieces) = annoying criticism or opposition. *Flack* = a press agent. The most common problem with these words is that *flak* is misused for *flack*—e.g.:

- “*Variety's* Todd McCarthy says he received a good deal of *flack* [read *flak*] for his negative review.” Georgia Brown, “Riviera of No Return,” *Village Voice*, 7 June 1994, at 54.


- “[W]e never bought Internet, dot-com or telecom stocks for our clients. Although we took a lot of *flack* [read *flak*] in 1998 and 1999 for this stand, . . . we were *proven* [read *proved*] right when the dot-com bubble burst in the early 2000s.” Ric Edelman, “The Truth About Money,” *Capital* (Annapolis), 17 Dec. 2006, Bus. §, at B2. (See *proved*.)

But the misuses go both ways. Occasionally *flak* ousts *flack* from its rightful place—e.g.:

- “To reporters, they are derisively known as 'flaks' [read *flacks*], whose main duties consist of peddling press releases.” Bryan Burrough & John Helyar, *Barbarians at the Gate* 293 (1990).


During the 1960s, the noun *flack* was made into a verb. A person who *flacks* provides publicity. But *flak* has appeared in this context, too—not commonly, but often enough to warrant caution. E.g.: “Monday, I was all over Chicago *flacking* [read *flacking*] my new book *On the Line* (Harcourt Brace, $21.95), about last year’s elections.” Larry King, “Zipping by the Rest Stops on the Highway of Life,” *USA Today*, 22 Nov. 1993, at D2.

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**flambeau** (= a flaming torch) predominantly forms the plural *flambeaux* in AmE and BrE alike—not *flamebeaus*.

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**flamenco** = (1) the Spanish music originally played by gypsies and characterized by stomping and clapping; or (2) the dance typically performed to this music. Occasionally writers confuse this word with *flamingo* (the long-necked pink bird)—e.g.:


- “Other activities of this May Saturday include a *flamengo* [read *flamenco*] dancer and children’s activities.” Donna Larcen, “Dominick Dunne’s Home Among Dozens Open for Touring This Year,” *Hartford Courant*, 25 Apr. 1996, at G8.

- “Performers brought in to provide entertainment will include an Asian Lion dancer, a Celtic dance *troop* [read *troupe*], South American dancers and *flamingo* [read *flamenco*] dancers.” “Hayes Elementary Hosts International Fest,” *Houston Chron.*, 31 Jan. 2001, This Week §, at 10. (On the misuse of *troop* in that sentence, see *troop*.)

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**flammable; inflammable.** The first is now accepted as standard in AmE and BrE alike. Though examples
of its use date back to 1813, in the 1960s and more so later it became widespread as a substitute for inflammable, in which some people mistook the prefix in- to be negative rather than intensive—e.g.: “[T]heir fireplace is mounted in a black box built out of an inflammable [read a nonflammable or a noninflammable] material made of pressed paper.” Michael Cannell, “A 180-Degrees View of a Hotbed of Housing Design,” N.Y. Times, 4 Jan. 2007, at F7. Traditionally, the forms were inflammable and noninflammable; today they are flammable and nonflammable. By the early 1970s, purists had lost the fight to retain the older forms. See negatives (a).

Even staunch descriptionists endorsed the prescriptive shift from inflammable to flammable—e.g.: “A word is bad if it is ambiguous to such a degree that it leads to misunderstanding. For me, the perfect example of such a word is inflammable, if it is applied to substances. As most dictionaries now recognize, inflammable can be confused with non-combustible, and so lead to accidents.” Archibald A. Hill, “Bad Words, Good Words, Misused Words,” in Studies in English Linguistics for Randolph Quirk 250, 252 (1983). Cf. inflammatory.

**Language-Change Index**

| Flammmable (= combustible): Stage 5 Current ratio (flammable vs. inflammable): 2:1

**flare, flair. Flare = a sudden outburst of flame; an unsteady light. Flair = (1) outstanding skill or ability in some field; (2) originality, stickiness. By far the most common confusion occurs when flare displaces flair—e.g.:

- “Just as disappointing is the failure of [John] Clancy to show the flare [read flair] he has demonstrated in previous Edinburgh visits with shows such as ‘Americana Absurdum,’ ‘Horse Country’ and ‘Fatboy.’” Mark Fisher, “Midnight Cowboy,” Variety, 14–20 Aug. 2006, at 34.
- “[Mark] Cuban would love to see [Sidney] Crosby or one of the sport’s other young guns show some flare [read flair] and self-promotion on the ice.” Brian Miller, “Marketing of NHL Misses Net,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 24 Jan. 2007, at D1.

**Language-Change Index**

| Flare misused for flair: Stage 1 Current ratio (natural flair vs. *natural flair): 10:1

**flatulate, vb. In the 1960s and early 1970s, my grandfather, Texas Supreme Court Justice Meade F. Griffin (1894–1974), liked to tell his family the definition of a perfect host: “When your guest flatulates, so do you!” It never occurred to anyone in the family that flatulate wasn’t a bona fide word. Yet it wasn’t in the dictionaries, then or for the most part now, because lexicographers have overlooked both flatulate and its cognate noun flatulation. They have been much kinder to the synonyms crepitate (recorded in the OED from 1623—and labeled obsolete) and crepitation (recorded, in the sense of liberating enteric airs, from 1822). Despite the paltry evidence given in the OED for both of those words, they have always been, as an empirical matter, more common than the words formed by analogy from flatulence and flatulent.

Flatulate and flatulation appear to have been mostly medical terms when they emerged in the 19th century. Flatulated was a past-participial adjective meaning “bloated,” and flatulation was a fancy synonym for bloating—e.g.:

- “Complains now of palpitation (violent), hot flushes, cold feet, dizzy spells, menses irregular, indigestion; flatulated [i.e., bloated]; bowels irregular.” Reynold W. Wilcox, “Cactus Grandiflorus: A Clinical Study,” 7 Post-graduate 85, 91 (Feb. 1892).
- “Every . . . recurring flatulation and old-fashioned belly-ache, is traced to an inflamed or, in some manner or another, abnormal appendix.” Otto Juettner, “The Slaughter of the Innocents,” 37 Toledo Medical and Surgical Reporter 5, 6 (Jan. 1911).
- “A year ago he began to be troubled with gas, at first chiefly by night, later also by day; relieved by eructations and flatulated, but passing mostly by rectum.” “Case 8063,” 8 Case Records of the Massachusetts General Hospital 1 (7 Feb. 1922).

Among the earliest traceable uses of flatulate as a verb occurred in an unusually poignant passage in an 1883 issue of Obstetric Gazette: “What is there more absolutely provoking to the physician than to witness a patient of this character strain and groan and grunt and scream and defecate and micturate and flatulate and vomit and moan and lament and strain again, without accomplishing any advancement?” H.V. Sweringen, “Cases from Practice,” 6 Obstetric Gaz. 169, 170 (Apr. 1883). The word didn’t gain currency in nonmedical usage until the 1960s. Today it is fairly common—e.g.:

- “The least *flatulating* legumes are said to be (in this order) lentils, split peas, adzuki beans, mung beans, black-eyed peas, and anasazi beans.” Crescent Dragonwagon, Bean by Bean 7 (2012) (flatulating meaning “causing flatulence”).
- “One day when we were out for a ride, I *flatulated* and then said, ‘Excuse me.’ Kristen asked why I said that, and I told her, ‘Because of that noise I made,’ and she responded, ‘I can smell that sound you made!’” Don Brock, “Modesto Area Dads on Being Dads,” Modesto Bee, 14 June 2014.

There is certainly enough linguistic evidence to support the treatment of these words in individual dictionary entries. Hence flatulate isn’t at all classifiable as a nonword.

**flatulence; *flatulency.* These words—meaning either (1) “having excessive intestinal gas,” or (2) “pompous and pretentiousness”—came into use in the late 17th
flaunt; flout. Confusion about these terms is so distressingly common that some dictionaries have thrown in the towel and now treat flaunt as a synonym of flout. But the words are best kept separate.

Flout has always meant “to contravene or disregard; to treat with contempt.” The word almost never causes a problem. Here it’s correctly used: “A record rider turnout, fueled by the mayor’s earlier pledge to end the escort and crack down on cyclists flouting traffic laws, poured into the streets on an improvised route.” Chuck Finnie & Rachel Gordon, “Critical Mass Reaches Another Fork in the Road,” S.F. Examiner, 3 Aug. 1997, at B1. But the rare mistake of misusing flout for flaunt does sometimes occur—e.g.:

• “He had hardly left Read’s doorstep before anguish smote him at thus flaunting [read flouting] his wealth in the face of Read’s poverty.” Sarah Gertrude Liebson Millin, The Burning Man 280 (1952).
• “Mr. Talton was soon joined by almost two dozen other conservative Republicans who filed en masse into the clerk’s office to flaunt [read flout] their disapproval for their colleague and fellow party member.” Christy Hoppe, “GOP Shows Off Its Own Defection,” Dallas Morning News, 25 May 2000, at A33, A35.

Flaunt predominantly means “to show off or parade (something) in an ostentatious manner” <if you’ve got it, flaunt it>. The word is most often used correctly—e.g.:

• “Most vivid among the gaggle of grandchildren are the trashy and very available Dori (Maria Mervis), complete with body-flaunting garb; [and others].” Christopher Rawson, “Putting the Fun in Funeral,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 23 May 1997, at 30.

But the word is often incorrectly used for flout, perhaps because it is misunderstood as a telescoped vernacular form of flout: flout. The word is most often used correctly—e.g.:

• “This isn’t just a problem in the pro and college ranks. . . . Players in recreation leagues and even third-grade soccer tyros have been known to flaunt [read flout] the rules.” Editorial, “Tell Us How You’d Restore Discipline,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 4 Jan. 2007, at C6.

• “We are supposed to be a nation of laws, and being able to cherry-pick which laws to follow is not supposed to be part of the process. If so, each American undoubtedly could find a law to flaunt [read flout].” Tom Knott, “Illegals for Diversity? The ‘Logic’ Is Ludicrous,” Wash. Times, 25 Jan. 2007, Metro §, at B2.

One federal appellate judge who misused flaunt for flout in a published opinion—only to be sic’d and corrected by judges who later quoted him—appealed to W3 and its editors, who, of course, accept as standard any usage that can be documented with any frequency at all. The judge then attempted to justify his error and pledged to persist in it. See William Safire, I Stand Corrected 158–59 (1984). Seeking refuge in a nonprescriptive dictionary, however, merely ignores the all-important distinction between formal contexts, in which strict standards of usage must apply, and informal contexts, in which venial faults of grammar or usage may, if we are lucky, go unnoticed (or unmentioned). Judges’ written opinions fall into the first category.

fled > fleed > fled. So inflected. *Flee is a solecism—e.g.:

• “Lexington police say Wallace Charles Lanford fled [read fleed] the prison camp about 8 p.m.” “Man Convicted of Murder Escapes from Davidson Jail,” News & Record (Greensboro), 15 Nov. 1995, at BH2.

• “Shortly after, Skelly fleed [read fleed] the island after being suspected of working for the CIA.” Mimi Whitefield, “After Fleeing Fidel, Newsman Ready to Return to Cuba,” Miami Herald, 9 June 2015, News §.

See irregular verbs.

Readers may occasionally encounter *fleed as an obsolete past participle not of flee but of fly—e.g.:

“*She fled at him, and, to cut a long story short, he owned to having carried off five sack altogether, upon her promising not to persecute him.” Thomas Hardy, Far from the Madding Crowd 76 (1905).

fleas > fleshly > fleshy. Fleshly = (1) bodily, corporeal <the soul’s fleshy counterpart>; (2) carnal, sensual

flout

flaunt
<fleshy desires>; or (3) worldly, not spiritual <fleshy pleasures>—e.g.: "We cannot fight a fleshy appetite by indulging in it." John Duke, "Addictions Vary, but All Find Help in Program," Indianapolis Star, 27 Jan. 2007, at 2.

_Fleshy_ = (1) resembling flesh <a fleshy pink>; (2) plump <fleshy fingers>; or (3) pulpy, succulent <a fleshy grapefruit>—e.g.: "The scallops . . . were firm, fleshy, and bursting with flavor." Terra Walters, Capital (Annapolis), 26 Jan. 2007, Entertainment §, at 2.

Not surprisingly, these terms are susceptible to word-swapping—e.g.:

• "Modotti's technique left her portrait subjects looking so fleshy [read fleshy] that the prints themselves seem to have skin." Kenneth Baker, "Southern Exposure," S.F. Chron., 2 Sept. 2006, at E1.


### LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

_Misused for fleshy_ Stage 1

**flesh out; flush out.** To _flesh out_ is to put flesh on bare bones—that is, to move beyond the merest rudiments and to elaborate; to add some nuance and detail. To _flush out_ (probably a hunting metaphor) is to bring something into the open light for examination. _Flush out_ is sometimes misused for _flesh out_—e.g.: "Both sides say their case was hampered by the disappearance of Anait Zakarian, whom they said they needed to help _flush out_ [read _flesh out_] some of the details." Tina Daunt, "No Release for Victims," L.A. Times, 16 Oct. 1996, at B1.

_Misused for flesh out_ Stage 2

**fleshy.** See _fleshy_.

**fleur-de-lis; *fleur-de-lys; *fleur-de-luce.** The first has been standard in all varieties of World English since the 18th century. The second and third are variant spellings. The standard plural is _fleurs-de-lis_. Whether singular or plural, the standard pronunciation is /flər-də-lee/.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 143:59:1

**flexible.** So spelled—not _flexible_. See -ABLE (A).

**flexion; *flection.** Flexion = (1) the act of bending or flexing; esp., the bending of a joint with flexor muscles; or (2) a bend in something. *Flection is a NEEDLESS variant that has never been common in any sense. Among American desktop dictionaries, only W11 and NOAD correctly list _flexion_ as the main headword for all senses. Current ratio: 135:1

See irregular verbs.

### LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

_Misused for flung_ Stage 1

*fledged* vs. _*flied out_. See _fly_.

**flier; flyer.** _Flier_ is the standard form in AmE, _flyer_ in BrE.

**flight attendant.** See _stewardess_.

**fling > flung > flung.** So inflected. *Flinged is a blunder—e.g.:

• "Ryan would have at least stomped his feet or _flinged_ [read _flung_] a clipboard into the air; wouldn't he?" Bob McManaman, "Where Is Buddy Goat Gruff?" Ariz. Republic, 8 Oct. 1995, at E1.

• "Then, he snapped. He had a lackey fetch his diamond-encrusted G-Unit chain, a relic from his time in 50 Cent's posse. Then _Game flinged_ [read _flung_] it out to the 50-yard line, where it fell into the hands of a fan." Dan Aquilante, "Game for a Fight," N.Y. Post, 7 June 2005, at 48.

• "[T]he sophomore _flinged_ [read _flung_] the ball toward the basket and it climbed over the rim as the buzzer sounded." Robert Burns, "Lincoln Finishes Fourth, Glenwood Sixth at Collinsville," State J.-Register (Springfield, Ill.), 31 Dec. 2005, Sports §, at 9.

See irregular verbs.

### LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

_Misused for flung_ Stage 1

Current ratio (_flung_ vs. _*flied out_): 5,881:1

**flippant; flip, adj.** _Flippant = (1) inappropriately nonserious or disrespectful; pert; or (2) glib, talkative. Sense 2—the older one—has become archaic. _Flip_, a clipped form, is a _casualism_ that is gaining ground on the more traditional word. But as a matter of word frequency, the collocation _flippant remark_ appears in modern print sources much more often than _flip remark_.

Current ratio (_flippant remark vs. _flip remark_): 5:1

*floatation.** See _floation_.

**flock.** Although this word has two plurals, _flocks_ and _flock_, the first vastly predominates. E.g.: "Longshore has three _flocks_ of hens and one _flock_ of toms for people who want 30- to 40-pound birds." Mike Lafferty, "Turkeys Turn Tail on Cramped Pens," Columbus Dispatch, 24 Nov. 1996, at C1.

**flees (= sheets of ice on a body of water [fr. Norw. "flo"] should not be confused with _flows_—e.g.:

• "By awarding Pittsburgh's sole casino license to the North Shore developer, the state's Gaming board did not put the Penguins on an ice _flow_ [read _floe_] and kick them down river." Gene Collier, "Penguins Will Get What They Want," Pitt. Post-Gaz., 21 Dec. 2006, at C1.

• "Lengthening and heightening the bridge will allow engineers to place the abutments outside of the normal high water mark, thereby increasing the water flow area and reducing the risk of damage from ice _flows_ [read _floe_]." Kevin Miller, "State Panel Supports Replacement of Allagash Waterway Bridge," Bangor Daily News, 5 Jan. 2007, at B8.

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flora

- “His father used to take him down to the riverfront during the winter months, when the water was still flowing and completely jammed up with ice flows [read floes].” Mike Jackson, "One Man’s Formula for Success Includes a Life Lesson for All of Us,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 11 Jan. 2007, Sports §, at 9.

Of course, when ice actually does flow, as in a melting glacier, that movement is a flow—e.g.: “Very deep, beautiful lakes . . . may be the product of something rather ugly. They are a regular feature of ice sheets, but it is only in the last few years that scientists have linked them to the fact that ice flow within those sheets appears to be accelerating in response to climate change.” “Greenland Blues,” New Scientist, 7 Jan. 2006, at 39.

**Language-Change Index**

flows misused for floes: Stage 2

Current ratio (ice floes vs. *ice flows): 7:1

flora, like fauna, is a singular word with a collective implication. It refers to the plant life in a particular region. The word has two plurals, both rarely used: florae and florae. The first is standard. See Plurals (b). Cf. fauna.

florilegium (= an anthology) forms the plural florilégia—the homegrown *florilegias being essentially nonexistent in literary language. The singular is pronounced /flor-i-lee-am/.

floruit (L. “he or she flourished”) is a learned word meaning “a period during which a person, idea, etc. flourishes.” So rare is the word that it hasn’t achieved its own floruit. Yet it does appear in scholars’ prose—e.g.:

- “We may prefer to read about how things were or seemed to be in the days of our favorite author’s floruit, rather than to see them as they are today,” Robert Eisner, “The Lure of Literature,” N.Y. Times, 27 Mar. 1994, § 5, at 31.


- “It is generally true, I would judge, that Olympia’s floruit as a venue of athletic excellence is reckoned around the sixth to fourth centuries B.C., with the erection of the Temple of Zeus in c. 460 B.C. signaling an apex of Classical deco-


The phrase *floruit period is a redundancy—e.g.:


Occasionally the word bears its original Latin sense, often in its abbreviated form (fl.)—e.g.:


- “Euclid . . . fl. 300 B.C.; Gr. mathematician: author of a basic work in geometry.” WNWCD at 468.

The word is pronounced /flor-yoo-it/.

**Flotsam Phrases** just take up space without adding to the meaning of a sentence. So there is usually no reason, when it is clear whose opinion is being expressed, to write In my opinion or It seems to me that. Other examples are in terms of, on a . . . basis, my sense is that, in the first instance, the fact of the matter, and the fact that. (Admittedly, some of these phrases may be useful in speech.) We have enough written words without these mere space-fillers. See basis (A) & fact (A), (b).

flounder; founder. Both verbs signal failure, but the literal senses—and therefore the images conveyed metaphorically—differ. To flounder is to struggle and plunge as if in mud (not, in other words, to fail completely)—e.g.: “Sun Microsystems Inc. yesterday posted its fourth loss in five quarters . . . as the computer market flounders.” Chris Gaither, “Sun Posts Loss,” Boston Globe, 18 Oct. 2002, at D3. To founder is (of a person or animal) to go lame; (of a building) to fall down or give way; (of a horseback rider) to fall to the ground; (of livestock) to become sick from overeating; (of a ship) to fill with water and sink—e.g.: “The show picked up emotional steam in Act 2, when the parallel romances founder on the rocks of prejudice and racism.” Harriet Brown, “‘South Pacific’ Takes Audience to Tropical Isle,” Capital Times (Madi-


floot. See flaunt.

flowed; flown. Surprisingly, these words are often confused. Flowed is the past tense and past participle of flow <the lava flowed to the sea>. Flown is the past participle of fly <I had just flown to Chicago>. See fly & overflow.

flows. See floes.

fluently; fluidly. Both adverbs derive from the same Latin root, fluere (= to flow), and both connote grace and elegance. When referring to one’s mastery of a foreign language, fluently appears far more often than fluidly. The latter word might usefully imply a higher level of mastery than the former—e.g.: “My ability to

fluid; liquid; gas. Non-scientists often confuse these terms. A fluid is any substance that is capable of flowing and that changes shape under pressure; in other words, a fluid is not a solid. Fluids include both liquids and gases. A liquid is a fluid that has a fixed volume (such as water or oil). A gas is a fluid that can expand indefinitely (such as oxygen or steam). Although these words should be kept distinct in scientific contexts, fluid is sometimes used as a loose synonym of liquid in nontechnical writing (bodily fluids).

flukey /fluur-/.

In any event, the preferred pronunciations start with /fluur-/ instead of /fluor/; these words are often misspelled with -ou- (fluor). In AmE and BrE alike since the late 19th century.

fluoride; fluoridation; fluorescent. So spelled. Probably because of one pronunciation of the first syllable (/flouhr/), these words are often misspelled with -ou- instead of -oo- in the first syllable—e.g.:

- “Fluoride [read Fluoride] has been added to the town’s water for the last few years.” Eun Lee Koh, “Manganese Levels Will Be Examined,” Boston Globe, 18 Nov. 2001, Globe West §, at 1.

In any event, the preferred pronunciations start with /fluor-/. See irregular verbs.

FOIST

fly > flew > flown. Despite those irregular inflections, in baseball it is standard to say that a player who has hit a fly ball (i.e., one hit high into the air) has flown—e.g.:

- “With two out and a runner on second in the seventh, Casey missed a chance to extend the Tigers’ lead when he flew to right against reliever Tyler Johnson.” Tyler Kepner, “Cardinals Put Tigers on the Brink,” N.Y. Times, 27 Oct. 2006, at D1.

Cf. flowed. See irregular verbs.

flyer. See flier.

Flynn, in like. See in like Flynn.

foist. See foist (b).

focus. A. As a Noun. Pl. focuses or foci (foh-st). The plural foci—typical in medical and other technical texts—may strike readers as pretentious in ordinary prose. E.g.:

- “A story on teenage smoking had two primary foci [more accurately messages or conclusions], one of which is that white male teens smoke more than black male teens.” “Just Killing Time Now’—Does Anyone Disagree?” Buff-falo News, 1 Sept. 1996, at M11.
- “[A]t the hotel in which Laure and the narrator stay, the hotelier becomes one of many shifting foci in our anti-hero’s obsession . . .” Edie Meidav, “French Lovers on a Road Trip Collide with Beckett’s Novels,” S.F. Chron., 20 Nov. 2007, at E2.

See plurals (b). Even so, foci is much more common in print sources than the plural focuses.

Current ratio (many foci vs. many focuses): 5:1

flush out. See flesh out.

flutist; flautist; fluter. Flutist (flooo-tist), the much older word (dating from the early 17th century), is generally preferred by professional flute players in the United States. It also predominates in modern AmE print sources by a 2-to-1 ratio—and has always been the more prevalent term. The old joke within the profession is that only a second-rate flutist prefers to be called a flautist (/flow-tist/ or /flaw-tist/). Fluter is an unusual dysphemism.

But flutist predominates in BrE and has done so since about 1880, after British writers began revising the word to make it a gallicism.

Current ratio (in World English in order of headwords): 59:35:1

fogy; fogey. This word, a dysphemism for a more or less elderly person with hidebound ideas, is predominately spelled fogy in AmE, fogey in BrE. The etymology of the word is unknown.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

flush out. See flesh out.

flyer. See flier.

FOIST

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When the phrase is as unidiomatic as *foist with*, a different verb is in order: “An employer is foisted with [read bears the] responsibility to a third party if his employee commits a tort in the course of his employment.” Stanley Berwin, *The Economist Pocket Lawyer* 231 (1986).

*Foist off on* is awkward and wordy (perhaps influenced by *fob off on*—see (b)). The OED quotes Charlotte Brontë as having written *foist off on* but calls the phrase “rare.” It is fairly rare today. It ought to follow.

As the plural of *folks*<ref>, *those folks over there*. Sometimes it is used to mean either “nonsense” or “a useless trifle.”

**FOLDS**

Folksfolks. This casualism has two plurals in Standard English: *folk*<ref> <rural folk> and *folks*<ref> <folks say>. *Folks* is most commonly synonymous with *relatives, relations, kinfolks, or kinsmen*. Often it takes on a more restricted meaning, referring either to parents *my folks are both in a nursing home* or to one’s immediate family (including siblings) to the exclusion of more distant relatives *Where do all your folks live?>. Context usually supplies some degree of clarity. The term can also refer to people more generally *<good evening, folks!> <those folks over there*>. Sometimes it is used as the plural of *you*<ref> <you folks>. Cf. *y'all*.

**FOLK ETYMOLOGY.** See etymology (d).

foment vb., = to incite or rouse *<the rebels fomented a revolution>*. Although the word was once used as a noun—the OED records sparse uses from 1540 to 1892—the corresponding noun has long been *fomentation* (= incitement, instigation). But some writers want to revive *foment* as a noun—e.g.: “In the social *foment [read fomentation]* of the 1960s and 1970s, Donahue was a pioneer in discussing both personal and political issues with a largely female audience.” Jane Hall, “At the End of a Long Run, Phil Donahue Looks Back,” *L.A. Times*, 3 May 1996, at F2. Perhaps this poor usage arises from confusion with *ferment* (= agitation). Indeed, *ferment* might be the better edit in the sentence just cited. It certainly seems the better choice in these examples:

• “There hardly could be better circumstances to nurture political *foment [read ferment]*:” Harry Austin, “Tinder for a Saudi Bomb,” * Chattanoog Times*, 3 July 1996, at A6.

• “A less noble reason is that art has long been the victim of political *foment [read ferment]*: The French Revolution and, in particular, the Reign of Terror are appalling cases in point.” Mario Naves, “Middle Age’s Stony Features,” *N.Y. Observer*, 25 Dec. 2006, Culture §, at 18.

• “As this year ends and a new one begins, the role of God among all nations must be acknowledged if there is to be any comprehension of why the world is in such *foment [read ferment]* and chaos.” Victoria A. Brownworth, “Faith: Something Worth Fighting For,” *Baltimore Sun*, 31 Dec. 2006, Ideas §, at F7.

Although *fomentation* doesn’t appear frequently, it remains much more common in printed sources than the noun uses of *foment*—e.g.:
or (2) the conical hat formerly put on dull pupils or, court jesters, with three peaks, each tipped with a bell; century papermakers used a fontanelle (one of several soft spots in a baby’s skull in which bone has not yet formed and hardened) has been the predominant spelling in both AmE and BrE alike, as well as the accepted term in veterinary medicine. It is true, however, that hoof-and-mouth disease is an Americanism dating from the late 19th century. But this version, despite its stronger claim to logic (since hoofed animals aren’t usually said to have “feet”), never progressed beyond its status as a casualism and a secondary variant. There is also an unrelated childhood condition called “Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease,” characterized by ulcerated sores in the mouth and rashes on the extremities.

B. Whether to Hyphenate. During the devastating 2001 outbreak of the disease in Europe, five major newspapers and magazines over a two-day period hyphenated the phrasal adjective, and one didn’t:

- “Ministers were forced onto the defensive over their handling of the foot-and-mouth epidemic last night.” Philip Webster et al., “Foot and Mouth Epidemic Will Rage Until August,” Times (London), 23 Mar. 2001, at 1 (hyphenating throughout the text but not in the headline).

The Financial Times and The Wall Street Journal Europe both sensibly hyphenate the phrase in headline and text alike, whereas The Times loses nerve and omits the hyphens from its headlines. The Guardian, meanwhile, omits hyphens everywhere—even when foot-and-mouth appears as a noun phrase, without disease or epidemic or some other noun following notably, on political dissidents in Maoist China. In sense 2, it’s also called a dunce cap or dunce’s cap.

foot; feet. When you use a number greater than one to denote a distance, use the plural feet <a fence ten feet high>, unless the distance is part of a phrasal adjective <a ten-foot fence>.

foot-and-mouth disease. A. And hoof-and-mouth disease. Although some commentators have erroneously suggested otherwise, foot-and-mouth disease has long been the predominant phrase in AmE and BrE alike, as well as the accepted term in veterinary medicine. It is true, however, that hoof-and-mouth disease is an Americanism dating from the late 19th century. But this version, despite its stronger claim to logic (since hoofed animals aren’t usually said to have “feet”), never progressed beyond its status as a casualism and a secondary variant. There is also an unrelated childhood condition called “Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease,” characterized by ulcerated sores in the mouth and rashes on the extremities.

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

- “For decades, extremists on both sides spoiled any hope of Arab acceptance of the Jewish state of Israel with their fomentation of hatred and bloodshed.” “Clinton’s Mideast Trip,” USA Today, 26 Oct. 1994, at A12.
Footnotes. A. The Good and the Bad. Footnotes are the mark of a scholar. Overabundant, overflowing footnotes are the mark of an insecure scholar—often someone who gets lost in the byways of analysis and who wants to show off. Underinclusive footnotes mark the scholar who (1) wants to write for a popular audience and fears that footnotes will be a turnoff; (2) doesn’t really know the literature in his or her field very well; or (3) doesn’t care to give credit where credit is due.

The difficult thing for any scholarly writer is to achieve a balance. Much depends on the subject matter, the intended audience, and the content of the writing. On the one hand, footnotes are “reminders that scholarship is an intrinsically communal enterprise—building on, revising or replacing the work of predecessors. History as we know it would not exist without source notes. Neither would philosophy, which even at its most original involves a dialogue with thinkers alive and dead.” Kenneth L. Woodward, “In Praise of Footnotes,” Newsweek, 9 Sept. 1996, at 75. On the other hand, footnotes can be “the horrid squeakings [that] arise when an author puts a brand new pair of shoes on his brain child. . . . Let all beware of too copious annotation, one of the deadly sins of literature.” Fairfax Downey, “Literary Chiropody,” in The Modern Writer’s Art 98 (Theodore J. Gates & Robert E. Galbraith eds., 1936).

Footnotes are generally an excellent place for citations. But discursive footnotes—those that contain substantive discussion—ought generally to be kept to a minimum.

B. Versus Endnotes. Whereas footnotes appear at the foot of the page, endnotes appear at the end of an article, chapter, or book. (Endnotes are often mistakenly called footnotes.) In general, footnotes are easier on the reader than endnotes, which require flipping through pages to locate references. But scholarly journals and books increasingly use endnotes to simplify printing and unclutter pages.

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FOR-; FORE-. As you’ll observe in many of the following entries, these prefixes cause a great deal of confusion. You can usually arrive at the correct prefix for any given word by remembering that fore- always means “before” <forebears = ancestors>. For- may mean either “completely” <forfeit = to lose (something) completely> or “against” <forbear = to refrain (from some action) against one’s inclination>.

for is one of several causal words in the English language, the most prominent others being the subordinating conjunctions because, since, and as. (See as (A).) And because for is roughly equivalent to those words, some grammarians have mislabeled it a subordinating conjunction. But unlike those words, for has always been proper at the beginning of an independent clause—e.g.:

- “Perhaps I should feel grateful for the hard work Ms. Smith has put in on behalf what he might call ‘for’ she certainly has worked very hard indeed.” Brandon Robson, “‘Shelf Life,” Independent, 11 Jan. 1998, at 27.
- “Earlier, Parish had said he was proud and flattered to have his number retired. For he always had lived in Bird’s long shadow” Bill Reynolds, “‘Green with Pride.” Providence J.-Bull., 19 Jan. 1998, at A1.
- “When placed in a New Zealand market context, the sportiness of the R3 isn’t exactly unique either. For sitting in showrooms a number of similarly focused models” “Yamaha’s Bantamweight Champ,” Manawatu Standard (N.Z.), 28 Aug. 2015, at 21.

The better grammatical view is this: “Because . . . for can stand at the beginning of an independent statement or even of a paragraph, it can be classed as a coordinating conjunction.” R.W. Pence & D.W. Emery, A Grammar of Present-Day English 124 n.31 (2d ed. 1963).

*fora. See forum.

for all intents and purposes; to all intents and purposes; *for all intensive purposes. The original phrase, dating from the 17th century, is to all intents and purposes. The other phrase, with for at the outset, is a relative latecomer that cropped up in BrE in the late 19th century and spread to AmE in the mid-20th century. By the 1990s for was almost as common as to in AmE, whereas to retained predominance in BrE. Both forms are used today, for being more common in AmE and to in BrE—e.g.:

- “It is only when life has, for all intents and purposes, already abandoned the patient that Dr. Kevorkian steps in.” Kevin Theis, “Assisted ‘Suicide,”” Chicago Trib., 17 Dec. 1996, at 28.

Either form, though, often qualifies as a flotsam phrase.

Because some people mishear the phrase, the moniker *for all intensive purposes has arisen—e.g.:

- “The basic numbers given above will not have changed much—bankers say that imports could be depressed a bit further—and with reserves that are for all intensive purposes [read for all intents and purposes] negligible there will be a clear payments lump.” Terry Povey, “A Rosier Tint to the Financial Horizon,” Fin. Times, 15 Oct. 1984, § III, at v.
- “For all intensive purposes [read For all intents and purposes], the electrically powered automobile is dead—and they are considered dinosaurs of the past.” Arthur Abrom, “The Forgotten Art of Electric-Powered Automobiles,” in The Tesla Papers 89 (David Hatcher Childress ed., 2000).
- “For all intensive purposes [read For all intents and purposes], the Titans’ Super Bowl dreams ended right there.” Aaron Wilson, “‘Determined’ Mitchell Broke Titan Hearts
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See malapropisms.

Language-Change Index

*for all intensive purposes for all intents and purposes: Stage 1
Current ratio (all intents and purposes vs. *all intensive purposes): 191:1

foramen /fa-ray-man/ (= a small opening or perforation, esp. in a bone or plant ovule) predominantly forms the classical plural foramina—not *foramens.

See plurals (b).

Current ratio: 49:1

for a period of. See period of.

forbade; *forbad. See forbid.

forbear /fohr-bair/, v.t.; forebear /fohr-bair/, n.

Though unrelated, these words are confused in every conceivable way. Forbear—the verb meaning “to refrain from objecting to; to tolerate”—is inflected forbear > forbore > forborne. But because the inflected forms appear only infrequently, writers sometimes fall into error—e.g.: “A borrower who lives in the home five years after doing the work may have the loan forebeared [read forborne].” Gary Mayk, “Grants and Loans Available to Buyers,” “Can D’Amato Save Cuomo?” Newsday, 9 Dec. 2000, at A23.

Forbear is occasionally misused for forebear—e.g.:


• “The founding fathers of cyberspace . . . , like their forbears [read forebears], were almost exclusively white, male, middle-aged and privileged.” Peter H. Lewis, “Technology,” N.Y. Times, 28 Aug. 1995, at D3.

The opposite error, though less common, also occurs—e.g.:


See word-swapping.

Language-Change Index

1. forbear misused for forebear: Stage 2
Current ratio (their forbears vs. *their forebears): 6:1
2. forbear misused for forbear: Stage 1
Current ratio (must forbear vs. *must forebear): 38:1
3. *forebearer for forebear: Stage 1
Current ratio (our forebears vs. *our forebears): 46:1

Forbearance. So spelled—not *forebearance, which is a nonword. But some writers blunder—e.g.:


• “[I]f you don’t pause in the adjoining retail shop and practically fill a suitcase with all sorts of parcels and those familiar red tartan tins of shortcake . . . , you’re showing far more forebearance [read forbearance] than yours truly.” Joe Crea, “You’re a Loch to Find Castles and Whisky, but a Monster Hunt Will Come Up Empty,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 25 Feb. 2007, at K6.

Language-Change Index

*forebearance for forebear: Stage 1
Current ratio (forebearance vs. *forebearance): 74:1

forbid > forbade > forbidden. A. Standard Forms.
The past tense is forbade (rhyming with glad)—e.g.:

“[Locke] sharply distinguished the respective spheres of Church and State and forbade each from meddling in the other.” Clifford Orwin, “Civility,” 60 Am. Scholar 553, 557 (1991). Forbid is sometimes wrongly used as a past-tense form—e.g.:

• “Susan has dropped the restraining order that once forbid [read forbade] him [from making] any contact with her.” Brian Biggane, “Fitzpatrick’s Life Improving, but His Time in Goal Isn’t,” Palm Beach Post, 31 Mar. 1995, at C1.


In fact, the slack usage is so common that some dictionaries now list forbid as an alternative.

Some writers—no doubt those who pronounce forbade correctly—use the variant spelling *forbad. It was common from about 1660 to 1800. Today it is an archaism. Avoid it—e.g.:


• “The Constitution forbade [read forbade] Congress from creating ‘an establishment of religion,’ but this was no mysterious concept known only to deep thinking legal scholars.” Thomas Sowell, “Silly War on Symbols Can Be Prelude to Tragedy,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 23 Dec. 2005, at A19.

See irregular verbs & bid (A).

Meanwhile, the laughable form *forbade occasionally appears—e.g. “Gramola told Williams to remove the headphones, originally thinking a PIAA regulation forbade [read forbade] Williams from taking them into a huddle.” Kevin Freeman, “Williams, Novak to Meet, Hash Out Their Differences,” Lancaster New Era, 28 Oct. 1997, at C1.

Finally, forbade is often misspelled *forebade, doubtless through an erroneous sense of etymology. In fact, the for- here means “against”; it has nothing to do with fore-, meaning “before.” E.g. “To make matters worse, experts said, PG&E and Edison couldn’t protect themselves from the high prices by entering into long-term contracts because regulations set during deregulation forbade [read forbade] them.” Mary Friccker, “Experts: Surge in Energy Cost Not Predictable,” Press Democrat (Santa Rosa), 18 Jan. 2001, at E1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. forbid for the past-tense forbade: Stage 2
   Current ratio (he forbade it vs. *he forbid it): 6:1
2. forbade misspronounced /for-bayd/: Stage 4
3. forbade misspelled *forebade: Stage 1
   Current ratio: 563:1

B. Preposition with. In formal contexts, forbid traditionally takes the preposition to, less formally, from. H.W. Fowler stated that forbid from doing is unidiomatic (FMEU1 at 186), but it is increasingly common. In fact, it is probably more common today than forbid to do, but both forms appear frequently—e.g.:

• “In exchange, the Government prohibits newspaper vending machines, forbids small stores from selling papers and gives the union sole right to use the public sidewalks to sell newspapers.” Anthony DePalma, “Despite Gains, Press Freedom in Mexico Is Still Limited,” N.Y. Times, 20 Nov. 1994, § 1, at 3.


• “On a 9–0 vote, the court struck down laws in Rhode Island and 10 other states that forbid retailers to advertise their prices for beer, wine or liquor.” David G. Savage, “Advertisers’ Free-Speech Rights Bolstered;” L.A. Times, 14 May 1996, at A1.


Cf. prohibit.

forbore; borne. See forbear.

forceable. See forcible.

forceps. This is traditionally a singular noun (this forceps isn’t big enough). But on the mistaken assumption that the word is plural, the word is increasingly joined with a plural verb. The error is old—e.g.: “The forceps are [read is] compact, they are [read it is] easy to handle and have [read has] firm gripping power.” Surgery, Gynecology and Obstetrics 662 (F.H. Martin ed., 1915).

The English plural is either forceps or forcepses. In The Origin of Species, Charles Darwin used forcepses. The Latin plural is forceps /for-si-peez/, which was fairly common in technical books from 1800 to about 1975. Since the early 19th century, the back-formation *forcep has occasionally appeared—e.g.:

• “With a considered tug Mr. Shebata soon frees the organ from one of the small holes in the donor’s stomach. He strides swiftly across the theatre, skirting trays of gleaming equipment, with it dangling from a forceps.”

Cf. biceps.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*force for forceps as a singular: Stage 2
Current ratio (a forceps vs. *a force): 38:1

forcible; forceable; forceful. Oddly, we have the spellings enforceable but forcible. (See enforceable.) The usual form, forcible means “effected by force against resistance”—e.g.:

• “Driving the 4% dip in violent crime through June were drops in homicide, 2%; forcible rape, 6%.” Robert Davis, “Random Killings Hit a High,” USA Today, 5 Dec. 1994, at A1.

• “Steel insulated or solid core wood doors offer the most resistance to forcible entry, provided there are no side-light s.” Linda Syron, “Helpful Ways to Keep Burglars at Bay.” Toronto Sun, 15 Dec. 1996, at H10.

Forceable, though it might appear a needless variant, carries a passive sense: “capable of being forced” (she tried to coerce him, but he simply wasn’t forceable).

Because forcible properly refers only to physical force, it shouldn’t be used where forceful is needed, the latter carrying figerative as well as literal meanings—e.g.: “A Washington Post–ABC News survey of U.S. voters taken Wednesday night confirmed the doubts forcibly [read forcefully] expressed by a dozen Illinois
forebear. See for-.

forebearance. See forbearance.

forebode (= to predict [usu. something bad]; foretell) is sometimes misspelled *forbode—e.g.:  
- "If the personalities of the principals on both sides of the table don't mesh, it forbodes [read forebodes] what well could be a bad marriage between the firms." Ursula Miller, "Investment Banker Manages Mergers," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 4 Mar. 1996, at D1. (On the odd syntax of that sentence, in which the unidiomatic phrase well could be appears in place of the more natural could well be, see ADVERBS (A.). )  
- "[T]he track is purportedly built atop an ancient Indian burial ground and the place seems to ooze a sense of morbid forboding [read foreboding]," Brant James, "In Junior's Words," *St. Petersburg Times*, 28 Apr. 2007, Sports §, at C12.

See for-.

**Language-Change Index**

forebode misspelled *forbode: Stage 1  
Current ratio: 44:1

**forecast > forecast > forecast.** So inflected. *Forecasted* is a solecism that spread during the 20th century and lingers still—e.g.:  

See *-cast & irregular verbs.*

**Language-Change Index**

*forecasted for past-tense forecast: Stage 2  
Current ratio (forecast that vs. forecasted that): 9:1

foreclose. A. Constructions with. Today, foreclose most commonly indicates one or more possibilities <his failure of the exam forecloses the possibility of a promotion>.  
In the context of a real-estate foreclosure, the verb is generally intransitive: one forecloses on property or a mortgage. E.g.: "William J. Hedebrand, a man the town took to court in 1984 over a house he built illegally in West Suffield, is now trying to persuade the town not to foreclose on his property." Mindy A. Antonio, "Man Offers to Settle Debt He Owes Suffield," *Hartford Courant*, 22 Dec. 1994, at B1.  
But the verb was formerly often transitive, so that a sentence like that one would have read, "William J. Hedebrand . . . is now trying to persuade the town not to foreclose his property." This usage is infrequent but not unknown—e.g.: "On the following April 10 the Bank instituted an action to foreclose its mortgage." Grant Gilmore & Charles L. Black Jr., *The Law of Admiralty* 953 (2d ed. 1975).

Some writers even use *foreclose against,* but on is more idiomatic—e.g.: "You can't foreclose against [read on] my home if you didn't record the mortgage." Robert J. Bruss, "Failure to Record Realty Files Can Be Costly," *Chicago Trib.*, 21 July 1994, at C5.  
Foreclose (a person) from (an action) is an archaic construction still occasionally used, but the instances are too convoluted to quote. That in itself should serve as adequate warning to avoid it.

B. Misspelled *foreclose.* *Forclose* is an erroneous form that sometimes appears—e.g.:  

See for-.

**Language-Change Index**

foreclose misspelled *forclose: Stage 1  
Current ratio: 716:1

forefathers; founding fathers. Both may denote the founders of the country, but the two shouldn't be combined—e.g.: "What would Washington, Jefferson, Madison and the other founding forefathers [read founding fathers] say about us today?" Charlie Rea, "The Moral Implications of Tax Cutting," *Roanoke Times*, 30 Jan. 2001, at A11. *Forefathers* is an old-fashioned synonym for *ancestors;* some writers avoid it because of its sexist overtones. (See sexism.) But *founding fathers* seems unobjectionable and historically accurate in reference to those who participated directly in establishing the U.S. Constitution and the American government. Meanwhile, the term *founders* (often capitalized) is common nowadays; it may denote the founders of anything, such as a town or a corporation.

**Language-Change Index**

*founding forefathers for founding fathers: Stage 1  
Current ratio (founding fathers vs. founding forefathers): 507:1
foregather; forgather. The latter (meaning “to meet in a group; assemble”) has long been thought to be the standard spelling—as the listings in the OED and W11 attest. In fact, though, in modern print sources, both AmE and BrE, the spelling foregather has enjoyed a significant preponderance. (See for-.) In any event, though, gather usually suffices—e.g.: “On the Greek isle of Skagathos, a gaggle of New Agers foregather [read gather], booked by Skagathos Holidays to enroll in such courses as Orgasmic Consciousness and Therapy of Fiction Writing.” Nicholas Delbanco, “From D.M. Thomas, a Fine, Funny Novel of the Writing Life,” Chicago Trib., 9 June 1996, Books §, at 9. (On second thought, the quirky word might be appropriate in that particular context.)

forego; forgo. Although a few apologists argue that these words are interchangeable, there’s a distinction worth preserving. True, for over a century (ca. 1800–1900), forgo was used in all senses. But about 1900 some differentiation emerged—a nuance observed today by fastidious writers. Forego, as suggested by the prefix, means “to go before.” Forgo means “to do without; pass up voluntarily; waive; renounce.” Cf. forswear.

Using forgo where forgo would be better is a persistent problem. Examples of the poor usage are legion—e.g.: • “That realization not only helped Lavelle’s brother but convinced her to forgo [read forgot] a career as a social worker or psychologist and instead become a teacher.” “Challenged Students Get Special Help,” L.A. Times, 11 Apr. 1997, at B2.
• “[T]he beauty of the trees by night, and the rapture of lovers under the stars, these things we shall forego [read forgot].” Alan Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country 72 (2003).
• “But the eye-popping purchase price offered by an investment group called Clipper Equity understandably raises fears that to recoup its investment, Clipper would forego [read forgot] its subsidies and attempt to raise rents, eventually forcing out many of Starrett’s 14,000 tenants.” “Protecting Affordable Housing,” N.Y. Times, 18 Feb. 2007, § 14, at 11.


Forwent and forewent are the past-tense forms. While forewent is hopelessly archaic <they forewent us to the theater>, forwent is occasionally useful—e.g.: • “I’m not going to say never to anything,” said Moulton Patterson, who forwent a bid for reelection.” Debra Cano, “Moulton Patterson May Seek Council Seat,” L.A. Times, 14 Dec. 1994, at B2.

Forgone and foregone are the past-participial forms. Foregone is correct in the phrase foregone conclusion because the idea is that the conclusion “went before” the question: everybody knew the answer before the question was posed. Naturally, though, blunders arise, even in the writings of those who should know better—e.g.: “[I]t was forgone [read foregone] that disinterested would lose its older sense once uninterested lost the sense of ‘having a stake in,’ which we retain only in the fixed phrase interested party.” Geoffrey Nunberg, “The Decline of Grammar,” Atlantic Monthly, Dec. 1983, at 44. (For more on the usage issue discussed in that sentence, see disinterested & disinterested.) Meanwhile, the past participle of forgo is forgone, without the medial -e-: “I would have given a lot for a few columns about what the Flynn years cost Boston in the way of forgone [read forgone] opportunities.” David Warsh, “In Sight of Milton,” Boston Globe, 26 Oct. 1993, at 37. See for-.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. forego misused for forgo: Stage 4 Current ratio (forgo the opportunity vs. *forego the opportunity): 1:1
2. forgoing misused for foregoing: Stage 1 Current ratio (the foregoing vs. *the forgoing): 101:1

forehead traditionally rhymes with horrid, as in the nursery rhyme: “There was a little girl, who had a little curl / Right in the middle of her forehead; / When she was good, she was very, very good, / But when she was bad she was horrid.” But in AmE, the word is commonly (and acceptably) pronounced /for-hed/.

foreign language; second language. There are connotative differences. A foreign language is learned mostly for the cultural insight it may provide. A second language is learned mostly for utilitarian purposes.

In technical usage, a foreign language is one you learn so that you can communicate with foreigners; a second language is one you learn so that you can communicate with people in the country where you live. People living in the U.S. who speak either English or Spanish may learn the other as a second language. But if the same people learned German or Urdu, for example, they would probably learn it as a foreign language.

forejudge. There are two words spelled this way. The first is a needless variant of prejudge. It’s sometimes misspelled forjudge. See prejudge.

The second, deriving from Middle English for-jugen (“to judge outside”), is an unetymologically spelled variant of an archaism. It should be forjudge because it means “to expel or dispossess by judicial decree.” But the OED shows that forejudge, with an -e-, has been used with this legal meaning since the late 16th century. In any event, the term is quite rare in this sense. When the word is needed, forjudge is the better spelling. See for-.
foreman. A. Generally. In the sense "a person in charge of a group of workers" (<the foreman on the docks>, foreman dates from the 16th century. But pressure is afoot to find gender-neutral alternatives, and the words supervisor, chief, and leader seem to be the most likely candidates. See sexism (c).

B. Legal Sense. Of the three choices—foreman, foreperson, and presiding juror—the best is the last. E.g.: “We are working diligently, the presiding juror concluded in the message.” George Flynn, “Turner Jury Eyes Secret Service Probe,” Houston Chron., 11 Oct. 1996, at 33. The word foreperson, though one word, is less satisfactory because it uses the -person suffix. (See sexism (c.).) Yet that form is, for the time being, ensconced in federal procedural rules and may be difficult to oust.

It’s mildly surprising to see foreman and foreperson being used together for purposes of inelegant variation—e.g.: “And since the foreperson is the single most influential person on a jury, lawyers will do anything to keep good foreman material off.” Robin T. Lakoff, Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives 114–15 (1990). (On the use of single most in that sentence, see single most.)

Current ratio (foreman of the jury vs. presiding juror): 2:1

forename. For the meaning of this term, see the discussion at surname.

*foresake. See forsake.

foseeable is occasionally misspelled *foseeable—e.g.:

See for-.

Language-Change Index
foreseeable misspelled *foseeable: Stage 1
Current ratio: 150:1

foreshorten (= to shorten lines for rendering three-dimensional perspective in two dimensions) dates from the Renaissance and is best left in the field of art—e.g.: “Even Titian does not foreshorten his boughs rightly.” John Ruskin, The Works of John Ruskin 71 (1887). Otherwise, it adds nothing but a syllable to shorten—“But scrawled within [the genome] are clues about our future, which can be downright terrifying. Rather than expand our sense of possibilities, they foreshorten [read shorten] them. . . . From our genes, we learn how we may die,” Jennifer Senior, “Chronicle of a Death Foretold,” N.Y. Times, 11 May 2008, Book Rev. §, at 28.

fores; fores(l)ment. Although the predominant verb is fores; fores(l)ment in AmE and BrE alike, the standard noun is fores; fores(l)ment in AmE but fores; fores(l)ment in BrE.

Current ratio (fores; fores(l)ment vs. *fores; fores(l)ment): 42:1

forever. One word. The OED suggests a distinction—the solid forever meaning "incessantly" <she’s forever twirling her hair> and the two-word *for ever meaning “for all future time” <we’ll be together for ever>. But the solidified version has become standard in both AmE and BrE, and the two-word version is best described as archaic.

forewent. See forego.

foreword (= a book’s introduction, esp. one written by someone other than the author) is often misspelled like its homophone, forward—e.g.:
- “In his forward [read foreword] to the book, Alexander Woollcott describes him as ‘the most notable city editor of his time,’ endlessly fascinated by ‘the changeless and ever-changing Baghdad which is the territory of his staff’;” “Mythic City Editor Is Brought Back to Life,” N.Y. Times, 18 Oct. 1999, at C18.
- “In the forward [read foreword] to his book, [José] Cisneros writes that the first Spanish horses were responsible for bringing civilization to our continent and that he considers it his mission to ‘follow their hoofprints along and across the land . . . . ’” Gary Cartwright, “Pasó por Aquí,” Texas Monthly, Dec. 2006, at 182.

See for-. Cf. preface.

Language-Change Index
forward misused for foreword: Stage 2
Current ratio (book’s foreword vs. *book’s forward): 10:1

forfeitue is naturally pronounced /for-fi-chәr/. Pompous speakers are fond of pronouncing the final syllable /tyoor/.

for free. See free.

forgather. See foregather.

forgery. See counterfeit.

fogo. See forego.

formality; formalism. These words are quite distinct. Formality denotes (1) conformity to rules or customs; (2) strict precision in manners; or (3) an obligatory step in a process. Formalism, by contrast, denotes strict adherence to traditional or prescribed forms, especially without regard to substantive import. The
word is generally pejorative—e.g.: “[Cinematographer Wally] Pfister and director Christopher Nolan used an unfettered camera to help them defy the stuffy formalism associated with period pieces and suggest contemporary parallels to their tale of Victorian-era illusions.” Sheigh Crabtree, “A Year of Some Dark Movie Magic,” L.A. Times, 18 Feb. 2007, Sunday Cal. §, at E6. Formalism also refers to various schools of thought or style, as in mathematics, art, architecture, and literature.

The corresponding adjective, formalistic, carries perhaps even more strongly negative connotations than formalism—e.g.:

• “Her colleague Rose Rosengard Subotnik blames Schoenberg for the whole notion of contemporary music as an unpopular, formalistic, not to say academic, pursuit, removed from society and powerless to change it.” David Schiff, “Schoenberg, Alive (Gasp!) and Well,” N.Y. Times, 16 Jan. 1994, § 2, at 25.


• “Current law affords the able-bodied a right that is denied to some disabled people, namely the right to kill themselves, . . . based on a formalistic moral distinction, between killing yourself and someone else killing you on your behalf, that is meaningless in practical terms.” Andrew Coyne, “If Euthanasia Is a Right, Why Not for All?,” Nat’l Post (Can.), 18 Oct. 2014, at A4.

For other words susceptible to confusion with formalistic, see forma matière.

formally. See formerly.

**Formal Words** are those occupying an elevated level of diction. The English language has several levels of diction, and it frequently has synonyms existing on the different levels. So *residence* is formal, *house* is the ordinary word, and *digs* (or *pad* or *crib*) is slang. Likewise, *proceed* is formal, *go* is ordinary, and *head on over* is slang.

In written AmE, the unfortunate tendency has long been to reach for the formal word that is widely known. So writers steer away from esquipedality but choose pomposities that everyone recognizes. That’s what leads people to write (or occasionally say) *be of assistance* instead of *help*, *attire* instead of *clothes*, *inebriated* instead of *drunk*. Early in the 19th century, the novelist James Fenimore Cooper worried that “the love of turgid expressions is gaining ground, and ought to be corrected.” “On Language,” in The American Democrat 117–24 (1838) (repr. in A Language for Writers 110, 113 [James R. Gaskin & Jack Suberman eds., 1966]). For stylists, that worry is perpetual, as each generation becomes enamored of its own brands of linguistic inflation: double speak, officialese, and the like.

The problem with formal words is that they are symptomatic of those stylistic disturbances. One way or another, they lead to stuffiness—the great fault in modern writing: “For most people . . . in most situations, in the writing of everyday serious expository prose, it is the Stuffy voice that gets in the way. The reason it gets in the way, I submit, is that the writer is scared. If this is an age of anxiety, one way we react to our anxiety is to withdraw into omniscient and multisyllabic detachment where nobody can get us.” Walker Gibson, Tough, Sweet & Stuffy 107 (1966).

In the left-hand column below are some of the chief symptoms—not in every context, of course, but whenever the terms in the right-hand column would do:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal Word</th>
<th>Ordinary Word</th>
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<td>accommodation(s)</td>
<td>room</td>
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<td>accompany</td>
<td>go with</td>
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<td>annex, vb.</td>
<td>attach</td>
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<td>appear</td>
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<td>own, have</td>
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<td>present, vb.</td>
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format, v.t., makes formatted and formatting in both AmE and BrE. See spelling (b).

formative; formidable. Formative (= of, relating to, or involving development) is unrelated to formidable (= inspiring fear or awe; hard to overcome). Yet the second word is occasionally misused for the first in the phrase formative years—e.g.:


See formidable & word-swapping.

Language-Change Index

former; latter. A. Application. If these terms are to be used at all (and it’s often best to abstain), they should apply only to a series of two. The former is the first of two, the latter the second of two. In contexts with more than two elements, first should be used rather than former, last rather than latter.

Former and latter can bewilder the reader when coupled with numbers—e.g.: “The former are liberals first and Catholics second, the latter Catholics first, liberals second.” David R. Carlin Jr., “A Liberal Catholic Taxonomy,” Commonweal, 22 Sept. 1995, at 8. (A possible revision, based on the fuller text: Catholic liberals are liberals first and Catholics second; liberal Catholics are Catholics first and liberals second. There is, by the way, a certain irony in the revision: what is described as first is the second word, and what is described as second is actually the first. The point is that the noun in each phrase [Catholic liberal vs. liberal Catholic] is the more important word.)

B. Misapplication. Sometimes otherwise brilliant writers get confused with former and latter and then misapply one term or the other—e.g.: “Thus, if for some special reason, X has contracted with Y to go on the former’s [read latter’s] own land, it is obvious that X has, as regards Y, both the privilege of entering and the duty of entering.” Wesley Newcomb Hohfeld, Fundamental Legal Conceptions 39 (1919; repr. 1946).

Language-Change Index

former misused for latter: Stage 1

C. Latter without former. May one have a latter without an explicit elements? Yes, as long as there are two identifiable elements. For a similar problem, see on the other hand.

*former alumnus, etc. See alumnus (b).

formerly; formally. Formerly (= once, at a time in the past) is sometimes confounded with formally (= [1] by authorized sanction; or [2] based on form rather than substance). Doubtless the blunder results from the similar pronunciations—e.g.:

• “Roger Westwell, formally [read formerly] chief accountant for Nadin Contracting, has now been promoted to financial controller of the company.” “Mining People,” Mining Mag., Dec. 1989, at 543.

• “The Sheriff’s Office formally [read formerly] had used for its rolling station a converted bread truck and a county hand-me-down bookmobile.” “Playback,” Herald-Sun (Durham, N.C.), 8 Sept. 2002, at C3.

Language-Change Index

formally misused for formerly: Stage 1

Current ratio (was formerly the case vs. *was formally the case): 105:1

*former veteran. See veteran.

formidable is preferably pronounced /for-mә-da-bal/, not /for-mid-a-bal/. See formative.

formula. Pl. formulas or formulæ /form-yə-le/. The native plural, ending in -s, predominates in all but scientific writing—e.g.: “Their appearances, after all, are formidable; formulistic; formalistic. For- mulic; fond of formulas. Formalistic = adhering unduly to form without regard to substance.

fornication. See adultery (A).

forsake > forsook > forsaken. So inflected. *Forsaked is a solecism that has never had currency—e.g.:
forseeable


Forseeable. See foreseeable.

forswear (= to renounce; pledge to give up) is sometimes misspelled *foreswear—e.g.:

1. "In threatening a trade war, the administration also undercut the fledgling World Trade Organization and the principles that nations foreswear [read forswear] tariffs as weapons and play by the same rules." John Talton, "It's Too Soon to Celebrate Trade Pact," Cincinnati Enquirer, 25 Sept. 1996, at B1. See FOR- & IRREGULAR VERBS.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. *forsaked for sook: Stage 1
   Current ratio (foosk vs. *forsaked): 1,434:1

2. *foresake for sook: Stage 1
   Current ratio (foosk vs. *foresake): 615:1

• forseeable. See foreseeable.

for sure (= certain, certainly) is a colloquial idiom that dates back to the 17th century and persists as a for sure (= certain, certainly) is a colloquial idiom that dates back to the 17th century and persists as a colloquialism <Am I going? For sure.>. The phrase grew staggeringly in popularity during the 20th century.

forswear (= to renounce; pledge to give up) is sometimes misspelled *foreswear—e.g.:

1. "In threatening a trade war, the administration also undercut the fledgling World Trade Organization and the principles that nations foreswear [read forswear] tariffs as weapons and play by the same rules." John Talton, "It's Too Soon to Celebrate Trade Pact," Cincinnati Enquirer, 29 June 1995, at B11.


If *foreswear were a proper word, it might mean "to swear before," since the prefix fore- denotes a previous time. See FOR-. Cf. forego.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

forswear misspelled *foreswear: Stage 2
Current ratio: 8:1

forte (= a person's strong point) has long been thought to be preferably pronounced with one syllable, like fort. That's because the word is originally French (in which fort means "strong," corruptly made with a feminine -e suffix) and is so pronounced. But most speakers of AmE use the two-syllable version (/for-tay/), probably under the influence of the Italian forte, a two-syllable word referring to a musical notation to play or sing loudly. Though it might have been nice to keep the two words separate in pronunciation, that hasn't happened—and the two-syllable version can no longer be condemned. What can be condemned is the pretentious pronunciation /for-tay/ and the occasional use of an acute accent on the -e.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

forte (= strong point) as two syllables: Stage 5

for the duration of is reducible to during or throughout—e.g.:


for the reason that. See because (d) & reason why.

fortitude refers to inner strength, willpower, and courage. Yet writers often seem to use it in reference to physical strength, stamina, or endurance—e.g.: "Talk-show host David Brudnoy showed off his physical fortitude [read prowess], bearhugging a reporter and lifting her off the floor." Susan Bickelhaupt, "Neely's New Stlckt," Boston Globe, 20 Sept. 1996, at D2.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

fortitude in the sense "physical strength": Stage 3

fortuitous, strictly speaking, means "occurring by chance," not "fortunate." The traditional sense remains fairly strong—e.g.:

1. "Unless the victim dies, the law cannot assume that the transgressor really meant to kill—even though whether the victim lives or dies might be entirely fortuitous." Jerome H. Skolnick, "A Capital Offense Spared by Luck?" L.A. Times, 27 Aug. 1993, at B7.

2. "He began his career with a fortuitous meeting and handshake with his brother, William C. Liedtke Jr., whom he encountered by chance on the South Pacific island of Saipan during the war. They decided that if they survived the war, they would start an independent oil and gas business." "Hugh Liedtke' (obit.), Tulsa World, 1 Apr. 2003, at A12.
See aleatory.

Meanwhile, of course, the word is commonly misused for fortunate, in itself a very unfortunate thing—e.g.:

• "My choice of Leeds University was quite fortuitous [read lucky or fortunate]. A few weeks before the university session was scheduled to begin, I was given a scholarship to study in England," Wole Soyinka, Yoruban Astrophysics, Wash. Post, 9 Apr. 1995, at C3.

• "That Smoltz would be so fortuitous [read fortunate or lucky] is something of a good howl in itself, given all the cruel twists in his career," Tom Verducci, Eye Opener, Sports Illustrated, 10 June 1996, at 46.

• "Keeping home and business under one roof is a constant challenge for Coover. Perhaps the most fortuitous [read most fortunate or best] feature of the house is a full-length staircase between the second and third floors, which physically separates the living and work areas," Alvin Rosenbaum, "The Balancing Act," Home Office Computing, Dec. 1996, at 62.

In the phrases *fortuitous accident and fortuitous coincidence, the word fortuitous bears the right sense but is redundant: every accident or coincidence is fortuitous. Writers using those phrases, though, almost invariably mean "fortunate" or "lucky"—e.g.:


Fortuity is the seldom-seen noun corresponding to fortuitous (usually in the strict sense)—e.g.: "Voters tend to be more straightforward, rewarding presidents who, whether by fortuity or by design, happen to be in office when the public's pocketful swells," John Liscio, "History, and Hard Numbers, Favor Bill Clinton," Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 18 Aug. 1996, at C1. Fortuitousness, which emphasizes the quality as opposed to the state of being fortuitous, is also rare.

Language-Change Index

fortuitous misused for fortunate: Stage 3

Fortunately. See sentence adverbs.

Fort Worthian: Fort Worther. The first is the standard term for someone who hails from or lives in Fort Worth, Texas. The second is a fairly uncommon equivalent. See denizen labels.

Forum. The standard plural forums has predominated in AmE since the early 1930s and in BrE since the mid-1970s. Although *fora was prevalent in earlier periods, it is now a pedantic archaisma—e.g.:


• "Even so, the debate over bigness—and how big is too big for corporate entities—continues in many different forums," Tom Petruno, "Your Money," L.A. Times, 7 Dec. 1997, at D1.


But some writers, especially in political science and law, persist in using the Latinate plural. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (forums vs. *fora): 4:1

forward; forwards. Forward is the usual form in both AmE and BrE. See directional words (a).

Current ratio: 29:1

forwent. See forego.

founder. See flounder & forefathers.

founding fathers. See forefathers.

fourth estate (= the journalistic profession; the news media) was coined as a jocular extension of the three estates of the (English) Realm. These "estates" represented social classes that were traditionally considered to have specific and distinct political powers. The English estates were (1) Lords Spiritual, (2) Lords Temporal, and (3) the Commons. (In France, the three analogous estates were [1] the clergy, [2] the nobles, and [3] the commons.)

Today, of course, this system of classifying estates is obsolete, but the term fourth estate is still commonly used, especially to indicate the media's extraordinary influence on politics—e.g.:

• "But now journalists make more than the people they are covering, and the fourth estate has become a conservative elite: " "Culture, Et Cetera," Wash. Times, 31 Dec. 1996, at A2 (quoting John F. Kennedy Jr.).

• "Don't stop reading. This isn't just another journalist spouting off about the public's right to know or the role of the fourth estate," Mickie Valente, "What This Verdict May Mean to You," Tampa Trib., 23 Jan. 1997, Bus. & Fin. §, at 1.

foyer. The best pronunciation for this word is /foʊ-/ or not the affected /foʊ-ɪ/ or the Frenchified and old-fashioned /fɔh-ə/.

fracas (= a noisy fight; brawl) is pronounced /fɔˈræks/ in AmE and /fɾɔˈkɑːs/ in BrE. Pl. fracases.

fractious. See factional.

*fraenum. See frenum.
f r a g i l e ; f r a n g i b l e ; f r i a b l e . F r a g i l e , t h e m o s t c o m m o n t e r m , m e a n s " d e l i c a t e , b r i t t l e " < a f r a g i l e v a s e > < a f r a g i l e e g o > . F r a n g i b l e m e a n s " b r e a k a b l e " b u t d o e s n ' t n e c e s s a r i l y i m p l y i n h e r e n t w e a k n e s s < f r a n g i b l e b o n e s > . F r i a b l e m e a n s " c r u m b l y " < f r i a b l e a s b e s t o s > . S e e f r i a b l e .

F R A G M E N T S , S E N T E N C E . S e e i n c o m p l e t e s e n t e n c e s .

f r a g r a n t . F o r a h u m o r o u s m a l a p a r o s m , s e e f l a g r a n t .

f r a m b e s i a ; f r a m b o e s i a . T h e t e c h n i c a l t e r m f o r t h e t o p i c s k i n d k n o w n a l s o a s y a w s i s f r a m b e s i a i n A m E , f r a m b o e s i a i n B r E . B o t h a r e p r o n o u n c e d / f r a m - b e e - z h e e - a / o r / f r a m - b e e - z h a / .

f r a n c h i s o r ; * f r a n c h i s e r . * F r a n c h i s e r w a s l o n g t h e p r e f e r r e d f o r m f o r t h e w o r d d e n o t i n g t h e h o l d e r o f a f r a n c h i s e r . I t p r e d a t e s f r a n c h i s o r b y a b o u t 1 2 0 y e a r s — t h e - e r f o r m i s a m b i g u o u s : i t m a y d e n o t e t h e g r a n t e r o f a f r a n c h i s e r o r t h e h o l d e r o f o n e , a s h e r e : " R e g u l a t o r s a l s o e m p h a s i z e t h a t b e f o r e p o t e n t i a l i n v e s t o r s w r i t e a n y c h e c k s , t h e y n e e d t o r e a d a n d b e s u r e t h e y u n d e r s t a n d t h e d i s c l o s u r e d o c u m e n t s — c a l l e d U n i f o r m F r a n c h i s h e d o c u m e n t s — t h a t f r a n c h i s e r s a r e r e q u i r e d t o f i l e i n c e r t a i n s t a t e s . " R i c h a r d G i b s o n , " H a v e I G o t a F r a n c h i s h E x p o r t O p p o r t u n i t y f o r Y o u ! " C h i c a g o T r i b . , 2 2 M a y 2 0 0 7 , S m a l l B u s . § , a t 6 .

P e r h a p s b e c a u s e o f t h a t a m b i g u i t y , f r a n c h i s o r i s a b o u t t e n t i m e s c o m m o n a s f r a n c h i s e r i n l a w , a n d a b o u t e i g h t t i m e s c o m m o n i n m o d e r n p r i n t s o u r c e s . I t h a s w o n t h e f i g h t i n o u r f a s t - f o o d n a t i o n — a n d h a s w o n t h e f r a n c h i s e a s t h e n e w l y p r e f e r r e d s p e l l i n g .

L A N G U A G E - C H A N G E I N D E X

f r a n c h i s o r : S t a g e 5

f r a n g i p a n i / f r a n - j i - p a n - e e / ( = [ 1 ] a t o p i c f l a t e n e s s ) ; [ 2 ] a p e r f u m e o b t a i n e d f r o m t h e s h r u b ' s f l o w e r s ; o r [ 3 ] a n a l f r u c t o s e f o r m s t a r t s t h e s t a n d a r d s p e l l i n g . * F r a n g i p a n e a n d * f r a n g i p a n i a r e v a r i a n t s .

C u r r e n t r a t i o ( f r a n g i p a n i v s . * f r a n g i p a n e v s . * f r a n g i p a n i ) : 3 0 : 4 : 1

F r a n k e n s t e i n . I n M a r y W . S h e l l y ' s n o v e l F r a n k e n s t e i n ( 1 8 1 8 ) , D r . V i c t o r F r a n k e n s t e i n c r e a t e s a g r u s m e a s c u t e t h a t e v e n t u a l l y k i l l s t h e d o c t o r ' s b r o t h e r a n d s i s t e r - i n - l a w , a n d t r i e s b u t f a i l s t o k i l l t h e d o c t o r b e f o r e e n d i n g i t s o w n l i f e . S t r i c t l y s p e a k i n g , t h e n , a F r a n k e n s t e i n ( u s u a l l y c a p i t a l i z e d ) i s a c r e a t o r o f a m o n s t e r o r o t h e r d e s t r u c t i v e a g e n c y , w h i l e a F r a n k e n s t e i n ' s m o n s t e r i s e i t h e r m o n s t e r t h a t t u r n s o n i t s c r e a t o r o r a d e s t r u c t i v e a g e n c y t h a t c a n n o t b e c o n t r o l l e d .

B u t p u b l i c u s a g e h a s c r e a t e d a m o n s t e r o f i t s o w n : F r a n k e n s t e i n h a s c o m e t o r e f e r t o t h e c r e a t u r e i t s e l f . T o d a y t h i s u b q u i b u t t o u s e u s a g e m u s t b e a c c e p t e d a s s t a n d a r d — e . g . :
the OED), today fraught with is invariably associated with danger or something else bad.

There is a new sense of fraught, too—"distressed" or "distressing"—dating from the mid-1960s. This new use (without a with) is now fairly common. Though much more frequent in BrE than in AmE, the sense does appear in American sources—e.g.:  

- "He was an energetic campaigner and perhaps most important in such a politically fraught time, he was not a politician." Elizabeth Kolbert, "Abortion, Dole's Sword in '74, Returns to Confront Him in '96," N.Y. Times, 8 July 1996, at A1, A8.
- "The sail-off escape of Kevin Patterson proves more funny than fraught as he flees a broken heart and tries to put his army days behind him." Gilbert Lewthwaite, "H. O.: Life, Death, War," Baltimore Sun, 23 July 2000, at F11.
- "Podeswa's starting points are the five senses . . . through which he tells a tale of disconnected urbanites whose attempts at human connection are fraught and incomplete." Deborah Hornblow, "Intellectual Ambitions of 'Five Senses' Go Unrealized," Hartford Courant, 11 Aug. 2000, at D5.

**Language-Change Index**

**fraught** (without with): Stage 5

**Fraught with and wrought with.** Wrought, an archaic past participle of work, is frequently but erroneously substituted for fraught in the idiom fraught with (danger, peril, etc.)—e.g.:

- "Despite the joyous homecoming, the transition from a life that was wrought [read fraught] with danger and emotion won't be easy for the soldiers or their families, said Lt. Col. Mary Erickson, a Combat/Operational Stress Control Officer." Sharon Schmickle, "Home After Doing Their Job," Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 7 Apr. 2004, at B1.
- "LaValle admits that the Highway Department is wrought [read fraught] with problems. But he denies he is at their source." Anne Givens, "Highway Chief Jabs at LaValle," Newsday (N.Y.), 18 May 2004, at A24.
- "The Games will go on. But they will go on so wrought [read fraught] with problems and scandals that some athletes have decided not to attend." *“Cancel Olympics: No One Really Cares*,” Miami Herald, 20 June 2004, at C15.

The confusion may be due in part to the similarity of another idiom, wrought up (= worked up; excited).

**Language-Change Index**

wrought with misused for fraught with: Stage 1

**fraulein** (the German word for an unmarried woman) is pronounced /froy-in/-/not /frow-in/.

**Free.** Except with an indisputably established word such as carefree, this combining form always takes a hyphen, whether the resulting phrase appears before or after what it modifies <alcohol-free drinks> <drinks that are alcohol-free>.

**free; for free.** Because free by itself can function as an adverb in the sense "at no cost," some critics reject the phrase for free. A phrase such as for nothing, at no cost, or a similar substitute will often work better.

Yet while it’s true that for free is a casuism that is severely overworked in ads, the expression is far too common to be called an error. It dates from the early 20th century. Sometimes the syntax all but demands it—e.g.: "Soft-dollar arrangements . . . include various services like research and information that big institutional clients receive for free from brokers." Anita Raghavan, "Pension Fund Plans to Scrap Certain Deals," Wall Street J., 26 Jan. 1995, at A5. That same writer, however, omitted the for when it wasn’t needed: "That research is sent free to the client." *Ibid.*

For an early discussion of this usage, see John R. Krueger, "On Pleonastic 'For,'" 41 Am. Speech 79–80 (1966).

**Language-Change Index**

for free instead of: Stage 4

Current ratio (get it free vs. *get it for free): 1:1

**freedom. A. And liberty.** These synonyms have connotative distinctions. Freedom is the broader, all-encompassing term that carries strong positive connotations. Liberty, slightly less emotive, generally suggests the past removal of restrictions on specific freedoms.

**B. Freedom of vs. freedom from.** Both are correct, the first denoting possession of a right and the second denoting protection from a wrong. Note the shift in forms: freedom of speech but freedom from oppression, pestilence, coercion, etc.

**Free gift.** This redundancy, the result of advertisers’ attempted assurances that you’ll really get something for nothing, isn’t much used by careful writers. But that’s not to say it’s not used—e.g.:

- "Merchants offered special discount drawings, fashion shows, decorating tips and free gifts [read gifts]." Michelle Daniels, "Sani Family Event Benefits Hinds Hospice," Fresno Bee, 29 Dec. 1995, at B2. (The serial comma would clarify that sentence; that is, insert a comma before the and. See enumerations (b) & punctuation (d).)
- "He was also softened up with free gifts [read gifts] such as tablecloths and coasters." Andrew Levy, "Dementia Sufferer, 103, Swindled Out of £60,000," Daily Mail, 27 Aug. 2015, at 28.

BrE has the related tautology *free gratis* (or *free and gratis*), which is hardly ever seen in AmE—e.g.:

- "I am not demanding that the shares should be given out free gratis [read free or gratis]," Padraig Yeates, "Telecom Urged to Allocate Shares to Workers," Irish Times, 7 Feb. 1996, at 2.

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(For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
• “They know that they can leave free gratis [read free or gratis] and pocket all the transfer fee,” Ian Paul, “Where Egos Are Part of the Game,” Herald (Glasgow), 8 Oct. 1996, at 35.

A little history may surprise you. *Free gift* is much older than you might have thought. In contexts discussing what is “freely given,” the phrase dates back to the late 17th century. In 1684, Henry Abbot wrote a book with an inspired title: *A Free Gift, Freely Given of God to Henry Abbot.* A 1722 polemic pamphlet printed in London was titled *A Free Gift to the Clergy.* A year later, the same author (Thomas Woolston) produced *A Second Free-Gift to the Clergy,* and the same year a *Third.* They were all anti-clergy tracts containing allegations against “Ministers of Antichrist.” So the phrase is old, even if the modern context in which it appears is much different. You might well be wary of using it.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *free gift for gift:* Stage 4
2. *free gratis for free:* Stage 2

free rein is the correct spelling of this phrase—not *free reign.* The allusion is to horses, not to kings or queens. But some writers have apparently forgotten the allusion—e.g.:

• “Indianapolis deserves to be a healthy and livable city, not just a place where developers enjoy free reign [read free rein], routinely decimating our few remaining significant tree stands.” Letter of Clarke Kahlo, “The Public’s Interest in Tree Protection,” Indianapolis Star, 19 Jan. 1997, at B4. (On the use of decimating in that example, see *decimate.*)

• “Holmgren was quoted in a New Orleans paper as saying his players have a fairly free reign [read free rein] to enjoy New Orleans during their stay there. However, he did warn them about talking to ‘weird women.’” Danny Wells, “Backup Draws a Crowd: McMahon Still a Super Attraction,” Charleston Gaz., 23 Jan. 1997, at C1.

• “The forward was given free reign [read free rein] behind Clark by Warburton but the home players were not so accommodating.” Oduwa Repeatedly Hacked as Rangers Cruise Once Again,” Daily Telegraph, 20 Aug. 2015, Sport §, at 6.

*Full rein* is a synonymous but less common expression. See *rein.*

**Language-Change Index**

*free reign for free rein:* Stage 3

Current ratio (free rein vs. *free reign*): 3:1

freethinker. See atheist.

free will, n.; free will, n.; freewill, adj. Although some philosophers have begun using the one-word spelling for the noun, the standard form remains free will (= [1] the view that people have the power to make choices and are not predestined either by earlier causes or by divine will; or [2] voluntary choice). (Cf. *fatalism.*) But when the adjective is needed, freewill (= voluntary) is the predetermined choice <that was her freewill decision>.

freeze > froze > frozen. So inflected. Yet the barbarous *freezed* isn’t uncommon—e.g.:

• “When they say they freezed [read froze] taxes for three years, what they are really saying is, ‘We have frozen your overtaxation for three years.’” John Springer, “Tax Rate Is an Issue in Bristol,” Hartford Courant, 26 Oct. 1997, at B1.


• “In season through July, mulberries keep in the fridge only for a few days after picking but they can be freezed [read frozen] for later use.” Gretchen McKay, “Purple Reigns with Mulberries Everywhere,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 17 June 2015, at C1.

Cf. deep-freeze. See irregular verbs.

**Language-Change Index**

*freezed for froze:* Stage 1

Current ratio (froze vs. *freezed*): 494:1

**French Words.** See gallicisms.

frenetic; *phrenetic; frenzy; *phrenzy; *phrensy. Although *phrenetic and *phrenzy are closer to the original Greek word (*phrenetikos “having brain inflammation”)—and predominated until about 1880—the *f* spellings have long been standard in both AmE and BrE. Today, *phrenetic, *phrenzy, and variant spellings such as *phrensy are all oddball archaisms—e.g.:


• “And he understood . . . that the Senate was uniquely insulated against the phrensy [read frenzy] of public opinion.” Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate 373* (2002).

**Language-Change Index**

1. *phrenzy vs. *phrenzy for frenzy:* Stage 1

Current ratio (frenzy vs. *phrenzy:* Stage 1): 113:1:1

2. *phrenetic for frenetic:* Stage 1

Current ratio (frenetic vs. *phrenetic*): 95:1

frenum; *fraenum. Since about 1900, frenum /free-nam/ has been the standard spelling—in AmE and BrE alike—for the word denoting a connecting fold of skin or mucous membrane that supports or restrains the movement of an organ or body part <lingual frenum> <labial frenum>. The Latinate spelling *fraenum* is now but a variant form. If the *frenum* is small, the diminutive *frenulum* is used <clitoral frenulum>—*frenulum* being a variant.

Current ratio (frenum vs. *frenum*): 10:1

frenzy. See frenetic.

freely. This adverb can be ambiguous when used with a plural subject and verb. Do individuals do something frequently (i.e., often), or is the characteristic true of a group that may do something only once (i.e., commonly)? Note the misuse here: “A study last year by Jack Hadley of the Georgetown University School of Medicine showed that uninsured patients
arrived at the hospital sicker than those with health insurance, and died in the hospital more frequently.” Jane Bryant Quinn, “Woe the Reformers,” Newsweek, 19 Oct. 1992, at 55. If the final clause is changed to and were more likely to die in the hospital, the misquote disappears.

fresco. Pl. frescoes. See plurals (d).

friable; fryable. *Friable* is able to be crumbled into dust or powder (friable soil). E.g.: “The ideal carrot soil is sandy loam, or at least something friable and well-draining.” Sylvia Thompson, “Garden Fresh: Underground Royalty,” L.A. Times, 3 Nov. 1994, at H18. *Fryable* = able to be fried (a fryable chicken).

friend. This word has settled into some exceptional idioms: a friend of mine; he is friends with me; he made friends with me; he has been a friend to me. Handle them with care.

For more on a friend of mine, see possessives (d).

friendly. See adverbs (b).

-FRIENDLY. When used in a compound with another word, -friendly implies ease of use. Several such compounds have become vogue words on their own, probably beginning with user-friendly. That term usually describes a device, software, or website that is easy to use—e.g.: “I use online resources nearly exclusively for researching your complaints and keeping up to date on consumer issues. . . . None of these sites requires a fee, and most of them are pretty user-friendly.” Suzanne Palmer, “Consumers’ Protection: Is Information,” St. Petersburg Times, 4 Feb. 2007, at E3. Many other analogous terms also exist, such as customer-friendly, driver-friendly, and pet-friendly.

These compounds are best hyphenated, since the hyphen is occasionally omitted in such compounds—e.g.: “The future of newspapers is the friendly Internet . . . . But the present is still in print. And part of the strategy is to make the print version more reader-friendly [read reader-friendly].” Mike Littwin, “Where’s Littwin? Way Back Here on News 38,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 23 Jan. 2007, News §, at 38.

In all these terms, -friendly means that the thing being discussed is good for the user, customer, driver, pedestrian, or reader. But one recent marketing term turns that sense on its head—e.g.: “I think [the school cafeteria] is also going to introduce more allergen-friendly choices. More and more kids, it seems, have peanut or milk allergies.” Linda Bock, “School System Faces Gluten Allergies Head-On,” Telegram & Gaz. (Worcester), 1 June 2006, at B1 (quoting Diane O. Mercier, a parent). Here, the meaning is not that the food is “friendly” or beneficial to allergens, but quite the opposite—that it contains no allergens. The twist may cause some readers to suffer an unpleasant gastrointestinal reaction.

friend of the court. See amicus curiae.

*frier. See fryer.

friol /free-hohl/ (= a bean used in Mexican cuisine) forms the plural frijoles /free-hoh-leezl/, which typically refers to refried beans. Because the plural is much more common than the singular, it’s hardly surprising that the back-formation *friole has emerged as a singular form. Avoid it.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*friole as a false singular for friol: Stage 3

Current ratio (a friol vs. *a friole): 2:1

friossen (/free-sohn/) is a Gallicism meaning “a shiver of excitement or emotion”—e.g.: “But I don’t know what that is,” she answered, trying to persuade herself, as she spoke, that the touch of his hand was giving her a tremendous frisson.” Aldous Huxley, Brief Candles 232 (1957).

friol, vb. This word, meaning “to trifle; to fritter away time,” is a lighthearted back-formation from frivolous dating from the mid-19th century. Its peak in popularity came about 1920. It’s inflected friooled, friolling in AmE, friolled, friolling in BrE. E.g.:

- “Be frivolous with me,” he begs Mr. Waterston, who—typical American or no typical American—has plainly never friolled in his life.” Walter Kerr, “Verbal Witchcraft Produces Magical Responses Out Front,” N.Y. Times, 12 June 1988, § 2, at 5.


frivolity; frivolousness. Frivoly (= [1] silliness, light-mindedness; or [2] a frivolous act or thing) isn’t a general-purpose noun corresponding to the adjective frivolous. It is, of course, just the word for the child who is being silly or for the silly things that a child might do, but it doesn’t work for the more negative connotations of frivolous. For example, when lawyers engage in frivolous conduct, courts take that as a serious offense and often fine the lawyers large
sums. To call an offending lawyer’s conduct frivolity is to trivialize it—there’s nothing lighthearted about a frivolous lawsuit. So in that context, the better noun is frivolousness—e.g.:


• “In allowing sanctions against those whose frivolity [read frivolousness] was short-lived, and perhaps caused little harm, the new rule promotes deterrence.” Jeffrey A. Parsons, “How to Deter Frivolous Papers,” Legal Times, 21 Nov. 1994, at 57.

• “As no check or witness’s name was attached, the court denied the motion, with $50 costs, saying sanctions for frivolity [read frivolousness] should be permitted in small claims cases.” “New Trial Is Denied, with $50 Costs,” N.Y.L.J., 8 Feb. 1995, at 25.

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frivolity misused for frivolousness: Stage 1

frizz (= to make tight curls) is the standard spelling. *Friz* is a variant.

Current ratio: 7:1

froe (= a chopping tool with the handle set at a right angle to the blade; traditionally used in splitting shingles) is the standard spelling. Frow is a variant.

Current ratio: 1:1:1

frog legs; frogs’ legs; *frog’s legs; *frogs legs. Although frog legs seems to be the most natural phrase, there is an amazing mélange of forms.


But most writers on culinary matters write frogs’ legs. See, e.g., Ruth R. Tyndall, Eat Yourself Full 66 (1967); Helen Corbitt, Helen Corbitt Cooks for Company 67 (1974); Gourmet’s France 426 (1978); Howard Mitcham, Creole Gumbo and All That Jazz 242 (1978); Pierre Franey, More 60-Minute Gourmet 132–33 (1981); France: A Culinary Journey 46 (1992). This form appears to be a direct translation of the French cuisses de grenouilles (= legs of frogs, or frogs’ legs).

The other forms are less defensible. At least one writer uses *frog’s legs, as if they were served always in pairs (and carefully matched up). See Jacques Pepin, La Methode 79 (1979). Some writers indecisively mix two or more forms. See Alan Davidson, The Oxford Companion to Food 321 (1999) (using both frog legs and frogs’ legs).

Those citations don’t quite reflect general usage in newspapers and journals. Of 1,600 examples checked in westlaw’s Allnews database in January 2002, the breakdown was as follows: frog legs—880 (55%); frogs’ legs—450 (28%); *frog’s legs—194 (12%); and *frogs legs—76 (5%). Likewise, informal surveys suggest that most cultivated speakers who would order this item say frog legs. The cookbook writers’ preference for frogs’ legs seems a mite pedantic. In any event, the two forms to be avoided are *frog’s legs (unless you’re talking about a particular frog) and *frogs legs (unless you eat them without utensils or napkins)—e.g.:

• “They were out of frog’s legs [read frog legs or frogs’ legs] the night we ordered them, so we can’t say whether we agree.” Molli Yood & Andy Yood, “Food, Fun and Music Are the Order of the Day,” Wash. Post, 8 Nov. 2001, So. Md. §, at T6.

• “Johnny’s Bistro . . . offers . . . an appetizer list that includes country pork pate, frogs legs [read frog legs or frogs’ legs] and other delicious treats.” Ralph McGregor, “Carve Out Time for Bite and a Belt,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 14 Dec. 2001, at 26.

• “That top price . . . buys one of the stars of the menu, a dish of sweet, succulent little frogs legs [read frog legs or frogs’ legs], one of the best renditions I’ve had in years.” Marion Warhaft, “But Ask for Favourites, Anyway,” Winnipeg Free Press, 21 Dec. 2001, at D4.

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1. frog legs: Stage 5
2. frogs’ legs: Stage 5
3. *frog’s legs: Stage 3
4. *frogs legs: Stage 1

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 11:9:4:1

from hence; from thence. The words hence (= from this time, from this place) and thence (= from that time, from that place)—as well as whence—are sufficient without the preposition from. E.g.: “Collier, then 32, was an erudite intellectual who had gone to the best prep schools and thence to Yale.” Matt Walsh, “Don’t Buy Until You See the Whites of Their Eyes,” Forbes, 19 Dec. 1994, at 76. Yet grammarians have never considered from hence and the like incorrect, and the word from may help orient readers who aren’t very familiar with these increasingly creaky words. James Boswell, Samuel Johnson’s biographer, used from thence: “Mr. Scott of University College, Oxford . . . accompanied [Johnson] from thence to Edinburgh.” 5 Life of Johnson 16 (1791).

The two phrases from hence and from thence appeared frequently in printed books from about 1580 to 1800 but gradually fell into disuse. Today they hardly ever appear except in quotations or in purposeful attempts at an antique tone. See hence, thence & whence.

*from henceforth. See henceforth (n).

from thence. See from hence.

from whence. See from hence, thence & whence.

frothy (= unkempt, untidy, slovenly) is the standard spelling—and has predominated in World English since the 19th century. *Frowzy and *frouzy are variants.

Current ratio (frowzy vs. *frowzy vs. *frouzy): 20:9:1

frustrum (a geometric term referring to the remaining part of a cone or pyramid that has had its top cut
off by an intersecting plane parallel to the base) overwhelmingly forms the plural *frustra—not *frustrums. Current ratio: 223:1

fulfill; fulfil. The first is the AmE spelling, the second the BrE spelling.

fulfillment; fulfilment. The word is spelled -ll- in AmE, -l- in BrE.

full complement. For the mistaken phrase *full compliment, see compliment.

full-fledged is a set phrase in AmE. But BrE writers often use fully fledged. See fledging.

fullness is preferably so spelled—not *fulness.

full-scale, a phrasal adjective, should be hyphenated.

FULL STOP. See punctuation (l).

fully fledged. See full-fledged.

fulsome (= abundant to excess; offensive to normal tastes or sensibilities) is still best used in its traditional, disparaging sense—e.g.: “Superbad . . . begins with pornography. The loud, large, and ribald Seth (Jonah Hill) calls his best friend . . . to discuss in fulsome detail a Web site called ‘Vag-Tastic Voyage.’” Richard Brody, “The Biblical Sense,” New Yorker, 17 Dec. 2007, at 20. But unfortunately, the loose usage to mean “very full” dominates today—e.g.:

• “Her energy is both warm and fulsome [read, perhaps, vibrant], and her big, deep laugh is always at the ready, especially when she is goofing on herself.” Allison Glock, “‘Just before Mobutu was run out of his lair in Kinshasa, National Public Radio played some old audiotapes of the fulsome [read lavish] praise heaped on this corrupt blackguard by Presidents Reagan and Bush,” David Nyhan, “Those Buddies of Uncle Sam We Didn’t Know Were Sooo Baad,” Boston Globe, 25 May 1997, at D4. Cf. noisome.

fulsome in a flattering sense: Stage 4

fumitory (= a flowering plant of the genus *Fumaria) is sometimes misspelled *fumatory—e.g.: “Here’s what’s blooming this week: Basil Balm, Bee Balm, Butterfly Bush, Carolina Phlox, Fringe Loosestrife, Fumatory [read Fumitory].” “Botanical Gardens,” Asheville Citizen-Times (N.C.), 5 July 1996, at C2.

See punctuation (l).


The word might justifiably be treated as a skunked term because the loose sense is so common, especially in the expression fulsome praise. Usually the true sense of that expression is something like “lavish praise”—e.g.: “Just before Mobutu was run out of his lair in Kinshasa, National Public Radio played some old audiotapes of the fulsome [read lavish] praise heaped on this corrupt blackguard by Presidents Reagan and Bush,” David Nyhan, “Those Buddies of Uncle Sam We Didn’t Know Were Sooo Baad,” Boston Globe, 25 May 1997, at D4. Cf. noisome.

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fumitory in a flattering sense: Stage 4

fulsome in a flattering sense: Stage 4

Actually, *funatory* is a rare word meaning “a smoking room or section.”

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*funatory* misused for *fumitory*: Stage 1

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*fun*, traditionally a noun, has come into vogue as an adjective—but only as a casualism. Why has usage changed here? Two main reasons. (1) Unlike other nouns of emotion, *fun* hasn’t had a corresponding adjective to mean “productive of fun.” *Funny* long ago took on other senses, such as “risible” and “weird.” Most other nouns of emotion have adjectives that mean “productive of” *<excitement–exciting>* *<fear–fearful>* *<gloom–gloomy>* *<sadness–sad>*. But not *fun*, which is among the most popular nouns of emotion. (2) Because *fun* is always a mass noun, it never appears with an indefinite article. So although we may say *This is a pleasure or a joy*, we cannot say *a fun*. Instead we say *This is fun*—and this predicate noun looks as if it might be a predicate adjective. There are other reasons that get more technical. For a detailed explanation, see Dwight Bolinger, “*’It’s So Fun,*” 38 *Am. Speech* 236–40 (1963).

For speakers who consider *fun* in *This is fun* to be a predicate adjective, it’s not a significant change to say, instead, *This is a fun thing to do*—or *This is so fun* instead of *This is so much fun*. Still, the usage remains casual at best—e.g.: “To liven things up the last few weeks of the season, some resorts create fun events to entice customers.” Susan McKee, “Ski Resorts Making Plans for Season-Ending Events,” *Sacramento Bee*, 16 Apr. 1997, at C7.

R.W. Burchfield notes that “in serious writing, it (so far) lacks a comparative and a superlative” (FMEU3 at 318). That may be true of serious writing, but not of spoken AmE (especially among those born after 1970 or so)—e.g.:

- “[You’ve got to be super-aggressive and ride just a hair over your head without blowing it,’ agrees Mike Cotes, 42, a Spokane condominium maintenance man who won the Masters Amateur category last year. ‘It’s pretty intimidating to do it. Once you get comfortable with it, it’s the funnest thing to do.’” Fiona Cohen, “Legendary Banked Slalom Preview,” *Bellingham Herald* (Wash.), 6 Feb. 2003, at B1.

The NOAD records *funner* and *funnest* as informal. Some writers use them seriously—e.g.:

- “This year, he was the guy everybody but Bob Huggins wanted to replace with Chadd Moore, the faster, funner [read more fun] freshman.” Lonnie Wheeler, “Barker Reason Bearcats Are 13–3,” *Cincinnati Post*, 7 Jan. 2003, at C1.
- “This is the simplest, arguably funnest [read most fun], fondue of all—particularly for kids.” “Do You Fondue?” *Wash. Post*, 12 Feb. 2003, Food §, at 4.

The linguist Steven Pinker has been quoted as saying that he “can tell whether people are under or over thirty years old by whether they’re willing to accept *fun* as a full-fledged adjective. [‘Boomers allow *fun* to have a few adjective privileges, and slackers allow it to have most or all of them, including modification by *so* and comparative -er and -est forms.’]” Barbara Wallraf, *Word Court* 87 (2000).

To traditionalists, the adjectival *fun* and its comparative forms remain blemishes in both writing and speech.

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1. *fun* as an adjective <a fun place>: Stage 3
2. *fun* as an inflectional adjective (hence *funner, funnest*): Stage 2

Current ratio (more fun vs. funner): 211:1

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**Functional Shift. A. Generally.** Renaissance rhetoricians called it *enallage* (*i*-nal-i-jee/), and some modern grammarians call it *transfer*: the ability of a word to shift from one grammatical function to another. A noun acts as an adjective (candy store); an adjective as a noun (a collectible); a noun as a verb (housing the collection); a verb as a noun (apt quotes); and so on. Many of these functional shifts lead to a compactness that Americans like: “We Americans will not use the more elaborate form when the simpler, more direct one is absolutely unambiguous and does the work without a hitch.” Edward N. Teall, *Putting Words to Work* 25 (1940).

By itself, of course, a word has no part of speech. Only in context does a part-of-speech label make any sense. Still, many words appear usually as one or another part of speech, so that we tend to think of even an isolated word as being a noun, verb, adjective, etc. For example, most people see *umpire* as a noun, and to say that you are *umpiring* a baseball game sounds, to most speakers of English who might pause to consider the point, as if you are using a noun as a verb. This type of shift involves an age-old custom that was especially robust in the Elizabethan age. Although a functional shift sometimes upsets purists—indeed, a new shift (such as *officings or taskings*) often seems ugly at first—both colloquial usage and literary usage tend to defy them in the long run.

But this inevitably runs only to certain types of shifts: noun-to-adjective, noun-to-verb, verb-to-noun, and adjective-to-noun. Other shifts are generally much less acceptable in English. For example, adverb-to-conjunction shifts are thoroughly disapproved; hence it remains a solecism to use *however* or *also* as a conjunction to combine two independent clauses with no more punctuation than a comma. As another example, preposition-to-verb shifts are considered *casualisms* (*upping the ante, downing a bear, or outing an acquaintance*).

**B. Nouns as Adjectives.** The transmutation of nouns into adjectives is one of the most frequent types of functional variation. Henry Bradley noted this linguistic feature in 1904:
One highly important feature of English grammar which has been developed since Old English days is what has been called the attributive use of the substantive, which may be exemplified by such expressions as “a silk hat,” “the London County Council,” “the Shakspere Tercentenary,” “Church of England principles,” “a House of Commons debate,” “the Marriage Law Amendment Act,” “the half-past-two train,” “the London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway,” “the High-street front of the Town Hall,” “my lawyer cousin.” No other European language has anything exactly parallel to this usage.


Usually the semantic shift is unobjectionable, as in the first word in each of the following phrases: *body weight, insurance policy, telephone wires, home repairs, family problems.*

Occasionally, however, shifts of this kind give rise to ambiguities or play tricks on the reader. Perhaps the worst problems arise when an adjective used as a noun is then used as an adjective—a recipe for ambiguity. Examples are *poor relief* (relief for the poor), *editorial reply* (if the sense is a reply to an editorial, as opposed to an editorial that replies to something else), and *hypothetical discussion* (if the sense is the discussion of a hypothetical). And it would be unwise for one writing about a statute concerning invalids to call it an *invalid statute.* The problem increases as the phrases grow longer <explosive device detection equipment> (see PHRASAL ADJECTIVES).

To make a somewhat different point, the reader's expectations are thwarted when a noun is used adjectively in place of the more usual adjective. E.g.: "Police would have access to the fingerprints for investigation [read investigative] purposes only after obtaining a court order." "Giving Fingerprint: Price of Security," *News Trib.* (Tacoma), 4 Mar. 1997, at A10. Often, of course, the sense conveyed is different when one uses the noun adjectivally as opposed to the adjective form. For example, *pornography commission* seems to mean something different from *pornographic commission* (which is somehow difficult to visualize). But at other times, the two ways of phrasing the idea are synonymous, as in *prostate cancer vs. prostatic cancer or pronoun problem vs. pronominal problem.* The main difference is that, in such pairs, the more usual phrasing uses the noun (*prostate cancer, pronoun problem*). Only specialists use adjectives such as *prostatic and pronominal.* Or, for that matter, *adjective (over adjective, adj.)*

The adjective–noun relationship often becomes vague when nouns that would normally follow prepositions are adjectives placed before nouns, and the relation-bearing prepositions are omitted. Hence *victim awareness* is a vague phrase: does it mean on the **part of, by, or?** E.g.: “Victim awareness gained momentum in the early 1980s, with the passage of the Victim and Witness Protection Act.” We can deduce that the intended sense is *awareness (on the part of the public) of victims and their rights,* but perhaps we should not ask our readers to make such deductions. The same sort of uncertainty infects *victim restitution* (= full restitution to the victim of a crime).

Almost every phrasal adjective involves a noun phrase used adjectively—hence *birch tree yields birch-tree study, government department yields government-department brouhaha, space flight yields space-flight objectives,* and so on.

C. ADJECTIVES AS NOUNS. Many English words that are ordinarily adjectives can function as nouns (collectibles, edibles, receivables, rentals). Indigent was originally an adjective (15th c.), but it came to be used as a noun (16th c.). The same process occurred with *editorial, hypothetical, postmortem, principal (= [1] principal investment, or [2] principal administrator), ignitables, potential, explosives, and recitative.* Among recent examples are *finals (= final examinations) and classifieds (= classified advertisements). Other examples are not hard to come by:

my dearest
the accused
the condemned
the deceased
the elite
the homeless
the poor
the religious
the rich

Though words that have recently undergone semantic shift are typically unsuitable for formal contexts, we should resist the benighted temptation to condemn all such shifts in parts of speech if they help fill gaps in the language. But as one commentator notes, some shifts have little to recommend them: “Can't we at least use correct English? That would distinguish Richmond from those places where the likes of ‘multicultural collaborators’ are springing up. Collaborative, of course, is not a noun; it is an adjective. There can no more be a collaborative for youth than there can be an exhaustive for marathoners or a repressive for dictators or a suggestive for exotic dancers.” Robert Holland, “No Collaboration Without Elaboration,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* 30 July 1997, at A13. As the headline says, the critic here would substitute the noun collaboration.

D. NOUNS AS VERBS. A type of semantic shift a little less common than the noun-to-adjective shift occurs when nouns function as verbs. There are scores of examples, such as *appeal, bias, deal, function* (as in the preceding sentence), handle, people, perfume, reward, room, silence, survey, and weather. Often these new usages are slangy—e.g.:

“He’d be as busy ambassadoring in Rome as he’s been may-orizing in Boston,” David Nyhan, “Bill’s Dabble at Diplomacy,” Boston Globe, 2 May 1997, at A23.

“Samples were air-expressed to Atlanta for testing,” Ken Kaye, “Asbestos Threat Delays Flights,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 3 Dec. 1997, at B3.


“Unless you can type, you’re not going to make it,” she said. “But they don’t even call it typing anymore; it’s called keyboarding.” Chuck Stinnett, “E-Mail, PC Have Redefined the Field and the Job,” Evansville Courier & Press, 15 Dec. 2002, at F1. (On the second use of anymore in that sentence, see anymore.)

Although some writers enjoy referring to fast-tracking budgets, tasking committees, and mainstreaming children, be wary of these vogue words. They reek of jargon.

Increasingly, too, people are turning noun phrases into awkward phrasal verbs even when much simpler verbs are available. This phenomenon typically involves an evolution from the simple verb to the noun phrase and then to the phrasal verb. For example, hotel clerks frequently deal with customers who, when checking in, request a different room from their preassigned one—that is, they change rooms. The staffers then refer to this as a room change, and that phrase becomes so customary among those staffers that they begin using it as a verb. So in some hotels—especially in New York—it’s not uncommon to hear someone at the front desk say, “Did you room-change?” Of course, the more natural question would be, “Did you change rooms?” The same phenomenon is apparent when gate agents (using air-liness) say that a flight has been gate-changed, or when children ask whether they can go bike-ride or ice-skate.

Some brand names are susceptible of being used as nouns (e.g., Xerox for “copy a document,” FedEx for “send a package,” Rollerblade for “skate on inline skates”). E. Adjectives as Verbs. Adjective-to-verb transformations have never been common in English. They usually have a jargonistic quality (as in the first and third examples below) or a trendy quality (as in the second). Careful writers tend to avoid them or, when quoting someone else, to distance themselves with telltale quotation marks (as in the first example):

“The New York City Fire Commissioner directed that her cargo tanks be ‘inerted’ through the introduction of carbon dioxide into the tanks.” Grant Gilmore & Charles L. Black Jr., The Law of Admiralty 925 (2d ed. 1975).

E. Adjectives as Verbs. Adjective-to-verb transformations have never been common in English. They usually have a jargonistic quality (as in the first and third examples below) or a trendy quality (as in the second). Careful writers tend to avoid them or, when quoting someone else, to distance themselves with telltale quotation marks (as in the first example):

“Clinton would be well-advised to low-key the task force before it announces anything embarrassing.” Joe Klein, “Time to Step Back,” Newsweek, 17 May 1993, at 40.


There are exceptions <greening rooftops>. And to copyeditors, it is natural to talk about lowering and uppercasing words. But to those not familiar with copyediting, references such as these smell of jargon.

F. Prepositions as Adverbs or Particles. Many prepositions (such as by, down, in, off, on, and up) function also as particles in phrasal verbs (some grammarians call them adverbs). The distinguishing feature is that the preposition invariably has an object <we walked by the park>, whereas a particle does not <they never came by>. When people bristle at the sight of a sentence-ending preposition, the preposition is often functioning as a particle <we’ll try to work you in>. See PREPOSITIONS (b) & SUPERSTITIONS (a).

G. Conjunctions as Prepositions. Conjunctions such as but and than may serve as prepositions. Compare the prepositional but in Everyone but you was there (but meaning “except”) with the conjunctive but in She liked the design, but she didn’t like the drawing. See but (d) & than (c).

H. Any Other Part of Speech as an Interjection. Almost any word can serve as an interjection. You might call it an exclamatory noun or verb, or an exclamatory conjunction, but in fact it is probably functioning as an interjection: great! (adjective); moron! (noun); look! (verb); fast! (adverb); you! (pronoun); if only! (conjunction).

fundament = (1) basis; or (2) anus or buttocks. Sense 2 is more common in BrE than in AmE—e.g.: “There is even a 12-step group for people addicted to 12-step groups—which is very Fight Club, but surely only a small step away from one’s head disappearing entirely up one’s own fundament.” Mimi Spencer, “Let’s Talk About Me,” Sunday Times (London), 19 Jan. 2003, Features §, at 12. But because sense 2 is current in AmE as well, it typically can’t be used without creating a double entendre. One hardly knows what to think about sentences such as this: “This is the best of the best, and like it or not, it’s the fundament of our private culture and public life.” Kyrie O’Connor, “Great Books,’ with a Classic Male Slant,” Hartford Courant, 22 Sept. 1996, at G3. To avoid trouble, try foundation.

Sometimes the word is misused in the plural as an inelegant variation of fundamentals—e.g.: “[Kyle] Korver is like a golfer, always tinkering, always looking for the perfect swing. He’ll watch other players, work on his fundamentals [read fundamentals], tweak his own shot.” Tom Shatel, “Korver Puts in the Hours to Become Jays’ Big Shot,” Omaha World-Herald, 18 Jan. 2003, at C1. (He wouldn’t get far by working on his fundament,)
funeral; funereal; funerary; *funebrial. *Funerary, commonly a noun, serves as its own adjective <funeral expenses>. *Funereal, adj., which is frequently confused with funeral, means "solemn, mournful, somber." *Funerary = of, used for, or connected with burial. *Funebral is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of funereal. H.W. Fowler wrote that no one who can help it uses funerary or *funereal (FMEU1 at 205).

funeral home. This Americanism dating from the 1920s is, in the incisive commentary of a mid-20th-century critic, “unquestionably one of the ultimates of verbal absurdity.” J. Donald Adams, “Ugly Words,” in The Ways of Language 2, 2 (Raymond J. Pflug ed., 1967). By the 1960s, the phrase was ubiquitous: “It now disfigures the streets of every American town and city,” Ibid. It had also pervaded BrE by that time. The particular silliness of the phrase is that there is no such thing as a “home” for funerals.

So what did such a place used to be called? The undertaker’s (itself a bygone euphemism). Centuries ago it was the deadhouse. Later the morgue. Then the mortuary. Then the mortician’s. Then the funeral parlor. And finally a funeral home, where the bodies are kept in a slumber room.

funereal; funerary. See funeral.

fungus. Pl. fungi: /faŋˈjʊɡəs/, not /fæŋˈdʒɪɡəs/. See plurals (b). The noun fungicide likewise has a soft -g-/faŋdʒiˌsid/.

funnel, vb., makes funneled and funneling in AmE, funnelled and funnelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

funnily. See adverbs (b).

fur. For an odd misusage, see fir.

furor; furore. Furor /fyuror-ər/ is the standard spelling in AmE, furore /fyur-ro-ər/ in BrE. Why the difference? Although both AmE and BrE predominantly adopted the Latin spelling of the word (furor) in the 18th century, in the late 19th century BrE publications increasingly adopted the Italian spelling (furore), which became unquestionably predominant in BrE during the 1940s.

further. See farther.

*Furthest is a dialectal term not to be found in good writing—except in dialogue involving nonstandard speech. Dating from the early 19th century, this nonword marks a good many pieces—e.g.:

- “Duke’s only real hope is that the open primary system operates as it has many times in the past, selecting the candidate from the furtherest [read furthest] right and the one from the furtherest [read furthest] left for the runoff, thereby pitting Duke against, say, Fields.” Jack Wardlaw, “Some New, Interesting Developments in Senate Race,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 25 Feb. 1996, at B7.

See dialect.

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*Furthest for furthest: Stage 1

furthermore, adv. & conj. This word is quite proper, of course, but its heaviness can weigh down a passage. A quicker word—such as also, and, besides, further, or even moreover—usually serves better.

*Further to your letter. This phrase, like *enclosed please find, epitomizes business jargon. If you want to write effective letters, don’t use it.

*fuschia. See fuchsia.

fuse, n.; fuze. A fuse is a wick or other combustible cord for an old-fashioned explosive. A fuze is for more high-tech explosives: it’s a mechanical or electronic device used for detonations.

In a different sense, fuse refers to a component that protects an electrical circuit by preventing it from overloading. The two clichs derive from the different senses of the word: blow a fuse from the electrical-component sense, and have a short fuse from the wick sense.

FUSED PARTICIPLES. H.W. Fowler gave the name “fused participle” to a participle that is (1) used as a noun (i.e., a gerund), and (2) preceded by a noun or pronoun not in the possessive case—thus Me going home made her sad rather than the preferred My going home made her sad. Or Shareholders worried about the company reorganizing rather than the preferred Shareholders worried about the company’s reorganizing.

The fused participle is said to lack a proper grammatical relationship to the preceding noun or pronoun. Yet no one today doubts that Fowler overstated his case in calling fused participles “grammatically indefensible” and in never admitting an exception. The grammarians Otto Jespersen and George Curme have cited any number of historical examples and have illustrated the absolute necessity of the fused participle in some sentences (barring a complete rewrite)—e.g.:

“The chance of that ever happening is slight.”

But Fowler had a stylistic if not a grammatical point. Especially in formal prose, the possessive ought to be used whenever it is not unidiomatic or unnatural. In the following sentences, then, possessives would have been better used than the nouns and pronouns in the objective case:

• “The pattern of our life, which now involves me spending [read my spending] some days each week totally alone so as to write, proves to be creative and necessary for all of us.” Terry Waite, “A Long, Long Way to Travel,” Times (London), 27 Aug. 1994, at 15.

• “Now when 11-year-old Shelby Young rides the bus to Loudon Grade School, he doesn’t worry about the older kids soaking [read that the older kids will soak] him with water guns,” Carrie Sturrock, “Separate Buses, Better than Equal,” Concord Monitor, 7 Sept. 1994, at B1. (The difference in meaning between kids soaking and kids’ soaking is slight: as currently worded, the older kids soaking him seems elliptical for the older kids who are soaking him [in which case the original sentence is right]. But the writer probably meant their soaking him—hence the older kids’ soaking him. The question is what he’s not worrying about: the kids or the soaking. The revised version, with a new subordinate clause [that the other kids will soak him], is a good way to avoid the problem altogether.)

A modern rule might be formulated thus: when the -ing (present) participle has the force of a noun, it preferably takes a possessive subject, especially in formal contexts. But when the -ing participle has the force of a verb, a nonpossessive subject is acceptable, especially in informal contexts. When the participle falls in the predicate—as it usually does when case selection is a subtle question—another key is to analyze what the proper direct object should be. Consider this exchange: Is John in the shower? / Yes, I heard him singing. / Is he talented? / Yes, I heard his singing. The object of the first reply may be John himself (him), but the object of the second is clearly John’s (hence, his) singing.

Yet there are other exceptions. For example, there’s typically no choice of construction when you’re using nonpersonal nouns <he was responsible for the luggage having been lost>, nonpersonal pronouns <she couldn’t accept nothing being done about the problem>, and groups of pronouns <he regretted some of them being left out in the rain>. For a scholarly discussion of still other exceptions, see Thomas Nunnally, “The Possessive with Gerunds,” 66 Am. Speech 359, 363–65 (1991).

If you can’t get a handle on fused participles, then just remember the words of an influential grammarian: “It’s a niggling point but one on which many people niggle.” Paul Roberts, Modern Grammar 20 (1968).

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Garden-variety fused participle <I can understand him not wanting to participate>: Stage 3

**fusible.** So spelled—not *fusible*. See -ABLE (A).

**futilely**, adv., is sometimes misspelled *futiley*—e.g.:


• “But the bottom line is Starks got the calls and the Nuggets were left futiley [read futiley] pleading their case to referees.” Dave Krieger, “Nuggets End East Trip 0–4,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 15 Dec. 1996, at C12.


Cf. agilely & solely. See adverbs (b).

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futilely misspelled *futiley*: Stage 1

**future, in the near.** This phrase is unbearable wordy for either of the simple one-word equivalents: soon and shortly. See in future.

**fuze.** See fuse.

-**fy.** Most verbs ending in -fy—from the French -fier or Latin -ficare “to do or make”—are preceded by an -i- (e.g., classify, mollify, mortify, pacify). But a few of them aren’t: liquefy, putrefy, rarely, stupefy. The reason for the difference is merely that the corresponding infinitives in French and Latin are spelled with an -e-(liquefier, etc.), and the words were borrowed directly into English from those infinitives. In any event, it’s a common error to misspell these words -iffy. The same mistaken switch of -e- to -i- occurs in the corresponding nouns, which should be liquefaction, putrefaction, rarefaction, and stupefaction.

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**GAAP.** See generally accepted accounting principles & abbreviations (A).

**gabardine; gaberdine.** These variant spellings have undergone differentiation. Gabardine is the modern fabric having a hard finish and diagonal ribs. Gaberdine is the outer garment traditionally associated with Jews of the Middle Ages.

**Gaelic; Gallic.** Gaelic /gay-lik/ means “Scottish” or “Irish”; Gallic /gal-ik/ means “French.”

As a noun, Gaelic denotes the language spoken by the Celts of the Scottish Highlands—or, more broadly, by the Celts of Ireland and the Isle of Man as well. Gallic, though formerly denoting a person from France, is not used as a noun in modern English.

**gaffe; gaff, n.** Gaffe = (1) a blunder in etiquette; faux pas; or (2) a blatant error. Gaff (a rarer word) = (1) a long pole with a metal hook used in fishing; (2) a metal spur; (3) a trick or swindle; (4) harsh treatment, abuse; or (5) (BrE) a cheap theater.
Gaffe is sometimes misspelled gaff—e.g.:

- "His biggest risk, Mr. Schoen said, 'is that something will happen and he will make another gaff [read: gaffe] as he did in 1989." Catherine S. Manegold, "Giuliani Shows a Polished Image," N.Y. Times, 7 Sept. 1993, at A1.

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**gaff** misused for: **gaffe**

- **gainsay; contradict.** Originally gainsay [ME "to say against"] was the popular word and contradict the erudite one. Today just the opposite is true: "This is Gallic. See the noun is considered literary. is pronounced either /gә-lant/ or /gә-lant/. (In the dated sense "polite largely displaced by /gahl gay-әnt/. (In the dated sense "polite to celebrate a special occasion) is most traditionally pronounced /gә-lant/." James B. Greenough & George L. Kittredge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech* 215 (1902). *Gainsay* is now a formal word some-

- **gala** (= a huge party or public entertainment to celebrate a special occasion) is most traditionally pronounced /gә-lә/ but in recent years it has been largely displaced by /gahlә/ or /gә-lә/.

- **gallant.** In all senses as an adjective, this word is best pronounced /gә-lәnt/. (In the dated sense "polite and attentive to women," it may also be pronounced /go-lәnt/ or /go-lәnt/). As a noun, however, the word is pronounced either /go-lәnt/ or /go-lәnt/. Today the noun is considered literary.

**Gallic.** See **Gaelic.**

**Gallicisms** (/gә-lә-siz-әms/) appear frequently in modern prose—e.g., blasé, coup de grâce, cul-de-sac, joie de vivre, mésalliance, succès d’estime, tête-à-tête, and tour de force. None of these is unduly recherché, to use yet another. But foreignisms of any kind become affectations when used in place of perfectly good English terms—e.g., peu à peu for little by little, or sans for without. (See *sans.*)

One stylist of high repute cautions sternly against all but thoroughly anglicized Gallicisms: "Of Gallicism... it is perhaps not necessary to say much: they are universally recognized as a sign of bad taste, especially if they presuppose the knowledge of a foreign language. A few foreign words, such as cliché, have no English equivalent and are in current use; and there may be others [that] are desirable. But except in tech-

- **gait** (= a manner of walking, trotting, etc.) is sometimes confused with gate—e.g.:

  - "Eddie squinted at the ball through thick black-framed glasses, his spindly legs and stooped shoulders giving him an awkward gate [read gait]." Hilary Waldman, "They Were Family," Hartford Courant, 24 Nov. 1991, at 14.
  
  
  - "AmericanCrems, which were not recognized as a breed until 1950, are medium-size draft horses, weighing about 1,600 to 1,800 pounds. Their gate [read gait] is smooth and easy, and their temperament is amiable and trustworthy." Suzanne Hively, "American Cream Is Featured Draft at Lake Farmpark Horse Show," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 16 May 2002, at E3.

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**gait** misused for: **gait**

- **gambit. A. General Uses.** In chess, a **gambit** is a move, usually an opening move, likely to sacrifice a piece to gain a strategic advantage. In strictest usage, it is the sacrifice that makes a tactical move a gambit. The word lost some of its unique punch when writers began applying it loosely to any trick, tactical move, or ploy. But that shift in meaning was clear by the mid-20th century, especially in the popular satires of Stephen Potter, most notably *The Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship* (1947), *Some Notes on Lifemanship* (1950), *One-Upmanship* (1951), and *Golfmanship*
(1968). For example, in the last of these, Potter wrote: “History is a gambit. More precisely the writing of history is a double or treble gambit. It is a way of saying ‘I think’ and ‘what about this’ in a tone [that] is supposed, simply by adding the word ‘History,’ to silence argument” (p. 3). Throughout his many satirical texts, Potter used and popularized gambit as a synonym for psychological play.

Today this use is relatively common—e.g.:


- “In addition to its other provocative narrative gambits [read twists], ‘Six Feet Under’ tweaks stereotypes by having its gay characters also the show’s most devoutly religious, even though many faithful would blindly condemn them.” David Kronke, “Killer Comedy,” Daily News (L.A.), 1 June 2001, at L30.


B. For gambit. Gambit = a full range or extent, literally of musical notes, but more often figuratively of anything <the gamut of available options>. Misusing gambit for gamut is an increasingly common malapropism—e.g.:


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*running the gambit for running the gamut: Stage 1
Current ratio (running the gamut vs. running the gambit): 89:1

C. In the Sense “opening.” Because the chess gambit is most often associated with openings, some criticize opening gambit as a redundancy. But strictly speaking, it’s not: a gambit can come at any point in a chess game.

gambling. See gaming.

gambol (/gəm-bəl/), vb., makes gamboled and gamboling in AmE, gamboled and gambling in BrE. See SPELLING (B).

gaming; gambling. The first is a euphemism for the second, especially in law and casino advertising—e.g.: “State officialdom, when hoping to sound professional and clinical, uses the term gaming as having an ameliorative sense. By contrast, . . . gambling has a pejorative connotation.” Thomas L. Clark, “Gaming and/or Gambling: You Pay Your Money,” 10 Verbatim, Spring 1984, at 20.

gamut. See gambit (B).

ganglion (= [1] an encapsulated group of nerve cells external to the brain and spinal cord, or [2] a cystic tumor on a tendon sheath) has predominantly formed the plural ganglia since the early 19th century—not ganglions.

Current ratio: 51:1

gantlet; gauntlet. Lexicographers and usage critics—especially American ones—have sought since the 19th century to make a distinction. One runs the gantlet (= a kind of ordeal or punishment) but throws down the gauntlet (= a glove). The trend, however, is to use gauntlet for all senses (a trend reinforced by the 1977 Clint Eastwood movie The Gauntlet). In fact, though, writers of English have never reserved gantlet for the ordeal. Instead, despite etymological faultiness in conflating two different words—gauntlet (glove) and gantlet (ordeal)—gauntlet has taken over both meanings. One is tempted to resist, as this book did in earlier editions, but empirical evidence now available shows that run the gauntlet outdistances run the gantlet by an 11-to-1 margin and has consistently done so since about 1800. The “battle” was lost before it began. Hence usages like this one are legion, and typical: “They tortured him last year, dragged him through a senseless frat-boy gauntlet that accomplished nothing.” Jay Mariotti, “Sauerbrun Kicks Away Past at Last,” Chicago Sun-Times, 4 Sept. 1996, § 1, at 10.

Many writers, however, have heeded all the editorial admonitions—e.g.:

- “In the lawsuit, Douglas Hartman, an Illinois air traffic controller[,] says he was forced to walk through a Tailhook-style gantlet during a workshop designed by Eberhardt to combat sexual harassment. Hartman says he became a victim himself when he was groped by his female co-workers, who then rated his sexual attributes.” Jean Marbella, “Daring Tailhook-Style Gauntlet Stirs Up Debate,” Detroit News, 12 Oct. 1994, at A12.

- “The streetside culinary gantlet of hot grease and grills stands selling everything from tacos to burgers to funnel cakes, pierogis and pizza—was shuttered, awaiting the evening rush.” Brian E. Albrecht, “Year of Pig at Popular E. Side Fest,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 3 Aug. 1996, at B2.


The word gauntlet is uncontroversially used in the phrase throwing down the gauntlet (= issuing a challenge)—e.g.:

- “But now it is too late to throw down the gauntlet to the Americans.” Emily Sheffield, “Jackdraw,” Guardian, 18 July 1996, at 17.
• “Don Davis, who threw down the gauntlet through news-
paper ads, figures his Corvette is the better car.” “People,”
Orange County Register, 4 Sept. 1996, at A2.
• “Anyone who passes her has thrown down the gauntlet.”

The corresponding phrase is pick up the gauntlet
(= accept a challenge)—e.g.:
• “It remains for the Palestinians to pick up the gauntlet
and accept the challenge to adopt the path of nonviolent
resistance.” David H. Rusticker Jr., “Do Palestinians Have
Courage to Resist Nonviolently?” Morning Call (Allentown,
• “The outcome depends on whether other big institutional
investors pick up the gauntlet that has been thrown down
by the Missouri Public School Retirement System.” David
Nicklaus, “Pension Fund May Get Ball Rolling for Startup

Occasionally the phrase invites a confused meta-
phor—e.g.: “It probably just took a person who was
willing to pick up the gauntlet and run with it,” Bark
said about Earle’s leadership,” Dean Geroulis, “High

Garner’s Law of Loanwords. The more arcane
or technical a loanword (= a word borrowed from
another language), the more likely it is to retain a
foreign plural, diacritical marks, and italics; the more
common it becomes, the more likely it is to lose them.
Corollary: if the loanword becomes widespread, it
typically loses italics first, diacritical marks second,
and a foreign plural last.

garnish; garnishee, v.t. In AmE, the usual verb form
is garnish (= to take property, usu. a portion of some-
one’s wages, by legal authority). Garnishee is usually
reserved for the noun sense “a person or institution,
such as a bank, that is indebted to another whose
property has been subjected to garnishment, esp. to
satisfy the debt.” The noun corresponding to garnish
is garnishment.

In BrE, however, and in a few North American
jurisdictions, garnishee as well as garnish is used as a
verb. Although the OED gives passing notice to this
usage and to the corresponding noun *garnisheement,
these forms are historically unwarranted and therefore
ill-advised—e.g.:
• “Our caller felt certain that repayment had been fully
made, and that the garnisheement [read garnishment] of
his wages should end.” “The Ombudsman,” Dayton Daily
• “A Virginia court this year ordered the money garnished
[read garnished] from six months of Brawley’s wages as a
nurse there.” Michael Garland, “Pay-Up Time for Braw-
• “He said the senators who have yet to reimburse their
expenses should either go to arbitration, or see their wages
garnished [read garnished] (if they are still sitting) or face
a lawsuit (if they are retired).” Daniel LeBlanc & Gloria
Galloway, “Senate Leaders Say Changes to Rein In Spend-
ing Have Already Been Made,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 10

Current ratio (garnished his wages vs.
• garnished his wages): 5:1

garrote, vb. (= to strangle with a cord or wire), is the
standard spelling today in World English. Garrotte,
garrotte, and *garote are variants—the first of which was once the predominant BrE spelling.

The word is traditionally pronounced /go-rot/, but /ga-rot/ now predominates and must be accepted as standard. With the first of these pronunciations, it’s inflected *garroted and *garrotting in AmE (to preserve the long -o-); with the second, it’s *garrotted and *garrotting (with a short -o-). See spelling (b).

A *snake that can be found in a garden.” But beginning about 1960, the herpetologically challenged have often referred to this unknown species—e.g.:


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*garden snake for garter snake: Stage 2

Current ratio (garter snake vs. *garden snake): 8:1

gas. See fluid.

gases, not gasses, is the plural form of the noun gas. Still, for the verb gas, gassed is the accepted past tense and gases is the third-person singular in the present tense. Cf. bus. See spelling (b).

Current ratio (the gases vs. *the gasses): 42:1

gasoline; *gasolene. The first is standard in AmE and BrE alike; the second is a primarily BrE variant.

gateau (= a rich, elaborately decorated cake), an 18th-century French loanword, predominantly retained its original circumflex (gâteau) until the early 20th century. The standard plural is gateaux in all varieties of World English—not *gateaus. Whether singular or plural, the word is pronounced /gah-toh/ in AmE and /ga-toh/ (or even /gah-oh/) in BrE.

Current ratio (gateaux vs. *gateaus): 63:1

gaudy (=[1] ostentatious, showy; or [2] dazzlingly brilliant or extravagant) is the standard spelling. *Gawdy is an archaic variant that still sometimes appears—e.g.: “Chris Warren carried nine times for 61 yards as Seattle averaged a gaudy [read gaudy] 6.1 yards per rush.” Peter King, “Inside the NFL,” Sports Illustrated, 22 Sept. 1997, at 56 (photo caption). In BrE, gaudy is also a noun denoting an annual festivity, especially at a college.

Current ratio (gaudy vs. *gawdy): 181:1

gauge is often misspelled *guage, perhaps because when gauge is spelled correctly it looks as if it might be pronounced the same as gauze, so the writer “corrects” it by transposing the first two vowels. The misspelling might also be influenced by language, despite the differences in pronunciation (/læng-/gwi/ vs. /dʒǽj/). The OED calls the misspelling “a mere blunder.”

When gauge refers to the width of wire, needles, or shotgun barrels—or to the thickness of sheet metal—higher numbers indicate narrower thicknesses. So avoid words such as small and large in favor of less ambiguous terms such as thick and thin—e.g.: “The company reported that [the thief] frequented the business, bringing in large-gauge [read heavy-gauge] copper wiring to sell.” “Wire Thief Faces 10 Years,” Huntsville Times (Ala.), 4 Apr. 2008, at B1. When gauge refers to the width of railroad tracks, the best descriptors are standard, broad, and narrow.

gauget. See gantlet.

gavel, vb., makes gavoted and gaveling in AmE, gavelled and gavelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

gavotte (= [1] a lively dance that originated in 17th-century France; or [2] the music accompanying this dance, set in a brisk 4/4 time) is the standard spelling. *Gavot is a variant.

Current ratio (gavottes vs. *gavots): 12:1

gay. A. Generally. In 1980, a well-known language critic commented: “[The] special-interest use of gay undermines the correct use of a legitimate and needed English word. It now becomes ambiguous to call a cheerful person or thing gay; to wish someone a gay journey or holiday, for example, may have totally uncalled-for over- and undertones and, in conservative circles, may even be considered insulting. The insulting aspect we can eventually get rid of; the ambiguous, never. What do we do about it? If we energetically reject gay as a legitimate synonym for homosexual, it may not be too late to bury this linguistic abomination.” John Simon, Paradigms Lost 27 (1980).

Hardly anyone today would dispute, though, that it’s too late to contain the word. Gay is now all but universal in referring to homosexuals, both male and female, and has been embraced by the gay community. Its stronger associations are with men, so that we have the phrase *gay and lesbian affairs, as if lesbians weren’t gay. See (b).

The homosexual sense of gay first appeared in the mid-20th century; before that the word did, however, bear the derogatory senses “leading an immoral life” and “(of a woman) engaging in prostitution” (SOED). Those connotations have disappeared in recent years.
But is Simon’s point about ambiguity a valid one? Consider the following passage, from a book published in 1993. Was Hoccleve homosexual?

**Hoccleve, Thomas** (c.1369–c.1450) poet, began to work as a clerk/copyist in the Privy Seal in about 1378, and had his salary raised to £10 a year in 1399, and to £13 6s.8d in 1408. This, with his private means of £4 a year, should have been adequate, but his pay was often late and he lived a gay bachelor life—dressing fashionably, travelling to the office by boat, eating and dining in taverns, and entertain ing pretty girls. All this we know from “La Mâle Règle,” a poem which includes a plea to the Treasurer, asking for his back pay. A few years later, his long-awaited benefice having failed to materialize, he married, for love.


Readers are likely to believe, at first, that he was homosexual—because of the word *gay*. By the end of the passage, most readers will be convinced that Hoccleve was heterosexual and that the author has simply used *gay* in an old-fashioned way. A few might finish the passage thinking that Hoccleve was bisexual. But almost any observant reader will have spent some time considering Hoccleve’s sexuality—at the detriment of the information that’s actually being conveyed. The writer would have been well advised to avoid the traditional sense of *gay*; it’s now all but obsolete. And that’s just as well, since there are (and always have been) plenty of alternative choices that have no sexual connotations.

The new sense of *gay* is standard. Trying to reclaim the old sense is an exercise in futility. Meanwhile, there’s much to be said for gays’ having a more or less neutral term to describe themselves—something besides the familiar old dysphemisms.

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*Gay* meaning “homosexual”: Stage 5

**B. *Gay and lesbian***. Though common, this phrasing is peculiarly redundant, since lesbians are gay women. So to say *gay and lesbian* raises a genus–species problem akin to saying *human beings and women* (an insult to women). What is actually happening, no doubt, is that *gay* is undergoing what linguists call specialization—that is, in some of its senses the word is becoming sex-specific. In the end, *gay* may end up referring always to men. In the meantime, though, it’s more logical to use *gay* as a solo adjective, as in the title of the *Handbook of Affirmative Psychotherapy with Lesbians and Gay Men* (2002). And when the use is attributive—a noun sense being desired—it’s probably more clearly descriptive to refer to *gay men and women*, as in the title of Tom Cowan’s *Gay Men and Women Who Enriched the World* (1997).

gazebo. Pl. gazebos. See plurals (d).

geisha ( [= a Japanese woman trained in the arts of dancing, singing, conversation, and other entertainment, esp. for men), an 1881 Japanese loanword, is preferably pronounced /gah-shah/—not /gee-shah/.

geminate. So spelled. See SPELLING (A).

gemology. See *gemmology*. For “the study of gems,” the first is AmE; the second, BrE.

gender has long been used as a grammatical distinction of a word according to the sex assigned (usually arbitrarily in the Romance languages) to a given noun. It has newly been established in the language of the law in phrases such as *gender discrimination*, a use disapproved as jargonistic by some authorities. In reformers’ eyes, it eliminates the distracting word *sex* (which, of course, denotes coitus as well as physical characteristics that contribute to one’s sense of self).

In recent years, *sex* in one of its senses has narrowed its meaning to designate a set of physical characteristics <sex change>, while *gender* (at least in academic circles) increasingly denotes the social and psychological distinctions between men and women <gender roles>. For example, most academics today would use *gender* in place of *sex* in the following sentence: “Given strong patriarchal traditions here, it is hardly surprising that the criticism is often put in ways that emphasize the two leaders’ *sex*, even if Bangladesh has had plenty of reason in 22 years of nationhood scarred by military coups and assassinations to conclude that men in power are no less likely than women to be governed by the whims of personality and ambition.” John F. Burns, “Two Women, at the Top and at Odds,” *N.Y. Times*, 28 July 1994, at A7. As worded, the sentence might even contain a miscue for some readers; that is, one might expect the sentence to be completed differently—e.g.: “Given strong patriarchal traditions here, it is hardly surprising that the criticism is often put in ways that emphasize the two leaders’ *sex*, which by all accounts is becoming more frequent.”

There are, in short, legitimate reasons for preferring *gender* outside grammatical contexts. But polemists sometimes argue that the reasons are entirely political—e.g.: “The [‘gender equity’] industry prefers the word ‘gender’ to ‘sex’ because ‘sex’ suggests immutable differences, while ‘gender’ suggests differences that are ‘socially constructed’ and can be erased by sufficiently determined social engineers.” George F. Will, “A Train Wreck Called Title IX,” *Newsweek*, 27 May 2002, at 82.

gendered is a jargonistic vogue word (dating from the early 1970s) meaning “biased in favor of one sex.” The term can seem preposterous at times. A correspondent who contributed the following example asked whether the suggestion is to remove all men and women from the military: “There are now demands to change the culture of the military, to create an *ungendered* military as if that were the ultimate...
solution to social problems having to do with sexuality,” Elaine Donnelly, as quoted in “Experimental Army,” Wash. Times, 29 Sept. 1997, at A2. Presumably, the sense is “a military free from sexual biases,” but the language is badly stretched—at least, that is, the language as it stood in the early 2000s. See functional shift (B) & unisex.

gender-neutral. See unisex; see also sexism.

genealogy (= [1] the study of the history of a family, or [2] a description or depiction of how family members and their ancestors are related), an Anglo-French loanword from the 14th century, doesn’t end (like so many other words) in -ology—but instead in -alogy. How is it pronounced, then? Traditionally /jee-nee-al-a-jeel/, as opposed to /-ahl-a-jeel/. Cf. mineralogy.

genera. See genus.

*general consensus. See consensus.

generalissimo. Pl. generalissimos. See plurals (D).

generalized (= made general) sometimes appears in contexts where general would serve better—e.g.: “For what begins in many of the stories as rich subject matter with great possibilities for originality soon turns—because of the hurried, vague patches and generalized language—predictable or, worse, uninteresting.” Mark Bautz, “Golden Boys’ Offers Gilded Promises, but Results Are Dull and Tarnished,” Wash. Times, 6 Oct. 1991, at B8. The sentence surely does not intend to convey that the language was made general by the author, but that it is general.

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generally has three basic meanings: (1) “disregarding insignificant exceptions” (the quality of the acting is generally very high); (2) “in many ways” (he was the most generally qualified applicant); and (3) “usually” (he generally leaves the office at five o’clock). Sense 3 is the least effective in formal writing, although at times it merges with sense 1.

generally accepted accounting principles; generally accepted accountancy principles. The first is the usual phrase in AmE and BrE alike. The second is a variant. The phrase is often abbreviated GAAP/gap/—e.g.: “[Deferred Acquisition Cost] is the way insurers defer some of the costs of acquiring a customer and amortize them over a number of years under generally accepted accounting principals [read principles], or GAAP.” Lee Ann Gjertsen, “Insurers’ Annuity Moves Could Crimp Bank Profits,” Am. Banker, 1 Nov. 2002, Ins./Inv. Prods. §, at 1. Because GAAP is an acronym, it should not have a period after each letter. See abbreviations (A) & principal (B).

*generally always; *usually always. These are unconscious oxymorons that have occasionally appeared since the 19th century—e.g.:

genial. See congenial.

**Genie; jinni; *djinni.** Although these words overlap, genie (jee-nee) more commonly denotes the magic spirit that, when summoned, carries out its master’s wishes (the best-known one living inside Aladdin’s lamp). On the other hand, a jinni (ji-nee or jin-ee) is a spirit or demon that, according to Muslim mythology, appears on Earth in human or animal form and exercises supernatural powers. *Djinni* is a variant spelling of jinni.

Both words have multiple plural forms. Genie forms genies or, less good, *genii. (See plurals (b).) Jinni forms jinn or jinns (corresponding to the incorrect singular jinni). The variations are so common that some dictionaries disagree about which spelling is standard. Cf. **genius.**

**Genitives.** See possessives.

**Genius** = (1) a person of high intellectual and inventive power; or (2) the prevailing character or spirit; characteristic method or procedure. Sense 2 often refers to language—e.g.: - “What has been called ‘the genius of the language’ can’t be resisted. If the new meaning attached to a word satisfies enough people, that use will stick.” Allan Massie, “Minimising the Language Potential,” Scotsman, 19 Sept. 1995, at 15. - “We go to poetry to meditate, to feel, to experience our private lives through the outward genius and beauty of language.” Donald Hall, “Poetry’s Munchiness and Manyness,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 5 May 1996, Everyday Mag., at C1. - “It was just by some miracle that the core notion of common sense—of taking things sometimes towards the cliff, but not over—became instilled in the genius of our language, and possibly not in some other ones.” David Warren, “Misjudging the People,” Ottawa Citizen, 8 Nov. 2009, at A11.

In its oldest sense, genius means “a guardian spirit assigned to a newborn child”—e.g.: “All the souls had now chosen their lives, and they went in the order of their choice to Lachesis, who sent them with the genius whom they had severally chosen, to be the guardian of their lives and the fulfiller of the choice . . . .” Plato, 10 The Republic, in 1 The Dialogues of Plato 878 (Benjamin Jowett trans., 1837). The plural geniuses is preferred over genius except in the sense of demons or spirits. E.g.: “These themes are an integral part of the book as she ventures into the realm of the genius, ghosts and spirits.” Chris Reynolds, “Anne Rice Afraid of the Dark?” Ark. Democrat-Gaz., 8 Sept. 1996, at J7. (See plurals (n).) The genius in that quotation, by the way, is different from genies (= magical servants). For more on genius, see **genie.**

**Genovese.** See Genevese.

gentleman. A. General Use. Gentleman should not be used indiscriminately as a genteelism for man, the generic term. Gentleman should be reserved for reference to a cultured, refined man. It is a sign of the times that “no word could be, it seems, more thoroughly out of style than gentleman.” John Mortimer, “Woofter Sauce,” Sunday Times (London), 29 Sept. 1991, § 7, at 6. In 2001, a Phoenix resort specified that at one of its restaurants, “Jackets are required for gentlemen.” Which leaves one to wonder what’s required for all the other men.

In BrE, the word formerly referred to a man of independent means not working gainfully. No doubt because the word is a vestige of a class-conscious society, it often appears in ironic phrases, especially in BrE <gentleman of the road = highway robber> <gentleman who pays the rent = pig>.

B. **Set Phrases.** Gentleman appears in many set phrases, such as the introductory “ladies and gentlemen” and auto racing’s “gentlemen, start your engines.” A gentleman’s agreement is an informal one that relies on the good faith of the parties rather than the legal obligations created by a contract. Gentlemen carries no class distinction as the sign on a public restroom, nor do its connotations of civility translate when it’s used in the euphemism gentlemen’s club.

C. And **gentleperson.** This word is occasionally used as a neutral term in salutations, especially in the plural, but it has never lost its look of jocularity. The Second Barnhart Dictionary of New English (1980) says this of gentleperson: “often used humorously or ironically.” E.g.: “Gentlepeople don’t read other gentlepeople’s e-mail.” James Coates, “Computer Privacy? It’s Not a Given,” Chicago Trib., 23 May 1993, at C1. Jocularity aside, the plural is gentlepersons, not *gentlepeople.

**Genus.** The only plural form included in many dictionaries is genera, but both the OED and RH2 include the variant genuses. That variant has become fairly common, and it is undeniably more comprehensible to more people—e.g.: - “New kinds of dinosaurs are described every month. Peter Makovicky, curator of dinosaurs at the Field Museum in Chicago, estimates there are 900 valid genuses, at least double the figure from two decades ago.” Jerry Adler, “Buried Treasure,” Newsweek, 27 June 2005, at 44. - “He created his own system of classification, his own set of genuses and species, under rubrics like ‘Charity, Aged,’ ‘Charity, Children,’ and ‘Charity, Tuberculosis.’” Edward Rothstein, “Categorized, Compared and Displayed: Social

- “One is enthroned upon a symbol-studded ‘Tree of Life,’ one kneels in apology to a sawed-off trunk with an all-seeing eye among its rings, and others are painted on slick slabs of wood—nymphs of different genera.” Leah Ollman, “No Need to Read Beyond the Book Title,” L.A. Times, 6 Apr. 2007, at E27.

Still, somewhat surprisingly, genera overwhelmingly predominate in modern usage, whether AmE or BrE—e.g.:


- “The campanula genus, which comprises more than 300 annuals, perennials and biennials, has become one of the most popular and identifiable genera in the United States.” Erle Nickel, “These Abundant Bells Are A Joy to Behold,” S.F. Chron., 17 Jan. 2007, at WB8.

- “[T]he boundaries between plant species are far more porous than they are in animals, and different species and even genera of plants cross-hybridize with each other surprisingly often.” Natalie Angier, “Green, Life-Giving and Forever Young,” N.Y. Times, 17 Apr. 2007, at F1.

See plurals (b). Cf. species.

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**Germanisms.** Although the English language is known as a Germanic language (evolving from Anglo-Saxon) and has a basic Germanic syntax, it has not borrowed as heavily from the modern German vocabulary as it has from the Romance languages Latin and French. Even so, the German contribution has been significant. Among the more frequent Germanisms in English are these, all of which can be found even in abridged English dictionaries:

- allergen
- angst
- anlage
- biergarden
- blitz
- bratwurst
- bundt
- delicatessen
- diesel
- doppelgänger
- dummkopf
- feldspar
- foosball
- frankfurter
- gesundheit
- glockenspiel
- hamberger
- hasenpfeffer
- hinterlands
- histamine
- katzenjammer
- kindergarten
- kohlrabi
- lederhosen
- leitmotif
- neandertal
- poltergeist
- pretzel
- pumpernickel
- quartz
- rathskeller
- realpolitik
- rottweiler
- rucksack
- sauerkraut
- schnapps
- schriftsprache
- schuss
- sein
- strudel
- sturm und drang
- tannenbaum
- waltz
- wanderlust
- weltanschauung
- weltzschmerz
- wunderkind
- zeitgeist
- zeppelin

Although in German the nouns are capitalized, loanwords tend to be lowercased as soon as they become common in English. See **gestalt.**

**Gerontocracy.** See governmental forms.

**gerrymander,** an early-19th-century satirical portmanteau word, combines the name of Elbridge Gerry (governor of Massachusetts from 1810 to 1812) with the ending of salamander. When Gerry’s party redistricted Massachusetts in 1812 to favor the Anti-Federalists, Essex County was divided in a way that made one voting district look, in the eyes of Federalists, something like a salamander. A famous editorial cartoon in the Boston Gazette added a dragon’s head, wings, and claws, and named the beast the gerrymander. Hence gerrymandering came to refer to the practice of arranging electoral divisions so as to give one political party an unfair advantage.

Gerry’s name was pronounced with a hard -g-; /jer-/, and gerrymander was originally pronounced /ger-ee-man-dәr/. Today /jer-ee-man-dәr/ predominates, though both pronunciations are standard.

When extended beyond geographic senses, the word is subjected to what could only be described as slipshod extension: “In the last few years, the 30-second ‘attack ad’ and the 10-second television news ‘sound bite’ have become such prominent . . . features of political campaigns that members of Congress have introduced more than two dozen bills in

*gerry-rig. See jury-rig.

GERUNDS. Oddly, there is a widespread prejudice against nouns ending in -ing. It’s largely unfounded. When it comes to reducing verbosity, one effective way is to use gerunds directly; so administering the medicine is better than the administration of the medicine, presenting the proposal is better than the presentation of the proposal, etc. See danglers (d), fused participles & zombie nouns.

gestalt; Gestalt. Borrowed from German in the mid-19th century, this term denotes a shape, configuration, or structure that, as an object of perception, forms a specific whole or unity incapable of expression simply in terms of its parts. This vogue word was formerly capitalized and italicized because it was long treated as a German noun (hence the italics), and in German all nouns are capitalized. But today it is increasingly treated as a naturalized word—e.g.:


• “But at least give them credit for trying to break the destructive gestalt of our times—this absurd idea that the only way to deliver public services and bolster the economy is to keep on taxing and spending more.” Lorrie Goldstein, “Kicking the Guilt over Tax Breaks,” Toronto Sun, 12 Jan. 1997, at C3.

Even those who capitalize the term today don’t usually italicize it. It is pronounced /ɡә-stahlt/ or /ɡә-stahlt/. See italics (b) & germanicisms.

get. A. Generally. Get is good English. Yet many writers want to avoid it because they consider it too informal; they prefer obtain or procure, two formal words. The same tendency is at work here that leads some writers to shun before in favor of *prior to, later in favor of *subsequent to, and the like. But confident, relaxed writers use the word get quite naturally—e.g.:

• “It was until recently a civil offense, called ‘alienation of affections,’ for which either spouse could get damages.” Max Radin, The Law and You 54 (1948).

• “Duke was obviously referring to some of the conference championship teams or playoff winners that either got lucky or hot during the playoffs or played an impressive schedule to win a conference title and gain an automatic berth.” Gordon S. White Jr., “N.C.A.A. Tourney Snubs Syracuse,” N.Y. Times, 9 Mar. 1981, at C1.

• “People have told the Amherst couple to get divorced.” Miriam Hill, “The Costs of Caring,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 3 Feb. 1997, at D1.

Although some pedants have contended that get must always mean “to obtain,” any good dictionary will confirm that it has more than a dozen meanings, including “to become.” So the second and third bulleted examples above are quite proper. And it’s entirely acceptable to use such phrases as get sick, get well, get rich, and get angry.

Anthony Burgess has noted the enormous versatility of get: “Foreign learner and native speaker alike can get through a great part of the day with only one verb … ‘get’ … I get up in the morning, get a bath and a shave, get dressed, get my breakfast, get into the car, get to the office, get down to work, get some coffee at eleven, get lunch at one, get back, get angry, get tired, get home, get into a fight with my wife, get to bed.” A Mouthful of Air 60 (1992). And he speculates that people regard it as a vulgar word precisely because it makes life so easy.

B. Inflection: get > got > gotten, got. The past participle gotten predominates in AmE, got in BrE. As recently as the early 20th century, some British writers benightedly lambasted the American form. Consider this misbegotten advice: “America need not boast the use of ‘gotten.’ The termination, which suggests either wilful archaism or useless slang, adds nothing of sense or sound to the word. It is like a piece of dead wood in a tree, and is better lopped off.” Charles Whibley, “The American Language,” 183 Blackwood’s Mag. 117, 118 (1908). Others, however, noted that gotten was the standard BrE form as late as the early 20th century. See G.H. Vallins, Good English: How to Write It 31 (1951). See irregular verbs.

C. Have got for have or must. The phrase have got—often contracted (as in I’ve got)—has long been criticized as unnecessary for have. In fact, though, the phrasing with got adds emphasis and is perfectly idiomatic—e.g.:

• “Most pathetic lyrics: The dumbest lyrics have got to be ‘Whose junkpile or Chevelle is this? You boys come here to race or just kiss?’ from ‘455 Rocket.’ ” Kathy Mattea, “In Sync,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 21 Mar. 1997, at E11.

• “For this offense to work, he’s got to be able to do more than dump the ball off desperately to his receivers.” Michael Wilbon, “Latest Effort Leaves a Lot to Be Desired,” Wash. Post, 6 Oct. 1997, at C1.

• “That’s pretty cool, but as an Ohio boy, I’ve got to go with the Fighting Irish in this one.” Michael Beaven, “Sports Sage Knows All and Sees All for Week 1,” Akron Beacon J., 27 Aug. 2015, at C1.

The OED, under get (24), has examples of have got from 1876 to 1889. Ruskin is cited. Jespersen adds Disraeli, Dickens, Eliot, Wilde, Shaw, Wells, Trollope. Although the OED calls it “colloquial or vulgar,” Albert H. Markwardt and Fred Walcott say (in light of the strong authorial evidence) that it’s good literary English. Facts About Current English Usage 29 (1938).
The main error to watch out for is omitting have in either its full or its contracted form. That is, such expressions as *I gotta leave now and *I got a $10 bill in my billfold aren’t in good use. But I’ve got to leave now and I’ve got a $10 bill in my billfold are good English. Cf. better (A).

D. Passive Voice with get. See passive voice (A).

get rid of. See phrasal verbs.

get the best of; get the better of. Eric Partridge suggested a narrow distinction between these verb phrases: “Properly, the former applies to swindling and other trickery, whereas the latter has no offensive connotation and simply = to overcome, to defeat” (UeA at 135). But the OED records no such distinction, and today the phrases are used synonymously to mean “to gain the advantage over” or “to prevail against.” The older phrase, get the better of, dates from the early 18th century and occurs with somewhat greater frequency in modern print sources. Get the best of emerged in the 19th century and appears most often in AmE. Get the best of is about three times as common in print as the other.

gewgaw /gyoo-gaw/ (= a gaudy trinket or flashy bauble) has been predominantly so spelled since the 16th century. The 20th-century variant *geegaw hardly qualifies as even a lexicographic gewgaw.

gastlylily. See adverbs (B).

ghetto forms the plural ghettos, not *ghettoes—and certainly not the pretentious *ghetti. See plurals (b), (d).

   Current ratio (ghettos vs. *ghettoes vs. *ghetti): 310:61:1

gibberish. So spelled—not *jibberish (a misspelling that arises from the pronunciation). E.g.: “At best they strove for remote, unrealizable ideals—insofar as their revolutionary jibberish [read gibberish] could be deciphered at all.” Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Reverberations 326 (Ruth Hein trans., 1989).

   LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
   gibberish misspelled *jibberish: Stage 1
   Current ratio: 98:1

gibbet (= an upright post used to hang executed criminals; a gallows) is pronounced /jib-әt/, with a soft g-.

gibbous ([1] protuberant, convex, or [2] having or resembling a hump; humpbacked) is most traditionally pronounced /gib-әs/, but today the standard pronunciation is /jib-әs/.

gibe; jibe; gybe; jive. A. Meanings. This set of words can be hard to keep straight.

   Gibe is both noun and verb. As a noun, it means “a caustic remark or taunt”—e.g.: “Irving Lewis . . . personified the faceless civil servants who, for all the gibles about pointy-headed bureaucrats, make government work.” “The Lives They Lived,” N.Y. Times, 29 Dec. 1996, § 6, at 13. As a verb, it means “to heckle, mock, or taunt.”

   Jibe is generally considered a verb only, meaning “to accord with, to be consistent with”—e.g.: “The sight just doesn’t jibe with the image of her character.” Jamie Schilling Fields, “Saintly Bernard,” Texas Monthly, Jan. 1997, at 52.

   Gybe, a sailing term meaning primarily “to shift a sail from one side of a vessel to the other while sailing before the wind,” is so spelled in BrE but is usually spelled jibe in AmE.

   Jive, like gibe, is both noun and verb. As a noun, it refers either to swing music or to the argot of hipsters. As a verb, it means “to dance to swing music” or “to tease”—e.g.: “Snipes and Harrelson previously jived and juked and ragged their way through ‘White Men Can’t Jump,’ so they’re old hands at this.” Jeff Simon, “Right on Track,” Buffalo News, 24 Nov. 1995, at G31.


“ar the new songs were clamorous and spacey, with distorted hooks and extended feedback that jived [read jibed] well with the futuristic stage lighting.” Sandy Stahl, “Separate Accommodations Prevent Lollapalooza from Coming Together,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 5 Aug. 1995, at A53.


   LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
   jive misused for jibe: Stage 2
   Current ratio (jibe well with vs. jive well with): 9:1

C. Jibe for gibe. While jibe is a recognized variant spelling of gibe, it is not the preferred spelling. And since the words are confusing enough as it is, the alternative spelling should be avoided—e.g.: “Chat rooms on the hockey fan website Faceoff.com were filled with jibes [read gibes] from fans and detractors alike.” Eric Beaudan, “Canadian Hockey Up Against the Financial Boards,” Christian Science Monitor, 13 Jan. 2003, World §, at 5.


“Since the game started, players continued to exchange jibes [read gibes], but that was the extent through the first 20 minutes.” Will Parrish, “Eagles Get Key Big South Victory Against Liberty,” Herald (Rock Hill, S.C.), 17 Jan. 2003, at C1.

   LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
   jibe misused for gibe: Stage 4
   Current ratio (bitter gibes vs. *bitter jibes): 2:1

D. Other Mistaken Uses. While less frequent than the above abuses, other errors do occur. Jibe is
sometimes mistaken for jive—e.g.: “Plug and play. It sounds so ‘good to go.’ . . . Yet the ‘plug and pray’ jibe [read jive], while admittedly tired, exists among engineers for a reason.” Leslie Ellis, “Plug and Play: Easy, Right? Ha!” Multichannel News, 13 Jan. 2003, at 30. Even less frequent is the misuse of gimme for jibe, though this error also sometimes occurs—e.g.: “‘The Gift of the Magi’ is played out in the broader-than-broad conventions of uninspired children’s theater, which doesn’t really give [read jive] with the material.” Roy Proctor, “‘Gifts’ Appears Fashioned for Non-Existing Audience,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 9 Dec. 2002, at E5.

Language-Change Index gimme misused for jibe: Stage 1
giblets (= the edible internal organs of a fowl) is preferably pronounced /jib-lits/, not /gib-lits/.
gift, vb. It may be surprising to learn that English speakers have been using gift as a verb since the 16th century. The traditional gift that is gifted is some innate talent (i.e., a gift from God) or a grant, especially of land, from a sovereign or a noble. That sense lives on, most often in the participial adjective <a gifted pianist> but also in participial phrases—e.g.: “Gifted with size, speed and a strong arm, his abilities were apparently lost on recruiters.” Will Webber, “‘St. Pius Stand-by Heads to Air Force, ’” Albuquerque J., 8 Feb. 2007, Sports §, at 7. (Note that gifted is a dangling participle in that sentence: see danglers (c).)

But now gift as a verb is on the rise in a more mundane realm—e.g.: “M&M’s is looking to be a big player in the Vegas convention center and have Dick Clark as the host. But Stevie Wonder? Isn’t that guilding [read gilding] the lily just a bit?” Taylor Buckely, “Did the World Cup Draw Really Need the Vegas Glitz?” USA Today, 21 Dec. 1993, at C11.


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guild misused for gild: Stage 1
Current ratio (gilded vs. *guilded): 162:1

B. Gilding the lily. The phrase gilding the lily misquotes its Shakespearean source, which reads, “To gild refined gold, to paint the lily” (King John 4.2.11). But because the phrase has become a cliché, criticizing the misquotation would be as fruitless as complaining about the inaccuracy of “Play it again, Sam” (which is never actually said in the film Casablanca—the line is “Play it, Sam”).
gimme, a golf term shortened from “give me,” refers to a short putt that needn’t be holed—usually because playing partners concede that the player would sink it. The plural form, naturally, is gimmies. But occasionally the plural is mistakenly written *gimmies—even by those who spell the singular form correctly. This mistake occurs, for example, throughout the following book (even in the title): Jane Blalock & Dawn-Marie Driscoll, Gimmies [read Gimmie], Bogeys and Business (1996).

Gimme is also used outside golf contexts as an adjective for various types of free merchandise, especially baseball caps bearing advertising logos and messages <gimme cap>.

Language-Change Index
*gimmies for gimmies: Stage 3
Current ratio (gimmies vs. *gimmies): 4:1

Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)
Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
gimmickry. So spelled—not *gimmecry.

Current ratio: 69:1

ginkgo /ging-koh/ (= a gymnospermy tree indige-

nous to Asia, with tasty yellow fruit enclosed in a mal-

odorous seed-bearing jacket) is the standard spelling.

*Gingko and *jingko are variants.

gin out. See gin up (b).

gin up /gin ap/. A. Generally. Gin up (= [1] to rev up

(as an engine); or [2] to concoct) is a late-19th-century

Americanism that is barely mentioned in the OED

and appears to have been missed by most American

lexicographers (being omitted from most dictionar-

es). Gin here is derived from a clipping of engine. The

phrasal verb is increasingly common—e.g.:

• “So they ginned up a ‘law and order’ message suggest-
      ing that Democrats were soft on crime.” David S. Broder,

• “This is a law enacted by Congress. This is not some-
      thing we just ginned up out of whole cloth.” Carl Ingram,
      “Debt-Reduction Bill Could Cost Community Colleges,”
      L.A. Times, 21 Dec. 1990, at A3 (quoting Bill Moran, of the
      U.S. Department of Education).

• “The Phillies organization has been working hard to gin
      up a tide of nostalgia for the last season in ‘The Vet,’ but
      it’s an impossible sell.” “There’s Nothing Like the Home
      Opener to Make Spring a Reality,” Morning Call (Allen-

B. And gin out. This related phrase means “to produce,

esp. on a routine basis or in a hurry”—e.g.:

“We’ll call it the Courthouse Diet Plan, and I’ll gin

out a trade paperback so we can stay on the New York
Times bestseller list for years and years.” Tom Alle-

man, “Why Are Lawyers So Cranky? They Don’t Eat

2002, at 1. Occasionally, though, it loosely replaces

gin up in sense 1—e.g.: “Those three hard-working,

high-tech liters gin out [read gin up] 225 horses, good

even to sling you to 60 mph in 6.6 seconds, BMW

tells us.” Brooks Peterson, “330i Another BMW Win-


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*jist for gist: Stage 1

Current ratio (the gist of vs. *the jist of): 357:1

give in to temptation. So written—not *give into
temptation. See phrasal verbs.

Current ratio: 7:1

given. For this word as an acceptable dangling modi-

 fier, see danglers (e).

given name. For the meaning of this term, see the
discussion at surname.

given (that). At the head of a statement (most com-

monly), given is an age-old shorthand way of saying

“assuming as a fact” or “with [the thing stated] sup-
plied as a basis for reasoning.” If what follows given

is a mere phrase (without a verb), given appears

alone—e.g.: “Given her high position, she does have

opposition.” Larry Whitham, “Episcopalians Brace

for Divisive Sessions,” Wash. Times, 13 July 1997, at
A4. But if a clause follows (with a verb), a that should

accompany given—e.g.: “Given that he was a medi-

cal student at Brown before turning to professional

hockey, Bill McKay might be expected to be a quick

study.” Peter Barrouquere, “McKay Learns How to

Wing It,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 26 Nov.

For more on wrongly omitted thats, see that (b).

giveth . . . taketh away. This phrasing alludes to the

biblical sentence, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath

taken away.” Job 1:21 (King James Version). Though

variations on this phrase have become cliché, they

have a resilient wittiness—e.g.: “For another thing

what Subsection (1) giveth, Subsection (2) largely

taketh away: the promise, even if made, will be
'binding' only within narrow limits." Grant Gilmore, *The Death of Contract* 74–75 (1974). Note that 'givelth' is a form found 141 times in the King James Version, but not in the quoted verse. See **archaïsms**.

**gizmo** (= a gadget) is the preferred spelling. *Gismo* is a variant.

Current ratio: 34:1

**gladiolus**—/gla-dee-oh-las/ or (pretentiously) /gla-di-oh-las/—is the singular form. The plural form is **gladioluses** or (predominantly) **gladioli**, the latter pronounced /gla-dee-oh-lee/ or /-li/. See **plurals** (b).

But because **gladiolus** is sometimes wrongly taken to be a plural, especially in speech, the mistaken form *"gladiola"* has emerged. It is an arrant mistake that should be stamped out. E.g.:

- "Anyone at the fair at 11 a.m. Thursday, Sept. 3, can join <her eyes glistened with unshed tears>."

**Language-Change Index**

1. *"gladiola"* for **gladiolus** as a singular: Stage 2
   Current ratio (gladiolus vs. "gladiola"): 6:1
2. *"gladiolas"* for **gladioli** as a plural: Stage 3
   Current ratio (gladioli vs. "gladiolas" vs. gladioluses): 31:10:1

**glamour.** So spelled, even in **AmE**. But the related words **glamorize** and **glamorous** change the -our- to -or-. See -or. Cf. **squalor**.

**glance; glimpse.** The traditional idioms are that one **takes** or **gives a glance** but **gets a glimpse**. But these idioms are occasionally confounded—e.g.:

- "Members of a Polk County School Board steering committee took a first glimpse Tuesday at [read got a first glimpse Tuesday of or took a first glance Tuesday at] the report that could become the district's landmark school improvement plan." Janet Marshall, "School Improvement Plan Shown," *Ledger* (Lakeland, Fla.), 5 June 1996, at B1.
- "He shook his head as he got his first glance at [read got his first glimpse of or took his first glance at] the stat sheet." Mike DeCourcy, "Tigers Earn Sloppy Win," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), 3 Dec. 1996, at D1.

**Language-Change Index**

1. **glimpse** misused for glance: Stage 1
2. **glance** misused for glimpse: Stage 1

**glossary.** Pl. glossaries. See **plurals** (d).

**glean** (= to gather [esp. information or, orig., crops left over after a harvest]) is occasionally confounded with **gleam** (= to shine)—e.g.: "A social worker visits new patients to glean [read glean] information about their social and financial resources." Editorial, "The Graying of Texas," *Dallas Morning News*, 30 Dec. 1999, at A24.

**Language-Change Index**

**glimpse**. See **glance**.

**glitter,** *"glister; glisten.** Glitter, dating from the 14th century, derives from the Middle English *glitteren*. It has four senses: (1) to sparkle; to reflect many small flashes of light <the sequins glittered>; (2) to flash positive emotions <when praised, the children glittered>; (3) to be spectacularly attractive <at the party, the couple glittered>; and (4) to be superficially attractive or exciting; to flash <those arguments may glitter, but there's little substance to them>.

*"Glister" is related to **glimmer**, having arisen from the same root, with the same meaning, and at the same time. It is now an archaic or dialectal form of **glitter** (in sense 1) <all is not gold that glisters>.

**Glisten** is the oldest term; the OED cites its use in a poem written about 1000. To **glisten** is to "produce a lustrous shine or sparkle like light on water" <the wood's polish is so brilliant it glistens> <moonlight glistening on snow>. In modern usage, **glisten** most often occurs in allusions to moisture in some form <her eyes glistened with unshed tears>.

**glue,** vb., preferably makes **gluing** not *"glueing.** E.g.:

"Teams start out with easier actions such as painting graffiti, **gluing** [read gluing] locks and breaking windows." Rebecca Merritt & Steve Lundgren, "A Guerrilla War for Animal Rights," *Bulletin* (Bend, Or.), 3 Aug. 1997, at B1. See **mute e**.

Current ratio: 17:1

**gnaw** > **gnawed** > **gnawed.** The form *"gnawn"* is an archaic past participle—e.g.: "In the end Kent scored 250, which, on a comfortable pitch, more or less guaranteed *"gnawn"* [read gnawed] umbrellas." Christopher Martin-Jenkins, "Benson and Hedges Cup," *Daily Telegraph*, 31 May 1995, at 34. See **irregular verbs** (b).

**Language-Change Index**

**gnawn** used for the past participle **gnawed**: Stage 1
Current ratio (had gnawed vs. *"had gnawn")*: 169:1

**go.** A *inflection: *go > **went** > **gone.** To use **went** as a straight-faced past participle is to engage in low dialect that isn’t appropriate even for the sports pages—e.g.:
goatherd


See irregular verbs.

Language-Change Index

went misused for gone: Stage 1

Current ratio (had gone vs. *had went): 358:1

B. Meaning “say.” The use of go as a synonym for say is seemingly part of every American teenager’s vocabulary (“So I go, ‘Whattaaya mean?’ and he goes, ‘Whattaaya mean by askin’ that?’”). It occurs in the past tense also: “Then he went, like, ‘No way!’” This is low-level slang. Cf. be-verbs (c) & like (b).

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go in the sense “say”: Stage 4

goatherd; *goatherder. Goatherd (= someone who tends goats) is the standard form, parallel in form to shepherd—e.g.: “Legend has it that the coffee bean was ‘discovered’ centuries ago when a goatherd in Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia) stumbled upon his animals cavorting in an unusually energetic manner.” “The World (Coffee) Cup,” Wash. Post, 28 Feb. 2003, at T31. The needless variant *goatherder, though not recorded in most dictionaries, makes occasional stray appearances—e.g.: “Claude Campbell . . . takes readers into the Gaza strip, places us in a Palestinian goatherder’s [read goatherder’s] tent and makes it as believable a place as your neighbor’s kitchen.” Pat MacEnulty, “Jewish Angel Counsels a Palestinian,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 3 Mar. 2002, at D10.

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*goatherder for goatherd: Stage 1

Current ratio (goatherd vs. *goatherder): 34:1

gobbledygook; gobbledegook. Maury Maverick’s original spelling was gobbledygook, and today that spelling outnumbers its variant form by a ratio of about 7 to 1 in AmE. Yet since the early 1990s, gobbledygook has been the predominant form in BrE print sources—but barely. Nevertheless, most American and British dictionaries list gobbledygook first.

The term refers to the obscure language characteristic of jargonmongering bureaucrats. Thus iterative naturalistic inquiry methodology supposedly refers to a series of interviews. Much technical writing is open to the criticism of being gobbledygook. One of the purposes of this book is to wage a battle against it. See abstracttitis, jargon, latinisms, legalese, obscenity & plain language.

goddamned; goddam, adj.; goddam. Strictly speaking, the first form is the only correct one. Yet because of the way this word is spoken—the final -d usually being silent—the latter two spellings commonly appear in print. In terms of word frequency in print, goddamn is by far the most common, followed by goddamned, and then goddam. The more loosely spelled forms make the expletive seem less literal, and therefore somewhat less offensive—e.g.:

- “Rostenkowski said in a recent interview: ‘Lyndon Johnson was in Texas, and he called me. ‘Goddamn you,’ he said. ‘Take that . . . get up there . . . tell Carl Albert. Oh, he was mad.’” John A. Farrell, “‘68 Convention Unrest Boosted O’Neill’s House Rise,” Boston Globe, 1 Sept. 1996, at A15.
- “Then someone handed me a metal pole with a glowing jellyfish perched at the top. I was now the Jellyfish King. I danced around with the jellyfish and poked the air with it until my arms got tired and I scoured feverishly for someone to pass the jellyfish to. Will someone please take this goddamn jellyfish?” Andrew Magary, “My Morning Rovers,” GQ, 1 Aug. 2015, at 48.

See damn.

godliy. See adverbs (b).

-goer. This combining form attaches to many nouns denoting places or events without the need of a hyphen, resulting in words such as beachgoer, concertgoer, movergoer, museumgoer, partygoer, seagoeer. The no-hyphen rule was adopted by the AP Stylebook in 2014.

goes without saying, it. This phrase isn’t generally suitable for formal contexts, although it may be appropriate in speech or in informal prose. Often, an editor is justified in thinking that if it really goes without saying, then it need not be said.

Goethe /go[ə]-ta/. “Americans who pronounce Goethe’s name ‘Go-ee-th’ are not always proper, ignorant clodhoppers in need of pity.” Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work (1940). Oh, no?

*go fetch. See fetch.

golf. One may either play golf (the phrase dates from ca. 1575) or simply golf (ca. 1800)—that is, golf can be a verb as well as a noun. Most golfers use the older phrasing and say that they play golf <I’ll be playing golf on Saturday>, whereas nowadays nongolfers tend to be the ones who use golf as a verb <she’ll be golfing on Saturday>. In modern print sources, played golf is 20 times as common as golfed.

Writers on golf often disparage the verb golf as symptomatic of linguistic duffferdom—e.g.:

Another refers mockingly to “the unwashed who think the word golf and its derivatives can be used as verbs (‘Hey, Ralph, ya wanna go golfing tomorrow?’ ‘Nah, Jim, I golfed yesterday’).” David Climer, “Senior Tour Isn’t Aging Very Nicely,” Tennesseean, 20 July 1999, at C1.

A third says that “using golf as a verb [is] a linguistic gaffe akin to shortening San Francisco to Frisco.” Bill Ott, “Blue Fairways,” Booklist, 1 Sept. 1999, at 63.

See functional shift (d).

If you’re serious about golf and writing, stick to the noun uses of golf. That will never tee off anyone.

The -l- is pronounced in this word, preferably: /gahlf/ or /gawlf/—not /gahf/ or /gawf/.

go missing (= to disappear, become lost) is a Britishism that has encountered an odd mix of resistance and acceptance in AmE. Still, it seems to be on an irreversible ascent—e.g.: “In Fort Worth last June, bronze memory urns disappeared from graveyards. The following month, at a high school football field in Washington, D.C., 750 pounds of aluminum bleachers went missing.” Telis Demos, “The Dark Side of Metal Madness,” Forbes, 9 July 2007, at 32.

The phrase, now recorded in W11 and NOAD, chafes many Americans. Some object to the notion of voluntariness that go suggests (did the bleachers in the example above run away and hide?). They incorrectly assume that the idiom suggests voluntary absence and should therefore be restricted to uses such as desertion or going AWOL. Others believe it to be ungrammatical.

But many usage pros defend it—e.g.:

“Why has this construction lasted so long and now blossomed? It does a semantic job that needs doing, that’s why. No other term quite encapsulates ‘to become lost inex- plicably and unexpectedly,’ which connotes suspicion of trouble. From the most serious loss (a person kidnapped, or a soldier unaccounted for or absent without leave) to an irritating minor loss (an object is misplaced), to go missing—always in the past tense, went, or past participle, gone—conveys a worried, nonspecific meaning that no other word or phrase quite does.” William Safire, “Gone Missing,” N.Y. Times, 27 June 2004, § 6, at 21.

“People ask me over and over again about certain things. ‘Why have Americans . . . shunned gone missing?’ It’s neither unclear nor ungrammatical (if you can go bankrupt, why not go missing?), and action-verb boosters should be applauding it as stronger than is missing. Anti-British prejudice can’t explain the animus; even people who don’t know its pedigree heap scorn on gone missing.” Jan Freeman, “Missing in Action,” Boston Globe, 19 Nov. 2006, at E3.

Although the phrase has been traced to the late 19th century, it spread primarily in World War I with reports of British air and sea missions when planes or ships didn’t return. It began its spike in AmE usage in the mid-1990s, especially in missing-persons reports—e.g.:

• “Authorities in Oregon are searching for a Garden Grove Jesuit priest and his traveling companion, who may have gone missing as long as two weeks ago during a tour of the Pacific Northwest.” Christian Berthelsen, “Garden Grove Priest and Friend Reported Missing,” L.A. Times, 22 June 2007, at B1.

• “One of the actor’s friends has gone missing, and it seems an easy enough matter for her to look into. Of course, that’s before people start dying, putting Wiggins herself in jeopardy.” David J. Montgomery, “Mysteries,” Chicago Sun-Times, 24 June 2007, Books §, at B9.


gondola (= a long narrow boat with a flat bottom and high points on each end, traditionally used in Venetian canals) is pronounced /gon-da-la/—not /gon-doh-la/.

good, adv. “You did good.” “Yeah, I played good tonight. Practice is coming along real good.”

These goods would once have been considered clearly nonstandard, even substandard. They’re typical of dialect; the adverb being well—not good. But in a few set phrases, the adverbial good cannot be replaced; among these are did it but good and a good many more.

Although adverbial uses appear frequently in print, they are almost always in reported speech—e.g.:


While the adverbial good is rare in edited prose, it has become almost universal in sports, even when the speaker obviously knows the right word—e.g.: “St. Joe’s coach Mark Simon, who had to laugh a little and shook his head as he reviewed the Wolverines, [said]: ‘They shot the ball very good, they passed the ball inside very well.’” Keith McShea, “Falls Crushes St. Joe’s with Third-Quarter Blitz,” Buffalo News, 29 Jan. 2003, at C3.

Of course, real good (a common dialectal phrase) may also occur in standard English if good is a noun, as here: “I believe in what we do, especially in
goose skin

19th century. In BrE, the older 
goose pimples

sources than 
est term, dating only from the 1930s. Y et today, in both 

Goose bumps

by fear, exhilaration, or cold, and marked by bumps 

All four terms refer to the skin condition brought on 

goose bumps; gooseflesh; goose pimples; goose skin.

even the verb is more often capitalized than not.

dopplegänger—which, like 
google -

and therefore showing up in search results when one 
ganger (= someone having the same name as oneself 
has spun off such derivatives as 
googleable

the Internet using the Google search engine. “ The term

to prominence in the sense “to look (something) up on 
google

came

to years of the company’s founding, the verb

google -
googleed oneself). A variant term for the latter is

dop -

aries don't generally list the noun. But within a few 
diction-

Google.

So written. See possessives (n).

goodwill.

Formerly two words, then hyphenated, the term has now become one word both as an adjective

a goodwill gesture> and as a noun <a symbol of 
goodwill>

Google. Because Google is a proper noun and trade-

mark denoting the company that so successfully 
launched its Internet search engine in 1998, diction-

aries don't generally list the noun. But within a few 
years of the company's founding, the verb google came 
to prominence in the sense “to look (something) up on 
the Internet using the Google search engine.” The term 
has spun off such derivatives as googleable (= having a significant presence on the Internet) and google-
geranger (= someone having the same name as oneself 
and therefore showing up in search results when one 
googles oneself). A variant term for the latter is dop-
plegoogler—which, like googleganger, is modeled on 
the German word doppleganger (= someone who bears 
a striking resemblance to someone else).

Even the verb is more often capitalized than not.

goose bumps; gooseflesh; goose pimples; goose skin.

All four terms refer to the skin condition brought on 
by fear, exhilaration, or cold, and marked by bumps 
located at hair follicles, especially on the forearms. 
Goose bumps (often written goosebumps) is the new-
est term, dating only from the 1930s. Yet today, in both 
AmE and BrE, it appears much more often in print 
sources than goose pimples, which dates from the late 
19th century. In BrE, the older gooseflesh (early 19th 
century) and goose skin (mid-17th century) are still 
common as well. In medical circles, the condition 
is called horripilation (essentially, “hair standing on 
end”) or, less commonly, piloerection.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 126:33:15:1

goosy (= [1] of, relating to, or resembling a goose; 
[2] foolish; or [3] hypersensitive to being prodded or 
startled) is the standard spelling. *Goosy is a variant. 
Loosey-goosy is a low CASUALISM meaning “relaxed” 
(as in “loose as a goose”) or, in describing machinery, 
“rattletrap.”

GOP. A. Generally. This abbreviation, short for Grand 
Old Party (= the Republican Party), may be doomed. In 
late 2002, the editors at The Wall Street Journal 
and at several other newspapers decided to drop it 
from all copy, including headlines, on grounds that 
not everyone knows what it stands for. See William 
48. Safire objected, pointing out that he knows what 
a DVD is but doesn’t know what the letters stand for. 
Ibid. (See DVD.) Part of the problem, it seems, is 
that while Republican Party has the short form GOP, 
Democratic Party has no equivalent short form. (That’s 
a quirk of language.) Also, some editors believe that 
abbreviations should be explained with the full phrase 
on first use, and they rebel at writing out “Grand Old 
Party” in each piece in which the phrase appears. If 
the abbreviation falls into disuse, it will dwindle very 
gradually. The 2002 editorial decision may ultimately 
be registered as a temporary blip in the history of the term, as editors retreat from a hasty decision because 
headlines and quotations make the abbreviation 
avoidable. Then again, the decision may signal the 
onset of moribundity.

B. Redundancy. When coupled with party, GOP 
creates an odd REDUNDANCY. *GOP party represents 
*Grand Old Party party. Either drop party or change 
GOP to Republican—e.g.:

• “We’re playing ball,” said GOP party [read GOP] chairman 
• “In those cases, local Democrats are seeking to have tossed 
out thousands of absentee ballots because of alleged mis-


ding of the ballot applications by GOP party [read 
GOP] workers.” Bob Davis & Phil Kuntz, “Gore Comments 
Unnerve Certain Democrats,” Wall Street J., 6 Dec. 
2000, at A12.

• “The GOP party [read GOP] leaders . . . then learned how 
to apply for a job in the prospective Bush administration.” 
Tyler Whitely, “Republicans Cheer Halt in Fla. Recount,” 

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*GOP Party for GOP: Stage 2

*gormand. See gourmet.

gossip, vb., makes gossiped and gossiping in both AmE and BrE. See spelling (b).

got, p.pl.; gotten. See get (b).

gotten. See get.
gourmet; gourmand; epicure. As a noun, gourmet now means "a connoisseur of food and drink," although it originally referred more specifically to a connoisseur of wine. Gourmet (/ˈgoʊr-mɛt/ or /ˈgoʊr-mɛt/) shares with gourmand (/ˈgoʊr-mәn-d/) the basic sense "someone who loves good food and drink," but their connotations have come to be markedly different. A gourment knows well and appreciates the finer points of food and drink. A gourmand, on the other hand, is commonly understood to be a glutton for food and drink. An epicure (/ˈɛp-i-kʊr/) is essentially the same as a gourment, though perhaps with a touch of overrefinement. Epicureanism is a philosophy concerned with personal happiness and freedom from pain.

The pejorative sense for gourmand has been the source of some confusion because the corresponding gallicism, gourmandise (/ˈgoor-mәn-deez/), means "gastronomic expertise; an appreciation of fine cuisine." The negative connotations of gourmand and the positive connotations of gourmet were once decried by those who want gourmand to correspond to gourmandise:

The word [gourmet] first began to take on its improper sense in the last decade of the 18th century, a time when certain noble lords, not to mention the nouveaux riches (who are always with us), were quite ignorant of true gastronomy . . . . But it was not till well on in the 19th century that this word was applied to the gastronome, or connoisseur of the table. Then the stupid, pretentious, and ill-mannered new rich of the Second Empire (1851–1870) began to feel squeamish over the shameful word gourmand, and soon it was replaced, among these ridiculous snobs, by gourmet . . . . Let us not fear gourmand. It has only one meaning. La gourmandise is and always has been celebrated as a virtue among the kind of sensitive people who despise gluttony as they do drunkenness.

M. des Ombiaux, as quoted in Donald Moffat, "Gourmet or Gourmand?" Atlantic Monthly, Apr. 1956, at 90, 91.

But the gourmand is no longer such a celebrated figure. The "ridiculous snobs" of the mid-19th century held sway, the curious result being that gourmand no longer corresponds to gourmandise. (*Gormand is a variant spelling formerly common.)

The word gourmet is also used—and perhaps overused—as an adjective meaning "of, involving, or serving fine or exotic food" <a trendy gourmet restaurant>. With gourmet chocolates on the pillow and gourmet pasta and sauce sets, the word has been devalued to the point that it merely describes food with pretensions.

government. In 1926, H.W. Fowler pronounced government an archaism for which either government or control suffices, allowing it only in "rhetorical or solemn contexts" (FMEU1 at 220). The word was simply in a prolonged lull. In the 1960s, it was awakened in AmE and by the 1990s had become something of a vogue word throughout the English-speaking world. In legal contexts, it frequently refers to running or governing a corporation—e.g.: "Pierre-Henri Leroy [is] founder of Proxinvest, which advises companies on French corporate governance issues." "French Drug Stocks Soar as Elf Proposes Alliance," N.Y. Times, 20 Dec. 1996, at D4.

governing (= regulating, controlling) is sometimes mistakenly written governing—e.g.:

• "The regents, historically a coordinating board rather than governing [read governing] board, were given the power to cut only funding, not actual programs." John Funk, "Regents’ Cutbacks Hit Humanities," Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 10 June 1996, at B1.

• "Cigars have become a major concern as they are becoming a status symbol and need to have the same tight laws governing [read governing] them as cigarettes, he said." Tom Ernst, “Clergyman Sees Place for Church in Anti-Smoking Campaign,” Buffalo News, 5 Jan. 1997, at C6.


Though rare, governing does have its use in denoting an automotive device that limits a vehicle’s speed (its governor)—e.g.: “The factory sets its top speed at 130 miles per hour and warns drivers to call if the governing system breaks.” Royal Ford, “2000 Audi TT: A Smooth, Sultry Scamperer,” Boston Globe, 23 May 1999, at F1.

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governing misused for governing: Stage 1

government is preferably pronounced with the -n-distinctly in the second syllable: /ˈgɑv-ərn-mənt/. According to the pronunciation expert Charles Harrington Elster, it is "one of a number of words that careful speakers are particularly diligent about pronouncing precisely. . . . How you say it is an indication of whether you are an average educated speaker or a cultivated one." BBBM at 229. Robert W. Burchfield, the OED chief editor and BBC consultant, said that government belongs "to a small group of words that [give] a maximum of offence to listeners if pronounced in a garbled manner, with the first n silent." FMEU3 at 339.

governmental; governmental, adj. Increasingly today, the noun government is used attributively—that is, in an adjectival function <governmental rules and regulations>. In only a few phrases is governmental the more frequently encountered adjective, examples being governmental authority and governmental organization. On the whole, though, the longer form appears to be in retreat. The choice seems to do not with whether
a vowel follows the word, since government agency predominates over governmental agency in AmE and BrE alike, but rather with meter. Over time, the longer form may well look and sound more and more archaic.

**Governmental Forms.** The English language abounds in words denoting almost every conceivable form of government, usually ending in either -cracy or -archy. What follows is only a sampling of the scores of familiar and arcane terms:

- androcracy = government by men
- autocracy = government by a single person
- bureaucracy = government by administrative bureaus
- democracy = government by the people
- dyarchy = government by two rulers
- ergocracy = government by workers
- gerontocracy = government by the elderly
- gynocracy = government by women
- hagio-cy = government by saints
- juenocracy = government by youth
- kakistocracy = government by a country’s worst citizens
- kleptocracy = government by thieves
- meri-cracy = government by those who have the most merit
- monarchy = government by a king or queen
- ochlocracy = government by the mob (also termed mobocracy, a hybrid)
- oligarchy = government by a small group of people
- panti-socracy = government by all people equally (in a utopia)
- plutocracy = government by the wealthy
- polyarchy = government by many people
- stratoracy = government by the military
- technocracy = government by technicians
- theocracy = government by religious leaders

Bureaucracy, of course, does not refer only to government by administrative bureaus. More commonly, it denotes inaccessible and inefficient government characterized by red tape. See **bureaucratize**.

governor-general (= a governor of high rank; esp., the chief representative of the British Crown in a Commonwealth country) has always predominantly formed the plural **governors-general**, not *governor-generals*.

Current ratio: 4:1


**Language-Change Index**

gracile misused for graceful: Stage 1

gracious (= kind and polite) is sometimes misused for grateful (= thankful). Common in speech (and reported speech), the error occurs less commonly in written work. But it does appear—e.g.:
- "She was very gracious [read grateful] for the love and support of her family." "Marlyn R. Rifley" (obit.), *Patriot-News* (Harrisburg), 4 Aug. 2002, at B8.

President George W. Bush was quoted as making this gaffe in 2001: "I’m so thankful, and so gracious—I’m gracious [read grateful times two] that my brother Jeb is concerned about the hemisphere as well." As quoted in "Weather in Florida Can Play Tricks on Your Mind," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 June 2001, at 38. See **grateful**.

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gracious misused for grateful: Stage 1

**graduate**, vb. The traditional idiom (dating from the 16th century) was that the school or the student was graduated from the school. By extension (during the 19th century), a student was said to graduate from the school. (See **ergative verbs.**) Those two uses of the verb are standard, as Teall explained in the mid-20th century: "Graduate’ may be a transitive or an intransitive verb. To be graduated is to be admitted to a scholastic standing or an academic degree; to graduate is to pass the final examinations, be dismissed with honor, take the degree. Many teachers ride the ‘was graduated’ hobby, but common usage, good literary practice and dictionary sanction may all be lined up on the side of the active [intransitive] form, ‘to graduate.’" Edward N. Teall, *Putting Words to Work* 280 (1940).

Today the old-fashioned was graduated is most common in wedding announcements and obituaries—e.g.:
- "The bride-elect . . . was graduated from Archmere Academy in Claymont, Del. “Elizardi/Gragg,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 26 May 2001, at 3. (On the use of bride-elect, see **bride-to-be.**)

In the mid-20th century, usage began to shift further toward an even shorter transitive form: students were said to *graduate college* (omitting the from after graduate). This poor wording is increasingly common—e.g.:
- "Today three quarters of boys and half of girls have had sex by the time they graduate [read graduate from] high school." Michele Ingrossa, "Virgin Cool," *Newsweek*, 17 Oct. 1994, at 59, 60.
- "I have a reading disorder," Leschkus says, yet he struggles to think of any friends who graduated [read graduated from] college who are doing as well." Del Jones, "Diplomas Decline as Degrees of Separation in the Workforce," *USA Today*, 3 Jan. 1997, at B1.
You may be happy to learn, however, that the collocation graduated from college remains much more common in modern print sources than graduated college. That ratio is bound to shrink over time.

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1. graduate as an intransitive verb (as in he graduated from college): Stage 5
2. graduate as a transitive verb (as in *he graduated college): Stage 3
Current ratio (he graduated from college vs. *he graduated college vs. he was graduated from college): 29:3:1

graffiti. W11 notes that this plural, originally Italian, “is sometimes used with a singular verb as a mass noun <the graffiti is being covered with fresh paint . . . .>. This shift has largely taken place since the late 1980s. (Cf. data.) Yet one still sees it being used as a plural—e.g.: “During the past year graffiti have begun to appear in cities.” Lara Marlowe, “Revolutionary Disintegration,” Time, 26 June 1995, at 42, 43. See plurals (1).

Sometimes one sees graffiti when the sense is undeniably singular and the mass noun would be inappropriate—e.g.:”

- “Troops in Qurah, Iraq, rest under a graffiti left by insurgents.” Time, 16 Apr. 2007, at 28 (photo caption).

See count nouns and mass nouns.

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graffiti as a singular mass noun: Stage 5
Current ratio (the graffiti was vs. the graffiti were): 3:1

*grainy; *grainery. See grainary.

grammar is often misspelled *grammer—e.g.: “Writing Center tutors go through extensive training before being assigned to students. They complete notebooks in which they are assigned exercises and look at their own writing. “Center Has guest lecturers, complete grammer [read grammar] exercises and look at their own writing.” “Center Has the Write Stuff for Students,” Boston Herald, 11 Aug. 2002, Mag. §, at M2. See spelling (A).

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grammar misspelled *grammer: Stage 1
Current ratio: 559:1

Grammatical Agreement. See concord & subject–verb agreement.

grammatical error. Because grammatical may mean either (1) “relating to grammar” <grammatical subject> or (2) “consistent with grammar” <a grammatical sentence>, there is nothing wrong with the age-old phrase grammatical error (sense 1). It’s as acceptable as the phrases criminal lawyer and logical fallacy. The phrase grammatical error dates from the 18th century.

Current ratio (grammatical error vs. error in grammar): 9:1

granary (= a place where grain is stored, esp. wheat) is most traditionally pronounced /gran-ә-ree/, though /gray-ә-na-ree/ is also acceptable. The spellings *grain-ary and *grainery are obsolete variants.

Current ratio (granary vs. *grainery vs. *grainary): 798:3:1

grandad. See grandpa.

granddad. See grandpa.

grandeur (= impressive beauty, power, or size) has long been preferably pronounced /gran-jair/ or /gran-juur/= not /gran-door/ or /gran-dyoor/ (two grandios-oeverpronunciations).

grandfather clause = a clause in the constitutions of some southern American states exempting from suffrage restrictions the descendants of men who voted before the Civil War. The OED misleadingly labels this phrase colloquial; it is the only available name for these statutes, and it appears in formal writing. E.g.: “A state law directly denying Negroes the right would be overthrown as a matter of course, and in 1915 the Court had invalidated a so-called ‘grandfather clause’ [that] required literacy tests of those who were not descendants of those who could vote in 1867,” Robert G. McCloskey, The American Supreme Court 212 (1960). Moreover, it has taken on an extended sense, referring to any statutory or regulatory clause exempting a class of people or transactions because of circumstances existing before the clause takes effect.

This phrase has given rise to the verb grandfather, meaning “to cover (a person) with the benefits of a grandfather clause.” E.g.: “The council could, and should, have crafted language that ‘grandfathered’ Mrs. Gary’s job.” “Nepotism Has No Place in Government,” Baltimore Sun, 12 Jan. 1998, at A14. Sometimes, in passive uses, the phrase is be grandfathered in—e.g.: “There is one exception to the ban on new roads: Any project already on the drawing board can be ‘grandfathered’ in, or continued as scheduled because its planning occurred before the new restrictions were put in place.” Christina Nifong, “Environmental Battle—New Roads vs. Clean Air,” Christian Science Monitor, 14 Jan. 1998, at 3.

A few writers and speakers—sometimes in jest—have resorted to grandparent clause to avoid what might be perceived as sexism—e.g.: “Since she was ordained four years before the policy was issued,
Spahr was sure a grandparent clause [read grandfather clause] would protect her.” Yonat Shimron, “Gay Presbyterians Fight for Ordination,” News & Observer (Raleigh), 30 Mar. 1996, at A1. That neutering skew the historical sense and is likely to strike most readers and listeners as too politically correct or downright jocular. The phrase is appropriate, however, in other contexts, such as some parental-notification laws that let grandparents substitute for parents in giving permission for a minor to have an abortion.

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grandparent clause for grandfather clause: Stage 1
Current ratio (grandfather clause vs. grandparent clause): 660:1

grandfather clock; *grandfather’s clock. The first is standard; the second is a variant form.
Current ratio: 10:1

grandma (= grandmother) is generally so spelled in AmE and BrE alike. The -d- being silent, both grandma and gramma are infrequent variants.

grandpa; granddad; grandad. These are colloquial terms for grandfather. Grandpa (the most prevalent term) is sometimes shortened to grampa, gramp, grampa, or gramps, all of which are recognized as good colloquial English. As for the -dad terms, the standard spellings are granddad in AmE and grandad in BrE.

grandparenting. See parenting.

grateful; gratified. The distinction is well established. Grateful = appreciative, thankful <I’m grateful for your help>. Gratified = pleased, satisfied <we’re gratified that you’ll attend our party>. Cf. gracious.

gratis is pronounced /grat- is/ in AmE, traditionally /gray- tis/ in BrE. For a serious blunder involving this word, see persona non grata.

gratuitous; fortuitous. These two words are occasionally confused. Gratuitous = (1) done or performed without obligation to do so <gratuitous promises>; or (2) done unnecessarily <gratuitous criticisms>. Fortuitous = occurring by chance <fortuitous circumstances>. See fortuitous.

gravamen (= the crux of a complaint or accusation) has predominantly formed the classical plural gravamina since the 18th century. The term appears primarily in legal writing. Although some have naturalized the plural to gravamen(s), that form remains a variant only.

The term is sometimes misspelled *gravaman and is subject to uncertainty in pronunciation. The traditional pronunciation is /gra- vay-man/, but many lawyers today say /grah- va-man/.

Current ratio (gravamina vs. gravamens): 21:1

Grave Accent. See diacritical marks.

gravel, vb., makes graveled and graveling in AmE, gravelled and gravelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

gravitas. Not many Latinisms spring into popular use. This one arose in English in the 1920s, mostly lay dormant until the early 1990s, and then became a vogue word. Meaning “personal stature, trustworthiness,” it carried lots of weight during the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign. People used it to denote something once conveyed by the cliché presidential timber. The election year saw gravitas take off, appearing twice as often in U.S. print sources as it had in 1999, and almost three times as frequently as it had in 1998. It has since been sagging a bit under its own weight. But in its heyday it soared with literary eagles—e.g.:

• “What is troubling to Republicans who have plighted their troth to this man is not that they think he is a coarse or cruel man. Rather it is that Carlson’s profile suggests an atmosphere of adolescence, a lack of gravitas—a carelessness, even a recklessness, perhaps born of things having gone a bit too easily so far.” George F. Will, “Not Ready for Prime Time?” N.Y. Post, 12 Aug. 1999, at 35.

• “It is the biggest question of the primary season whether Mr. Bush will be rejected by the voters, on the grounds that he is lacking in such gravitas as is evident in John McCain and Steve Forbes.” William F. Buckley Jr., “The Party Spoiler . . . and the Thug,” Wash. Times, 10 Sept. 1999, at A18.

• “He has to show his gravitas; said a top Bush aide, ‘and he can’t make any mistakes. If he pulls that off, he’s probably unstoppable.”’ Thomas M. DeFrank, “Bush Score in Debate a Primary Concern,” Daily News (N.Y.), 2 Dec. 1999, News §, at 4.

gray; grey. The former spelling is more common in AmE, the latter in BrE; both are old, and neither is incorrect. The BrE preference had been established by 1715, the AmE preference by the mid-1820s. Note that greyhound is an invariable spelling.

Great Britain consists of England, Scotland, and Wales—all three on the island known to the Romans as Britannia. (Modern usage routinely shortens the name to Britain.) It differs from United Kingdom, which also includes Northern Ireland.

Some people wrongly think of Great Britain as a boastful name. But it’s not; it’s rooted in history. Great Britain was once contrasted with Little Britain (or simply Brittany), in France, where the Celtic Bretons lived. Although the OED’s last citation for Little Britain dates from 1622, the term Great Britain has persisted (though perhaps not without a sense of pride).

Grecian; Greek. As adjectives, these words both generally mean “of, relating to, or involving Greece or the Greeks.” If a difference exists, it’s that Grecian more often refers to ancient Greece—and in particular its art and architecture <Grecian urn>. An exception is Greek mythology. In general, though, Greek is the broader term <Greek salad>.

greenkeeper (= the person in charge of the upkeep of a golf course) is the standard term. *Greenskeeper is a chiefly AmE variant.

Current ratio: 2:1


Grenadian; *Grenadan. The first is standard; the second is a NEEDLESS VARIANT. See DENIZEN LABELS.

Current ratio: 7:1

grey. See gray.

grievance; *aggravance. The latter is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 2,997:1

**grieve is most often an intransitive verb meaning "to feel grief." It is also, traditionally, a transitive verb meaning (1) "to cause distress to," or (2) "to suffer from a loss." Sense 2 is now more common—e.g.:


But recently the verb has taken on a new meaning: "to bring a grievance for the purpose of protesting." The emergence of this sense is not entirely surprising because it is implied by the words grievable and grievant. It's most often used in employment contexts—e.g.:

- "[Sgt. Brett] Eisenlohr, who has worked for the department since July 1982, is *grieving the discipline, which he has already served." Katie Melone, "3 Police Officers, Sergeant Suspended," Hartford Courant, 17 Apr. 2007, at B3.


Stylists are not likely to use the verb, but neither are they likely to be awarded relief.

**Language-Change Index**

**grieve meaning "to bring a grievance": Stage 3

**grievous (/gri-voʊs/) is frequently misspelled *grievious and mispronounced (/gri-vee-as/), just as *miscievious is frequently misspelled *mischievous and similarly mispronounced. These are grievous and mischievous malformations. See Mischievous.

Current ratio (grievous vs. *grievious): 440:1

**grill; grille. A grill is a cooking device, especially one with a gridiron over an open flame; as a verb, it means to cook something on a grill. By extension, a grill is also an informal restaurant serving a limited menu highlighting *grilled (or often just fried) food. A grille is a protective metal latticework such as that in front of an automobile's radiator.

Grill is a recognized variant spelling for grille, but not vice versa—e.g.: "He hauls a huge *grille [read grill], made from a split oil tank, to the park and cooks chickens by the dozen." Michael Sangiocomo, "Cook Finds Buyers for Homemade BBQ Sauce," Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 15 Oct. 2001, at B10. Still, *grille is very popular in the pretentious names of restaurants, perhaps to suggest a pub-like atmosphere, as in Ye Old Bar & *Grille. In fact, the name has become so ubiquitous that the mere detail that a grille is not a *grill is unlikely to make a difference.

**Language-Change Index**

**grille** misused for *grill: Stage 2

Current ratio (charcoal grill vs. *charcoal grille): 333:1

**grimace (= a facial expression of physical pain or mental disgust) is now almost universally pronounced /grim-as/. But the word came into English from French in the 17th century as /gri-mays/ (rhyming with face), and as recently as the 1970s that pronunciation was still preferred. Charles Harrington Elster pinpoints the death of the traditional pronunciation: "Then came the inane McDonald's restaurant advertising campaign with Ronald McDonald the clown and his puppet sidekick GRIM-is, and poor old gri-MAYS swiftly became as strange as a square hamburger." BBBM at 233.

**grind > ground > ground. So inflected. But the erroneous form *grinded is gaining ground—e.g.:

- "Masahiro Tanaka (9–6), coming off a complete-game victory last Saturday in Toronto, *grinded [read ground] through six innings." Erik Boland, "Yanks Go Down Swinging to Tribe," Newsday (N.Y.), 22 Aug. 2015, at A34.

See irregular verbs.

In one context, however, *grinded is perfectly legitimate (though lamentable, in the eyes of high-school chaperons everywhere). There is now a style of dancing known as *grinding, involving a female's pressing her buttocks against her partner's groin (through clothing), or sometimes a direct rubbing of groins or of her breasts, often with vigorous perfurcation. (Call it part of the coarsening of our culture.) Someone who has engaged in such dancing would say that he or she *grinded, not ground. O tempora! O mores!

**Language-Change Index**

**grinded** misused as a past tense in a nondancing sense: Stage 1

Current ratio (ground his teeth vs. *grinded his teeth): 78:1
grizzly; grizzly; grizzly; grizzled. Grizzly = ghastly, horrible <grizzly murders>. Grizzly = (1) grayish; or (2) of, relating to, or involving the large brown bear that inhabits western North America. Each word is sometimes misused for the other. Most commonly, grizzly displaces groom from its rightful position—e.g.: “That night the television news is full of the grizzly [read grisly] horror of it all.” Myra MacPherson, “Songs for a Native Son,” Wash. Post, 2 May 1980, at C1. But the opposite error also occurs—e.g.: “Dolphins, storks, cranes, pelicans, grizzly [read grizzly] bears, an 8-foot map of Texas: Joe Kyte has stuffed them all.” “Topiary Reindeer Harmless Grazers,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 30 Nov. 1996, at D1.

Grizzly = (of meat) containing an unappetizing amount of cartilage. The error is rare, but on occasion this word is also misused for grizzly—e.g.: “In London, take in Jack the Ripper’s walking tour that explores hidden courtyards and gaslit alleyways of London in the year 1888, when residents were shocked and frightened by a series of grizzly [read grisly] murders.” Jerry Morris, “Hunting Ghosts in Old England,” Boston Globe, 27 Oct. 1996, at M2.

Grizzled is a synonym for grizzly in the sense of “grayish,” most often describing hair streaked with gray—e.g.: “Jennet turned her attention to Davy Ingram, deep in conversation with Zachary Alday, a middle-aged man whose most distinguishing feature was a mole on one cheek. Ingram, younger but more grizzled, showed no outward trappings of newfound wealth.” Kathy Lynn Emerson, Face Down Across the Western Sea 47 (2002). Because gray hair and beards are associated with old men, grizzled has also come, by extension, to describe any old-timer. In fact, this is its most common use today—e.g.: “Those, as grizzled fans here say while sipping a Hudepohl, were the days.” Todd Jones, “Good Old Days Gone for Good for the Reds in Cincinnati?” Columbus Dispatch, 23 July 2002, at D1.

Language-Change Index
grisly misused for grizzly: Stage 1

grocery /groh-s/ -ree/ is often mispronounced /grouch-shree/. See pronunciation (b).

groom = (1) someone who takes care of horses; or (2) a bridegroom. Both senses are standard. Some writers, however, have ill-advisedly objected to sense 2, which is first recorded in Shakespeare’s Othello (1604): like bride and groom (2.3.173). But there’s no sound basis for objecting to groom in sense 2.

The historical facts are these. The original term was bridegroom, not bridegroom, and the unetymological -r- got added in the early 16th century (probably from the influence of what has now become sense 1). In the early 17th century, Shakespeare (or perhaps predecessors or contemporaries) shortened bridegroom to groom through aphaeresis. In 1755, Samuel Johnson recorded both bridegroom and groom as standard.

In 1806, Noah Webster defined bridegroom as “the name of a new-married man.” But 22 years later, in his big two-volume American Dictionary of the English Language, Webster decided to revive bridegroom without the -r— which had lain dormant since the 14th century—to no avail. And he cut groomsman (which he had recorded in his 1806 Compendious Dictionary of the English Language) from the big dictionary of 1828, presumably because the prospect of touting groomsman made him uneasy. As for bridegroom (again without the -r-), Webster wrote that “[t]his word, by a mispronouncing of the last syllable, has been corrupted into bridgroom, which signifies a bride’s hostler . . . . Such a gross corruption or blunder ought not to remain a reproach to philology.” Yet it has remained.

Somehow, in the middle of the 19th century, a prejudice against groom as a shortened form of bridegroom arose, perhaps from the fallacious thought that a word can have only one correct meaning. But it makes no more sense than objecting to plane for airplane or ball for baseball <Play ball>.

grotesquerie (= something grotesque; a grotesque quality) is the preferred spelling. *Grotessquery is a variant—not exactly a grotesquerie, just a variant. Current ratio: 3:1

grotto (= a small picturesque cave, whether natural or artificial) has predominantly formed the plural grottos since the early 19th century in both AmE and BrE. *Grotoses is a variant term. See plurals (d). Current ratio: 2:1

grounds, on the. See because (d).

groundwater. One word.

ground zero = (1) the site of a bomb explosion, esp. a nuclear bomb, or (2) the site of the destroyed World Trade Center. Sense 1 is typically literal—e.g.: “To the northeast, tunneled one mile below the surface of Cheyenne Mountain, is the norad facility—in all likelihood, ground zero during a nuclear attack.” David Feela, “A Bull Market,” Denver Post, 31 Dec. 2000, Perspective §, at K2. But it may also be figurative—e.g.: “The nation’s jails and prisons are at ground zero of the war against AIDS.” Scott Wyman, “Out of Jail and into the Arms of Angels,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 31 Dec. 2002, at B1.

As a reference to the site of the former World Trade Center, ground zero might seem to be a proper noun requiring capitalization. But a year after the terrorist attack, that usage had not become standardized: for example, Newsday and Newsweek capitalized it but The New York Times and U.S. News & World Report did not. And though some do not capitalize the phrase when referring to the New York site, others mistakenly capitalize it even when it’s used generically—e.g.: “Everybody’s slate is wiped clean,” Lyons said. ‘It does make it a little easier from the standpoint that everybody starts at Ground Zero [read square one].” Rob Daniels, “Scholarship Rule Stirs Up Controversy,” News & Record (Greensboro), 15 July 2002, at C1.
As in the example just quoted, it is common to hear and read phrases such as \textit{start from scratch} and \textit{back to ground zero} where the meaning is \textit{start from scratch} or \textit{back to square one}. In these phrases, using \textit{ground zero} is ill-advised because (1) a ready-made phrase is already at hand (either of the substitutes just mentioned), (2) the sense of destruction is wholly absent, and (3) the phrases seem to trivialize the 2001 devastation of lower Manhattan, with which the phrase is now so closely associated—e.g.: 

- “Members of the Orchard Park Village Board held out hope Monday that planning for the Orchard Downs site at the village’s heart might not be back at ground zero [\textit{read to the drawing board},]” Elmer Ploetz, “Board Hopeful for Project at Four Corners Site,” \textit{Buffalo News}, 14 Aug. 2001, at C3.

\textbf{LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index} \\
\textbf{ground zero} for \textit{square one}: Stage 1

\textbf{grow}, vb., makes \textit{groveled} and \textit{groveling} in AmE, \textit{grovelled} and \textit{grovelling} in BrE. See spelling (b). The word is pronounced either /\textit{gra}v-\textit{val}/ or /\textit{gra}v-\textit{val}/.

\textbf{grow}, v.t. Although this verb is typically intransitive <he grew two inches taller over the summer>, its transitive use has long been standard in phrases such as \textit{grow crops} and \textit{grow a beard}.

Recently, however, \textit{grow} has blossomed as a transitive verb in nonfarming and nongrooming contexts. It is trendy in business \textit{Jargon}: \textit{growing the industry, growing your business, growing your investment}, and so on. But because many readers will stumble over these odd locutions, the trend should be avoided—e.g.: 

- “The plan was to help each key industry develop an industry allocation, create a business plan, create a strategic plan and then implement the plans to \textit{grow} [\textit{read expand or develop}] the industry.” John M. Grund, “Triage It, but Don't Kill It,” \textit{Oregon Bus.}, Jan. 1997, at 26.
- “To this common mix Quantum has added a clever way to keep the teams’ collective vision focused on how to \textit{grow} [\textit{read expand or develop}] the business rather than just on how to cooperate inside.” Thomas A. Stewart, “Another Fad Worth Killing,” \textit{Fortune}, 3 Feb. 1997, at 119.
- “Whether you are an existing landlord looking to \textit{grow} [\textit{read expand} or \textit{develop}] your portfolio or looking to become a first-time landlord, my thoughts are take advice from as many people as possible.” “Are Homeowners Warming to the Idea of Renting?” \textit{Canterbury Times} (U.K.), 19 Aug. 2015, at 33.

\textbf{LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index} \\
\textbf{grow} as a transitive verb in reference to nonliving things <\textit{growing the economy}>: Stage 3

\textbf{grudging} (= reluctant; with grumbling) is the standard adjective in phrases such as \textit{grudging acceptance}. Avoid the participial adjective \textit{*grudging}—e.g.: “I have heard even some die-hard Hillary-haters express \textit{begrudging} [\textit{read grudging}] admiration for her determination, resourcefulness and fierce advocacy for her beliefs.” Clarence Page, “Obama’s Next Hurdles,” \textit{Chicago Trib.}, 14 May 2008, News §, at 27.

\textbf{LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index} \\
*\textit{begrudging} for \textit{grudging}: Stage 2 \\
Current ratio (a \textit{grudging respect} vs. *a \textit{begrudging respect}) : 13:1

\textbf{grueling, gruelling}. Meaning “extremely tiring and demanding,” \textit{grueling} is the standard spelling in AmE, \textit{gruelling} in BrE. The spellings diverged in the 1930s, before which time \textit{gruelling} was standard in all varieties of World English.

\textbf{gruesome} is so spelled—not *\textit{grewsome}. E.g.: “Hughes’s innkeeper obliquely applied his mouth to the ‘Blawing Stwun,’ producing a \textit{grewsome} [\textit{read gruesome}] sound between a moan and a roar.” Christopher Somerville, “Back Again to Tom Brown’s Vale Days,” \textit{Daily Telegraph}, 5 Feb. 1994, at 36. Let us hope that the next edition of this book does not have to report that, since the previous edition, this misusage grew some.

\textbf{LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index} \\
\textbf{grewsome} misspelled *\textit{grewsome}: Stage 1

\textbf{guacamole} (= a dip made with mashed avocados and a combination of lime or lemon, chiles, onions, tomato, and cilantro) is usually pronounced /\textit{gwah-ka-moh-lee}/. In the Southwest, it is often pronounced /\textit{gwah-ka-moh-ley}/, a bit closer to the Spanish pronunciation.

\textbf{guarantee}, n. & vb.; \textbf{guaranty}, n. These homophones are related in meaning as well as in sound, but they are not interchangeable. The broader term, \textit{guarantee}, is more common and is used as a noun and a verb. To \textit{guarantee} something is to assure someone that a promise will be kept <our company guaranteees customer satisfaction>. As a noun, a \textit{guarantee} is the promise itself <bring this written guarantee with your proof-of-purchase card if the television breaks down>. The narrower term, \textit{guaranty}, is a promise to pay money if someone else fails to do so <a mortgage \textit{guaranty} company>. It is mostly used in banking and other financial contexts, and seldom appears outside legal writing.

A person who gives a \textit{guaranty} is a \textit{guarantor} <the guarantor must sign a guaranty for the car loan in case the borrower doesn't make the payments>.

\textbf{guerrilla} (Sp. for “raiding party”) = a member of a small band of military fighters who, mostly through surprise raids, try to harass and undermine occupying
forces. The word is preferably so spelled—not *guerilla. It’s often used attributively <guerrilla warfare>.

The malapropism *gorilla forces occasionally surfaces.

Current ratio (guerrilla warfare vs. *gorilla warfare): 400:1


**guillotine** (= a piece of equipment to behead people by slicing) entered English in the late 18th century and was almost immediately Anglicized in pronunciation: *gil*-ə-teen/. Only in the mid–20th century did AmE speakers begin re-Frenchifying the pronunciation to *gee*-ya-teen/. See pronunciation (d).

**guilty.** See not guilty.

gulf; bay. In oceanographic contexts, these words share the basic sense “a portion of an ocean or sea surrounded by land; an indentation in a shoreline.” The difference between the terms is this: a gulf is narrow at the mouth but deeply recessed; a bay is a wide, shallow inlet. But historically, the distinction hasn’t been rigorously followed: consider the Gulf of Mexico with its vast mouth and the Hudson Bay with its narrow one.

gully (= a small ravine) is sometimes misspelled *gulley—perhaps because of the similarity to valley. The correct plural is gulleys. E.g.: “Its six small fields, severed by roads, gulleys [read gulleys] and a river, made it awkward for modern machinery, and much of the land was unproductive.” Larry Towell, “The World from My Front Porch,” Life, Sept. 1997, at 62.

**gulley.** Misspelled *gulley: Stage 1

Current ratio: 14:1

*gunnel. See gunwale.

gunwale /gon-əl/ (= the upper edge of a boat’s side) is the standard spelling. *Gunnel—a phonetic spelling—is a variant.

Current ratio: 10:1

gustatory; *gustatorial. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 234:1

gut reaction. This phrase, meaning “an instinctive response,” is sometimes malapropistically said (and written) *guttural reaction, or, what is worse, *gutteral reaction—e.g.:

- “But there is a scene—one of the most revealing in the documentary series—when Carole Brennan, Menino’s press spokesperson, tangles with Herald reporter David Guarino over a story he’s reporting about the mayor’s daughter and her guttural reaction [read gut reaction] to angry firefighters picketing Menino.” Monica Collins, “Where’s the Hub, Bub? ABC’s Documentary Series ‘Boston 24/7’ Presents a Harsh Dose of Reality,” Boston Herald, 30 May 2002, at 59.
- “But it is emotion talking. It is the raw, guttural reaction [read gut reaction] to someone daring to suggest that Rice athletics be scaled back, played at a diminished level or even vaporized.” John P. Lopez, “Rice Needs Our Help, Not Just Our Concerns,” Houston Chron., 7 May 2004, Sports §, at 1.

Occasionally, the redundant double bobble *guttural instinct (for instinct) also appears—as does *gutertlal instinct (a triple bobble):

- “What’s more, his vacuous screen presence—he gives the impression of a man with absolutely nothing on his mind—is actually a bonus in the role of a beleaguered jingle-dweller who drop kicks cops and swings from skyscrapers driven by guttural instinct [read instinct] alone (and, anyway, I heard Robert De Niro was unavailable for the role).” Joel Rubinoff, “He May Not Be Arnold but Tarzan Gets It Done,” Hamilton Spectator (Ont.), 11 Oct. 2003, at 19.
- “And it’s weird enough with the Braves having a guttural instinct [read the instinct] to pull for the Mets the night Glavine is going for 300.” Carroll Rogers, “Braves Blog,” Atlanta J.-Const., 2 Aug. 2007, Sports §.

See malapropisms & double bobbles.

**guttural reaction for gut reaction:** Stage 1

**guttural.** So spelled—not *gutteral, which is a frequent misspelling. The confusion probably occurs because of a mistaken association with gutter, when in fact guttural derives from the Latin guttur (“throat”). E.g.: “I find myself gripping the handle and uttering a gutteral [read guttural] ‘vroom! vroom!’ ” Ron Alexander, “Metropolitan Diary,” N.Y. Times, 30 Oct. 1996, at C2. See gut reaction.

**guy; guys.** The singular form is invariably masculine, and the plural often is, too <Dave Barry’s Complete Guide to Guys>. But the plural is now often used inclusively to address a group that includes males and females, especially in the casualism you guys. It can be seen as a handy term because the truly inclusive alternatives are more likely to offend (“guys and gals” or, worse, from the ’50s musical, “guys and dolls”).

gybe. See gibe.

gymnasium. Pl. gymnasiurns—preferably not *gymnasia. See plurals (b).

Current ratio: 1.2:1

gynecocracy. So spelled—not *gynecocracy. See governmental forms.

Current ratio: 7:1
**gypsy.** In literal senses, denoting members of the tribes that migrated from northern India to Europe in the 14th or 15th century as well as their language, Gypsy is capitalized. (The term now preferred is Roma.) In figurative senses—as an adjective meaning “wanderer” or a verb meaning “to live like a Gypsy”—it is not. Nor is it capitalized in such phrases as gypsy cab and gypsy moth. The term comes from an erroneous belief that the people were from Egypt. Cf. Romany.

*Gipsy,* the standard spelling for much of the 19th century (and in BrE, for much of the 20th as well), is an occasional variant.

Because gypsy is often used in a pejorative sense, some authorities recommend avoiding it in all contexts. But that advice seems unduly strict. A gypsy cab easily becomes an unlicensed cab, but there is no ready substitute for gypsy moth.

Current ratio (gypsy vs. *gipsy*): 3:1

**gyrfalcon** /jәr-fәl-kәn/ (= a large falcon found in Arctic regions) is the standard spelling. *Gerfal-con* (standard through the early 20th century) is a variant.

Current ratio: 2:1

**gyro.** Two words are so spelled. A gyro (/jt-roh/) is a spinning (gyrating) device such as a gyroscope or a gyrocompass. *Gyro* (/yee-roh/ or /zhir-oh/) is a loaf of meat, typically lamb, but sometimes beef, pork, or a mixture, prepared by roasting the loaf on a rotating vertical spit. A gyro is also a sandwich made from the meat and served in folded or rolled-up pita bread.

The sandwich takes its name from the singular Greek noun *gyros,* meaning “a turning” (no doubt a reference to the spit that the meat is roasted on). The -s in *gyros* was erroneously taken to be plural, and the singular *gyro* was formed—e.g.: “We made do nicely with . . . a hearty double-fistful of beef shawarma, the Middle Eastern version of a gyro, sporting marinated meat, lettuce, tomato and tahini tucked into a warm pita.” Nancy Leson, “Middle East Inspires a Middling Feast at Aladdin,” *Seattle Times,* 25 Jan. 2002, at H3. See back-formations.

Today *gyros* is typically a plural—e.g.: “Jose Bineda said he wants to make his gyros even better; he wants to buy a machine to roast lamb on a spit.” Sue Kovach Shuman, “Hermanos Restaurant in Manassas Serves Up a Whole World of Flavors,” *Wash. Post,* 23 Jan. 2002, Prince William Extra §, at T5.

Two final points. First, although *gyros* occasionally appears as a singular (like *kudos,* the plural form *gyroses* is essentially unknown as an English word. Second, the phrase *gyro sandwich,* like *pizza pie,* might be considered a venial redundancy, but perhaps it shouldn’t be: the meat is also served on platters and as pizza toppings.

**H**

**ha**—the interjection that expresses surprise, triumph, discovery, anger, and various other states of mind—is so spelled. *Hah* is a variant spelling.

For laughter, *ha-ha* is the usual spelling.

**habeas corpus** (lit., “you shall have the body”) = a writ ordering that a person be brought before a court, esp. to ensure that the person has not been illegally imprisoned. When used as a phrasal adjective, the term is sometimes hyphenated—e.g.: “The Senate is scheduled to consider crime legislation, including habeas corpus proposals, possibly as soon as next week.” *Wall Street J.,* 16 May 1990, at B6. But with such a prima facie foreignism (like *prima facie* in that phrase), the hyphen is unnecessary to prevent miscues. See phrasal adjectives (H).

The traditional plural *habeas corpora* has gradually given way to *habeas corpus.* See corpus.

Current ratio (habeas corpora vs. habeas corporuses): 2:1

**habitability;** *inhabitability.* Because of confusion over the prefix in-, which is intensive and not negative in *inhabitability* (or, e.g., in inflammable), today the positive form is habitability and the negative form uninhabitability. *Inhabitability* has never been much used—and whenever it is used it’s ambiguous. See flammable & negatives (A).

Current ratio: 30:1

**habitation.** See addicted.

*habitue.* As generally used today, this gallicism is a needlessly variant of habit, one that supplies a hint of archaism—e.g.: “Tocqueville spent nearly a year examining American *habitudes* [read *habits*] and mores.” Richard Wolin, “Liberalism as a Vocation,” *New Republic,* 2 Sept. 1996, at 34. (On the use of *Tocqueville*—without the particle de—in that sentence, see names (D).)

Current ratio (habit vs. *habitude*): 241:1

**habité** (= a frequent visitor to a particular place, or sometimes a resident) is printed in roman type but
predominantly retains the acute accent. If you aspirate the h, it should be a hábitué; if not, it can misspell-ly be an habitué. Both forms appear with frequency in English-language print sources. BrE tends more toward an over a. See a (A).

Although the French pronunciation is /ha-bich-ә-way/, English speakers often anglicize the pronunciation to /ha-bich-ә-way/. Avoid the misspelling *habituee.

háček. See diacritical marks.

had better. See better (A).

*had have; *had've; *had of. All these constructions are poor usage, the word had being sufficient by itself. Had is the auxiliary verb used in forming the past-perfect tense. It commonly expresses a past condition <if I had been there, I would have said something> or a wish <I wish I had been there>. (See tenses (a).) A superfluous have after had is typical of dialect, and it sometimes makes its way into print—e.g.:

• “Lazutina said her success would not have happened if she had have [read had] stayed with Grushin.” “Russia Earns Women’s Cross-Country Sweep,” Salt Lake Trib., 20 Feb. 1998, at D4.

• “He also said that the fact he was arrested in Las Vegas also supports his innocence because if he had have [read if he had] been involved in the crime, he would have left town.” Glenn Puit, “Victims of Quadruple Homicide Lost Lives for $240, Officials Say,” Las Vegas Rev.-J., 29 Aug. 1998, at A1.

• “If they had have [read had] been [asked to justify their actions], they might have come out of it subject to an idiot tax.” Chris Young, “Tax Deal for Pros a Con Job,” Toronto Star, 28 Nov. 1998, at C6.

Those inclined to make this mistake often collapse the erroneous phrase into the contraction *had've—e.g.:

• “My friend Russ called. ‘Read your article today. Well written, wished you had've [read wish you had] warned me what it was about.’” James A. Buist, “On Friendship and Not Wanting to Know,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 17 Nov. 1998, at A26.

• “I wish there had've [read had] been something like this group then.” Ed Marcum, “Support Group Shows Grieving Spouses How to Begin Living Again,” Knoxvile News-Sentinel, 12 July 2000, at W1 (quoting Sue Lane).

• “Waistin’ would’ve been a slacker classic if it had've [read had] been written 10 years ago.” Patrick Donovan, “More Light,” The Age, 20 Oct. 2000, at 7.

Worst of all, the contracted have is sometimes mistakenly rendered of, resulting in a double bobble. Notice that two of the following three instances occur in quoted speech (in which *had’ve would have been the better transcription of dialectal phrasing):

• “If I had of [read had] known that, we would have been looking for those papers for all those years.” ’Hayes Hickman, “Getting Flag for Veteran’s Funeral Takes Some Planning,” Knoxville News-Sentinel, 11 Nov. 1999, at A1 (quoting the daughter of a deceased veteran).

• “If I had of [read had] dropped 20 spots I would have called myself a real dummy,” Doyle said. “Doyle Leads,” Houston Chron., 5 Mar. 2000, at 11 (quoting Allen Doyle, the professional golfer).

• “If he had of [read had] been 10 years older he could have tried some of the water sports.” Sue Mathias, “Time to Relax in a Dalmatian Idyll,” Daily Express (London), 30 June 2001.

Sometimes this same error is rendered *Id of (where Id alone would be correct).

For more on this type of error, see of (d).

Had rather; would rather. Both phrases are idiomatic and old <he had rather play golf> <she would rather be fishing>. Today would rather is the predominant form. But both forms are fully established. The OED, under rather (9d), cites examples of had rather from 1450 to 1875. Otto Jespersen’s Modern English Grammar (1948) cites writers such as Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–1863), George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), and H.G. Wells (1866–1946). For the similar phrase had better, see better (A).

*had used to be is unidiomatic and awkward in place of had been or had once been—e.g.: “Still there came a time when I was anxious again. I was still in St. Louis but in another apartment, shared with the man who was later to be my husband. The house had used to be [read had once been] a butcher’s shop.” Abby Frucht, “Come in, Come in,” Seattle Times, 21 May 1995, Pacific §, at 50. See used to.

haemoglobin. See hemoglobin.

haemorrhage. See hemorrhage.

hagia, hagiography; hagiolatry. These words—meaning, respectively, “rule by saints,” “biography of saints,” and “idolatry of saints”—may be pronounced either with a hard -g- (as Fowler preferred) or with a soft -j- sound. The only disadvantage of the traditional pronunciation with the hard -g- (/hag-ee-ahr-kee/), etc.) is that it sounds more as if it denotes “rule by hags” than “rule by saints.”

hagiocracy. See governmental forms.

hagiography. See hagiarchy.

hagiarchy. See hagiarchy.
The phrase is sometimes wrongly written as 'The other forms are needless variants. Breadth victory.' E.g.: Breadth, and today are one of the less common forms. The standard terms are: hairbreadth. Although most American dictionaries list breadth. With a razor). See To raise a hair here and be prepared for a hair-razing journey spiced with general discomfort and rudeness from the driver. David Osborne, "New Rulebook Leaves Cabbies Speechless," Independent, 6 July 1996, at 13. To raise is either to tear down or to cut close (as with a razor). See raze.

Language-Change Index
*hair-raising for hair-raising: Stage 1

Hair raising, a near-equivalent of the Latin horribilis (= making to stand on end), is sometimes misrendered as hair-raising, as in the headline for an item that began: "Jimmy Johnson's hair was messed up, and he couldn't have cared less because he had just seen his Dallas Cowboys mess up the Buffalo Bills even worse." Randy Riggs, "Beating Bills Was Hair-Raising [read Hair-Raising] Experience," Austin Am.-Statesman, 24 Jan. 1994, at C10. The error occurs also in BrE—e.g.: "Hail a taxi here and be prepared for a hair-razing [read hair-raising] journey spiced with general discomfort and rudeness from the driver." David Osborne, "New Rulebook Leaves Cabbies Speechless," Independent, 6 July 1996, at 13.

To raze is either to tear down or to cut close (as with a razor). See raze.

Language-Change Index
*hair-raising for hair-raising: Stage 1
hair's breadth; hair's breadth; *hairbreadth; *hairsbreadth. Although most American dictionaries list *hairbreadth first as both noun and adjective, that is one of the less common forms. The standard terms today are hair's breadth as a noun <victory by a hair's breadth> and hair's breadth as an adjective <a hair's-breadth victory>. E.g.: • "Eventually it will blunt conservatism's edge, leaving voters to see but a hair's-breadth difference between Republicans and Democrats," 'Crisis of the Soul,' Daily Oklahoman, 27 July 1997, at 12. • "In 1972, we came within a hair's breadth of being arrested by Franco's Spanish police." Linda Matchan, "Can You Really Go Back?" Boston Globe, 17 Aug. 1997, at M1.

The other forms are needless variants. The phrase is sometimes wrongly written *hair's breath or *hair's breath—e.g.: • "CBS won by a hair's breath [read hair's breadth], followed by ABC and NBC, in a close race." Kinney Littlefield, "Cable Viewers Get Their Kicks from Football," Orange County Register, 5 Dec. 1993, at F11. • "The Harvest Moon Inn, a hair's breath [read hair's breadth] away from achieving four-star status in the mere months of its existence, is clearly on the rise." "Discover Rising Food Star at the Harvest Moon Inn," Asbury Park Press (Neptune, N.J.), 31 Mar. 1996, at D5.


Language-Change Index
1. *hair's breath for hair's breadth: Stage 1
Current ratio (hair's breadth vs. *hair's breath): 420:1
2. *hair's breath for hair's breadth: Stage 1
Current ratio (hair's breadth vs. *hair's breath): 27:1

Hale, vb., = to compel to go. This is the correct verb in the idiom hale into court—e.g.: "Taney ordered that the general himself be haled into court." Robert G. McCloskey, The American Supreme Court 98 (1960). Unfortunately, though, the verb is often mistakenly written hale—e.g.: • "He grabbed the trespasser by the seat of the pants and the scruff of the neck and tossed him out—an outburst that got the diminutive mystic, much to his dismay, haled [read haled] into court for sedition." Wilson Frank, "That Rare Thing: A Happy Man," Des Moines Register, 2 June 1996, at 5.

Although the court eventually recognized that the three officials were just doing their job, these agents and others similarly situated may, in the future, be less willing to do that job in the most effective manner, based on a reasonable fear that they could be haled [read haled] into court and potentially subjected to personal civil liability as a result." Michelle Visser, "Sovereign Immunity and Informant Defectors: The United States' Refusal to Protect Its Protectors," 58 Stanford L. Rev. 663, 692 (2005).

Language-Change Index
hail misused for hale: Stage 2
Current ratio (haled into court vs. haled into court): 9:1

Hale and hearty is the set phrase meaning "strong and healthy." But writers often get one or the other of the words wrong, and occasionally both—e.g.: • "[S]tepping into the maelstrom that is today's health care environment . . . is a daunting prospect for even the most hail and hearty [read hale and hearty] executive." Kim Norris, "Hard Task Met with a Smile," Detroit Free Press, 23 Apr. 2003, at E1.

"In two outings, biologists got 34 walleye ready to spawn, yielding 1.3 million eggs. Of those, 938,500 walleye fry emerged hale and hearty [read hale and hearty] and were released in South Bay at pre-selected sites, a phenomenal 71.5 percent survival rate." Fred LeBrun, "Turnaround for Walleye," Times Union (Albany), 27 Apr. 2006, at C7.

The reasons for the paradox are a matter of some debate. Some scholars attribute it to immigration, which may draw selectively from the ranks of the hale and hearty [read...

Cf. hardy.

Language-Change Index
*hail and hardy (any variation) for hale and hearty: Stage 1
Current ratio (hale and hearty vs. *hale and hearty vs. *hail and hearty): 59:2:1

**Haley’s Comet. See Halley’s Comet.

half. A. Half (of). The preposition of is often unnecessary. Omit it when you can—e.g.: “Nearly half of [read half] the people in Cuba receive economic help from family and friends in the United States.” “Family Pulls Painting from Auction,” Fresno Bee, 28 Nov. 1997, at C2. Here the better form appears:

- “About half the prisoners had been loaded on planes for Miami.” Evan Thomas, Robert Kennedy: His Life £27 (2000).

Concededly, in modern print sources the collocation half of the has outnumbered half the since about 1900, today by a 2-to-1 ratio. The shorter form vastly predominated in the 18th and 19th centuries and remains perfectly idiomatic. Of course, when a pronoun follows, the of is typically needed <half of them are>.

B. Number. Although we say half of it is, we should say half of them are. When the noun or pronoun following half of is singular, then half is treated as singular; but when the noun or pronoun is plural, then half is treated as plural. For the principle underlying the latter phrase, see synesth.

C. Half a dozen and a half dozen. For this noun phrase, either half a dozen or a half dozen is good form. The predominant form in print sources has always been half a dozen. Avoid *a half a dozen and half of a dozen. When the phrase is used as an adjective, it becomes a PHRASAL ADJECTIVE that should be hyphenated <a half-dozen twirlers with the band>.

Current ratio (half a dozen vs. a half dozen): 5:1

D. *Two halves. This phrase is often redundant—e.g.:


On the plural halves, see plurals (c).

Current ratio (cut into halves vs. *cut into two halves): 3:1

half-staff; half-mast. As a memorial, most flags on land fly at half-staff. Strictly speaking, they fly at half-mast only on ships and at naval stations. (That’s because only there does a flag hang from the part of a ship known as the mast.) This is a distinction that newspaper styles are usually careful to make, but that dictionaries and the general public mostly ignore—e.g.: “Friday night, the flags at Scarborough Downs were lowered to half-mast [read half-staff].” Steve Solloway, “Former Downs GM Dies,” Maine Sunday Telegram, 11 Aug. 2002, at D9.

As a metaphor, either phrase will do. Writers usually choose half-mast, perhaps because it seems more colorful—e.g.:

- “[H]e was down on one creaky knee, one arm propped on the scorer’s table for ballast, tie at half-mast, sweater long ago discarded, voice in that familiar, rasping, jackhammer syncopation, eyes ablaze like a blast furnace and sweeping the floor, seeing every sin.” Bill Lyon, “Villanova–Temple Matchup a Contrast in Coaching Styles,” Phil. Inquirer, 21 Mar. 2002, at E1.

But sometimes half-mast is undoubtedly chosen because of its phonetic similarity to half-assed—e.g.: “We weren’t too crazy about Bill Clinton’s ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy (although we adored Bill, and especially his charming wife Hillary) but we figured even a half-mast policy that would let gay soldiers serve their country was better than just tossing them out on their keisters because of their sexual orientation.” Dennis Rogers, “Putting Liberals in a Quandary,” Dallas Morning News, 16 Feb. 2002, at B1.

Language-Change Index
half-mast misused for half-staff: Stage 2

half-yearly. See biannual.

Halley’s Comet, named after Edmund Halley /hal-ee/ (1656–1742), is often misspelled *Haley’s Comet. In print sources, the misspelling is almost 25% as common as the correct one—e.g.: “For Rita’s own mother, there were brighter memories—watching Halley’s [read Haley’s] comet with her father.” Marie Villari, “Heritage Retraced from a Thousand Cups of Tea,” Post-Standard (Syracuse), 15 Feb. 2001, at 9. This probably results from the widespread mispronunciation /hay-leez/ for /hal-eez/. Even if the erroneous pronunciation can be called “standard,” the spelling remains unchanged.

Language-Change Index
*Haley’s Comet for Halley’s Comet: Stage 1
Current ratio (Halley’s Comet vs. *Haley’s Comet): 15:1

*halliard. See halyard.

Halloween, a contracted form of All Hallow Even, is so spelled. *Hallowe’en, a variant spelling, is pedantic.

hallucination; delusion. A hallucination results from disturbed sensory perceptions, as when a person “hears voices” or sees ghosts. A delusion results from disturbed thinking, as when a person incorrectly imagines that he or she is being persecuted. Cf. illusion.
halo. Pl. halos (in AmE), haloes (traditionally in BrE). The American-style plural is making inroads into BrE. It predominates in World English. See PLURALS (D).

Current ratio (halos vs. haloes): 3:1

halve (= to separate into two equal portions) is preferably pronounced like have. The pronunciation /hɑlv/ is less good—and worse still is /hɑlv/.

For the plural noun halves, see half (d).

halyard (= a rope device designed for raising or lowering something, as a flag or a ship’s sail) is the standard (d). See phrasal verbs.

handicraft. For a brief discussion of this diacritical mark in Hawaiian English, see Hawaii (b).

handiwork, n. So spelled—not handicraft. See handicraft.

hand down. See PHRASAL VERBS.

handful. A. Plural. The word is handfuls, not handsful. See PLURALS (G).

Current ratio: 77:1

B. Handful is or handful are. When followed by the preposition of plus a plural noun, handful typically takes a plural verb—e.g.:

• “Today there is [read are] only a handful of residents in what is left of the white section of town.” Peter Applebome, “Deep South and Down Home, but It’s a Ghetto All the Same,” N.Y. Times, 21 Aug. 1993, at 1, 6.

• “There is [read are] a handful of people around the Pebbled Sea who pay highly for magical curiosities,” replied Niko.” Tamora Pierce, Circle of Magic: Daja’s Book 119 (1998).

• “A handful of local teams is [read are] hitting the pool this fall to compete in the quickly emerging sport of water polo.” Tom Ramstetter, “St. X Rises to Top in Water Polo,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 26 Aug. 2015, at C2.

For the reason, see synesis. In both AmE and BrE, the collocation a handful are has predominated over a handful is in print sources since about 1950; before that, the two usages were close contenders from about 1890 on.

Current ratio (a handful of them are vs. a handful of them is): 13:1

handicapped. The phrases *handicapped-accessible and *handicap-accessible are illogical. Although wheelchair-accessible makes sense (accessible by wheelchair), *handicapped-accessible does not—unless we do some contortions to suggest that it means “accessible to the handicapped.”

Handicapped parking is a well-known example of HYPALLAGE.

handicraft (= [1] an art or avocation requiring manual skill; or [2] an article made by manual skill) is the standard noun. Handicraft, n., is a Needless Variant. But the verb handicraft (= to fashion by hand) and the adjective handicrafted are perfectly good. In fact, sometimes handicraft is wrongly asked to do their work—e.g.: “Dress up a wooden container with a selection of handicraft [read handcrafted] tiles.” “Tile Looks Terrific Out in the Garden,” S.F. Chron., 25 June 1997, Home §, at 5 (photo caption).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*handicrafted for handicraft: Stage 1

Current ratio (handicrafted vs. *handicrafted): 670:1

handiwork, n. So spelled—not handymwork.

Current ratio: 99:1

handkerchief /hang-kar-chief/. Pl. handkerchiefs—not handkerchieves. See PLURALS (c).

Current ratio: 392:1

hands and knees. The mental image of a person begging has the pleader on knees. Yet speakers often embellish that image unnecessarily—e.g.: “The Muncie City Council’s finance committee last week made final recommendations on next year’s municipal bud-get after listening to tax protesters do everything but beg on hands and knees [read their knees].” Larry Riley, “Muncie City Council Failed to Curtail Spending,” Star Press (Muncie, Ind.), 23 Sept. 2007, at A7.

*handful. See handful (A).

hand-wringing. See wring (b).
### Language-Change Index

**hanger** misused for **hangar**: Stage 3  
Current ratio (aircraft hanger vs. *aircraft hanger): 4:1

### hanged; hung

Coats and pictures are **hung**, and sometimes so are juries. But criminals found guilty of capital offenses are **hanged**—at least in some jurisdictions. To be **hanged** is to be suspended by the neck with a rope or cord for the purpose of causing death—e.g.:  
- “The six officers were executed by a firing squad and the two civilians were **hanged**; the radio said.” *Libya Hints at CIA Plot, Executes 8*, Chicago Trib., 3 Jan. 1997, at 5.  
- “But while mere murderers were **hung** [read **hanged**], a quick thing if the hangman were skilled; women found guilty of poisoning their husbands were condemned to be burnt at the stake.” Kathy Lynn Emerson, *Face Down Beneath the Eleanor Cross* 32 (2000).  

But the mere fact that a person is suspended doesn’t mean that **hanged**—which implies an attempted killing or self-killing—is always the right word. If a person is suspended for amusement or through malice, and death isn’t intended or likely, then **hung** is the proper word—e.g.: “He charges that authorities did little or nothing after he complained at various times of being attacked by dogs, shot at, beaten with a rake and tortured while being **hanged** [read **hung**] upside down.” Jeffrey A. Roberts, “Despite Suit, Gilpin Retains Racial Epithet,” *Denver Post*, 3 Jan. 1997, at B1. In Italy in 1944, Benito Mussolini and his mistress were executed and then their bodies **hung** upside down, but press reports often say incorrectly that they were **hanged**—e.g.: “Hitler decided to do so after hearing that Partisans had captured and shot Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, and **hanged** him [read **hung** his body] upside down in Milan plaza.” *A Time of Remembrance*, *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 8 May 1995, at B8. See irregular verbs.

### happily

**happily** means “fortunately,” not “in a happy manner,” when used as here:


See sentence adverbs. Cf. hopefully.

### hara-kiri

(Jap. “belly-cutting”) is often misspelled in various ways, including *hari kari*, *hari-kari*, and *hiri kiri*. These misspellings may be especially tempting because they exemplify what linguists call “reduplicative” or rhyming syllables, whereas the actual phrase does not have reduplicative sounds. E.g.:  
- “While Baltimorans are certainly entitled to their disappointment—the fear here is the brass section of the Colts’ Band will be found on their trombone slides, *hari kari* [read **hara-kiri**] style, any day now—the city has apparently learned nothing from Washingtonians’ ritual whining about losing the Senators eons ago.” Johnette Howard, “Baltimore Suffers NFL’s Growing Pains,” *Wash. Post*, 2 Dec. 1993, at B3.

• “I’m beginning to wonder when the instructor plans to pass out the hari-kari [read hara-kiri] swords and provide us with a more merciful end to offing ourselves.” Tom Murawski, “The Pen May Be Mightier, but the Sword Is So Much More Cool,” Chapel Hill Herald, 18 Sept. 2002, Editorial §, at 5.

Fortunately, the proper spelling is more than twice as common in print as any of the erroneous forms.

Language-Change Index

hara-kiri misused *hari-kari or *hiri kiri: Stage 2
Current ratio (hara-kiri vs. *hari-kari): 6:1

harass; harassment. During the Senate’s confirmation hearings on the appointment of Justice Clarence Thomas in October 1991, senators were divided over whether to say /har-is/ and /har-is-mәnt/ on the one hand, or /ha-ras/ and /ha-ras-mәnt/ on the other. (They were divided on other issues as well.) Because the proceedings were closely watched throughout the country, the correct pronunciation became a popular subject of discussion. Although in BrE first-syllable stress predominates—and many Americans (therefore?) consider it preferable—in AmE the second-syllable stress is standard.

The words are often misspelled -rr-. See spelling (A).

Language-Change Index

harass misused *harrass: Stage 1
Current ratio: 64:1

harbor (= a shelter for vessels) has been predominantly so spelled in AmE since the early 1840s; harbour has been the established BrE spelling since Middle English. See -or; -our.

hardly. In dialect, this word appears in at least three erroneous forms: *can’t hardly (for can hardly), *not hardly (for hardly), and *without hardly (for almost without). See can hardly & *not hardly. Cf. scarcely any.

Language-Change Index

1. *can’t hardly for can hardly: Stage 1
Current ratio (can hardly vs. *cannot hardly): 98:1
2. *not hardly for hardly: Stage 1
Current ratio (is hardly vs. *is not hardly): 282:1
3. *without hardly for without: Stage 1
Current ratio (without being vs. *without hardly being): 51,558:1

hard put. G.H. Vallins once insisted that it’s wrong to say the reader is hard put to know what is happening, insisting instead on adding to it to the sentence: the reader is hard put to it to know what is happening. Vallins, Better English 73 (4th ed. 1957). Today, however, idiom doesn’t even allow the to it, and virtually no one is hard put to know why—because hardly anyone even thinks of it.

hard sell = (1) strong pressure tactics used in selling; or (2) a difficult sales job resulting from reluctant buyers. So the phrase can be used in a negative sense (about the seller’s actions) from the buyer’s perspective (sense 1), or a negative sense (about the buyer’s actions) from the seller’s perspective (sense 2). Sense 1 is the more traditional one—e.g.:


• “Don’t fall for the hard sell. Some of the most dubious investments and ’bargains’ around are sold with a now-or-never urgency befitting heart transplants.” Ronald Campbell, “No Free Lunch,” Orange County Register, 30 Dec. 1996, at D3.

Though sense 2 has become common, it is shared with the phrase hard sale (a more logical form). Indeed, whereas sell is usefully a noun in sense 1 because the phrase denotes the seller’s actions, it isn’t needed in sense 2, which denotes the buyer’s actions. So the better, more logical phrasing for sense 2 is hard sale—e.g.:


• “Hurricane Katrina created opportunities for Jindal to push public policy initiatives that might have been a hard sell [read hard sale] otherwise.” Julia O’Donoghue, “After the Storm, a Political Shift,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 30 Aug. 2015, at A2.

Language-Change Index

hard sell misused for hard sale: Stage 1

hardy; hearty. Hardy = bold, vigorous, robust. Hearty = (1) warm and enthusiastic <a hearty greeting>; (2) strong and healthy <a hearty rancher>; (3) (of food) nourishing, satisfying <a hearty meal>; or (4) (of an eater) needing or demanding plenty of food <a hearty appetite>. Although sense 2 of hearty overlaps somewhat with hardy (and is therefore avoided by some careful writers), the other senses don’t. Still, some writers confuse the two words—e.g.:


• Sense 3: “Milwaukee Bucks center Alton Lister . . . settled in on the more secluded side of the counter for a hardy
harebrained


Cf. hale and hearty.

Sometimes, too, hearty is misused for hardy. We speak of hardy (not hearty) plants—e.g.:


- “Turnips, which also date back to ancient times, are hearty [read hardy] vegetables, able to survive long, cold winters stored underground.” Amy Peterson, “Root Force: Let the Roots That Nourish Plants Nourish You;” Diabetes Forecast, Aug. 1995, at 32.

**Language-Change Index**

1. hardy misused for hearty: Stage 1
   Current ratio (hearty laugh vs. *hardy laugh): 61:1

2. hearty misused for hardy: Stage 1
   Current ratio (hardy plants vs. *hearty plants): 78:1

**harebrained** is the correct form; *hairbrained* is the common blunder. The misspelling falls just short of being what it attempts to denote—e.g.:

- “But what makes the episode such a delight is that it takes us inside the goofy mind of Helms and his hairbrained [read harebrained] sidekick.” David Zurawik, “‘Homicide’ Goes Out with a Bang,” Baltimore Sun, 5 May 1995, at D1.

- “[Lincoln] did argue that whites were superior to blacks in some ways (though not in having a right to freedom), and he did support some hairbrained [read harebrained] schemes to send blacks to Africa or Central America.” Edward Achorn, “The Latest Lincoln Conspiracy Theory,” Providence J.-Bull., 23 Apr. 2002, at B5.


**Language-Change Index**

*hairbrained for harebrained: Stage 1
   Current ratio (harebrained vs. *hairbrained): 11:1

**harelip** (= a congenital deformity in which the upper lip is cleft, like that of a hare) is sometimes erroneously spelled *hairlip*—e.g.:


- “She says she was willing to overlook his hairlip [read harelip] and the resulting speech impediment.” Alan Cairns, “Profile of a Pedophile,” Toronto Sun, 31 Mar. 1996, at 26.

- “Gay said that over the years he has caught many deformed fish, especially brown bullhead catfish, known as hornputs, that had hairlips [read harelips], body lesions and festering sores.” Richard Higgins, “Tracing Health of Assabet River State,” Boston Globe, 12 Oct. 1997, at 1.

The term is considered offensive. Cleft lip has been the preferred term since the late 1950s.

**Language-Change Index**

*hairlip for harelip: Stage 1
   Current ratio (harelip vs. *hairlip): 43:1

*hare’s breath. See hair’s breadth.

**hark back. A. And *hearken back; *harken back.** The phrase hark back is now the preferred form throughout the English-speaking world. E.g.:

- “For an example of this sort of hazard, Biggs harks back to June 1950, when the Japanese market fell more than 50 percent in eight days as hostilities flared in Korea.” Chet Currier, “Russia Mutual Fund May Require Leap of Faith,” News & Record (Greensboro), 21 July 1996, at E2.


*Hearken back and *harken back are needlessly variants that, taken together, are markedly less common than hark back.

**B. Wrongly Written *harp back.** This odd mistake seems not to have spread beyond BrE—e.g.:

- “It just encourages blokes to harp [read hark] back to a time when men were men and women were very pissed off.” Julia Clarke, “Isn’t It About Time That Rabbie Was Barred?” Daily Record (Glasgow), 24 Jan. 1996, at 28.


- “The coach is determined not to let his men harp [read hark] back to that September result in Limerick as a means of motivation.” “At: Don’t Think About Last Time,” Daily Record (Glasgow), 11 Apr. 2015, at 51.

Curiously, most British dictionaries say nothing about this error.

**Language-Change Index**

*harp back for hark back: Stage 1
   Current ratio (harked back vs. *harped back): 170:1

*harp back. See hark back (b).

**harp on (= to talk or write about persistently and tediously) is frequently miswritten *hark on, especially in BrE. Whereas harp on usually takes a direct object <kept harping on his foibles>, *hark on often occurs in the collocation *hark on about (as in the second and third examples below)—e.g.:

“He’s at a different club now and no one will move forward if they keep harking on about [read harping on] the past.” Ian Rush, “Five Things Rodgers Must Do to Turn Season Around,” *Irish Independent*, 13 Dec. 2014, at 75.

“You’re probably sick of hearing about them, to be fair. But Conor O’Brien is worth harking on about [read harping on].” *More from the Village Folk*, *Daily Mirror*, 17 Apr. 2015, at 12.

**HARVARD COMA.** See punctuation (n).

**hashtag (#)** is the quintessential vogue word of the early 21st century. Known also as the *pound sign* or *number symbol*, it took on a new life with the advent of Twitter and other social-media sites. People would post a message and then add, for example, “#goodmemories” or “#happilymarried”—always without internal spaces or punctuation. About 2008, the term even entered conversations as people would make a comment and then remark, “Hashtag annoyed” or “Hashtag HappyMothersDay.” Often the term is invoked with more than a tinge of sarcasm: someone else will self-pityingly harp on personal disappointments, and another (perhaps a “frenemy”) will say, “Hashtag Woesisme.”


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

| **hassle** | **misspelled *hassel*** | **Stage 1** | **Current ratio:** 958:1 |

**has to do with; is to do with.** The first predominates in AmE and BrE alike; the second is a chiefly BrE variant. E.g.: “The other measure *is* to do with [or, in AmE, *has* to do with] one’s colleagues.” Lucy Kellaway, “Yes, We Have No Free Bagels,” *Fin. Times*, 15 Jan. 2001, at 10.

**hatable.** So spelled in both AmE and BrE—not *hatable*. See mute e.

| Current ratio: 6:1 |

**haulyard.** See halyard.

**hauteur /hoh-tuhr/** is a gallicism denoting haughtiness in manner—e.g.:

- “This gives her dancing a folkish, down-home, countrified cast, a bit of humor or even a moment of toughness in the midst of her conventional flamenco *hauteur*.” Judith Green, “La Tania, Marin Move Past Gypsy Roots of Flamenco,” *S.F. Examiner*, 12 Oct. 1996, at C1.

“[Brad] Smith is a polished, thoughtful, and credible advocate whom some have described as the face of the kinder, gentler, post-monopoly Microsoft. But that’s not really an apt description of Smith; he projects intensity, determination, a hint of Ivy League *hauteur*, and ambition.” Roger Parloff, “Microsoft Takes On the Free World,” *Fortune*, 28 May 2007, at 76.

**have.** On the question of morphing ’ve into *of*, see of (d).

**have got.** See get (c).

**have your cake and eat it too.** See you can’t eat your cake and have it too.

**having said that.** This phrase, which hedges a previous assertion, is a frequent source of danglers. The phrase is perfectly fine, of course, if *I* or a word for some other speaker follows the comma: “*Having said that*, I freely acknowledge that I have returned to work to catch up on my rest.” Tom Jackson, “Snared in Pasco’s Comfy Time Warp,” *Tampa Trib.*, 20 July 1999, Pasco §, at 1. But the expression becomes a mid- to low casualism when it’s not anchored to a term for the speaker in the main clause—e.g.:


An easy solution is simply to delete the phrase, which doesn’t say much anyway.

The variant *that said* does not create the same problems: it’s an elliptical nominative absolute standing for *that having been said* <That said, some clubs are going to be more aggressive>.

**havoc,** vb., forms *havocked* and *havocking*. See -c-.

**havoc, wreak.** See *wreak* (c). See also *reek.*

**Hawaii.** A Sense. To most people, the place name *Hawaii* is unambiguous. It refers to the 50th state of the U.S., comprising eight volcanic islands (and more than 120 islets), inhabited from the 5th century a.d. by Polynesians, annexed by the United States as a territory in 1900, and admitted as a state in 1959. The islands have individual names: Oahu, Maui, Kauai, Molokai, and so on. The biggest island, which is geologically the newest and still has active volcanoes, is called *Hawaii.*

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-ii.)

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Hence an ambiguity: when you say Hawaii, do you mean all the islands collectively (the 50th state) or just the biggest of the islands? To cure this ambiguity, the big island is usually called the Big Island (so capitalized). But officially it is known as Hawaii.

In New York, of course, a similar problem exists: the major city and the state bear the same name. But here the semantic hegemony goes the other way (from the smaller political unit to the larger): if you say you’re going to New York, everyone assumes it’s New York City—no one thinks of Albany or Rochester or Buffalo. But if you say you’re going to Hawaii, most people would think of Oahu or Maui—few would assume that you’re referring to the Big Island.

B. Spelled Hawai‘i. Sometimes you’ll see a dia
critical mark (called an okina [/oh-kee-na/], ‘u’ina [same pronunciation], or hamzah [/ham-za/ or /hahm-za/]) inserted in Hawaiian and other Hawaiian names, usually between repeated vowels <Ni‘ihau> but occasionally between vowels not repeated <O‘ahu>. E.g.: “It looks like the rest of Hawaii.” Andrew Doughty & Harriett Friedman, Maui Revealed 141 (2001). It is typically printed as an inverted comma, not as an apostrophe. This accent marks a glottal stop—a sharp guttural break that prevents a diphthong.

The okina is part of the Hawaiian language. It didn’t crop up much in English-language contexts until the late 20th century. For example, the Honolulu Advertiser began using the okina on all its pages in October 2000, and today its front-page motto contains an odd-looking possessive: Hawai‘i’s Newspaper. But usage isn’t uniform: whereas the Honolulu Advertiser uses the okina throughout, names mentioned in the Maui News are free of it.

As a diacritical mark in an English context, the mark seems largely out of place and undesirable: (1) it smacks of a provincialism that resists linguistic assimilation to standard AmE; (2) it isn’t much help to the nonnative speaker who seeks to pronounce Hawaiian names correctly (look at ‘u’ina itself—most speakers would be at a loss to know how to say it); (3) it leads to odd-looking phrases, such as the Honolulu Advertiser’s motto; and (4) most Hawaiian names (such as Hawaii) itself have been assimilated into English without the mark—usage has long been settled, and the okina simply unsettles it.

A University of Hawaii professor opposed the needless diacritical mark in English contexts as early as 1973: “The use of diacritics is not only superfluous but also contrary to the facts of conventional HE [Hawaiian English] orthography and normal HE pronunciation . . . . The practice must therefore be regarded as sheer pedantry or as sheer folly if it is to be interpreted as a pitch for the preservation of the glottal stop and the like in HE loans.” Stanley M. Tsuzuki, “Hawaiian English,” 48 Am. Speech 117, 119 (1973).

C. Pronunciation. Most Americans say /hә-wi-e/ or /hә-wah-ee/—the only pronunciations recognized by most English-language dictionaries. Most locals say /hә-vi-e/, since in the Hawaiian language a -w- preceded by a vowel is pronounced as a -v-. The -v- sound is an “insider” pronunciation, used only by denizens of Hawaii. Among residents interviewed in August 2002, most agreed that it would be pretentious for anyone but a longtime resident to adopt the pronunciation. If one moved to the state, there might well be social pressures after some time to adopt the -v- pronunciation. And the feeling among interviewees was that the pressures would be much weaker on the island of Oahu than on the other islands.

Hawaiian. Among residents of Hawaii, this term expresses ethnicity, not nativity or residency. Whereas most state labels refer to where you were born or now live (e.g., Californian, Iowan, New Yorker), Hawaiian is reserved only for those descended from indigenous Hawaiian Islanders. E.g.: “Hawaiians believe that all of life is part of a force they call ma’a, and they believe ma’a can be shared.” Judith Kreiner, “‘Aloha’ Speaks Volumes in Hawaii,” Wash. Times, 7 Oct. 2000, at E1. Other residents of Hawaii, even those born there, are termed locals or islanders. The standards explained here are pretty well recognized in the press—e.g.:

- “‘Locals’ [is] a term that includes native Hawaiians and certain non-European ethnic groups, but generally not white people or the middle class of any colour.” Christina Thompson, “Forked Tongue,” Australian, 13 June 2001, at B19.

In the following example, Hawaiians is loosely used as meaning “all residents of Hawaii.” “New Yorkers pay about 14 cents and Hawaiians [read residents of Hawaii] pay nearly 17 cents, according to the Department of Energy.” John Woolfolk, “Regulators to Boost Power Bills by as Much as 36 Percent,” San Jose Mercury News, 27 Mar. 2001, State & Regional News §, at 10. See denizen labels. On a related subject, see Native American.

*hayday. See heyday (A).

He; Him. When referring to God, most professional writers and editors don’t capitalize the pronouns—e.g.: “God is a spirit. I have had tremendous messages from him, which are from the Bible; it’s not something I’ve dreamed up or had a vision of. It’s important to study the Bible on a daily basis so he can speak to me.” Billy Graham, as quoted in “Of Angels, Devils and Messages from God,” Time, 15 Nov. 1993, at 74. Is Time bowing to secularism? No. As the 14th edition of The Chicago Manual of Style noted, “in few areas is an author more tempted to overcapitalize or an editor more loath to urge a lowercase style than in religion” (§ 7.74, at 265.
HEADLINES. A. Headlines and Headings Generally. Headlines in journalism, like headings in other documents, are both the most important and least important parts of the writing. They are the most important because they are the most read and, if effectively written, most valuable to the reader. Their value comes in attracting the reader’s attention and guiding the reader to where particular information might be found. Piquing the reader’s interest is equivalent to a salesperson’s getting a foot in the door. It’s not the closing of the deal by any means. The text must deliver what the head promises or the deal’s off. That’s why the heading might also be said to be the least important part of the writing.

Besides capturing the reader’s attention and generating interest, headlines (or, in documents, headings and subheadings) guide the reader through the content. Headlines show the reader where to find things of interest, both on a first reading and later, when the reader wants to refer to that information. In longer articles and essays—and certainly in documents—headings and subheadings are crucial finding tools.

The ability to write brief, accurate, and clear headlines and headings is an important skill, and a hard one to learn. As a University of Kansas journalism professor put it: “Many students find précis writing a hard art to master. A newspaper copy editor has to master not only the art of writing a précis but also the far more difficult art of writing a précis of a précis. He writes news headlines.” John B. Bremmer, HTK 1 (1972).

B. Peculiar Usage of. Space constraints are responsible for the odd, nonconversational way in which news headlines are often written. The “count” (loosely speaking, the number of lowercase letters that can fit in a column of type) is absolute and often small. So short words are the headline writer’s friend. And since good heads are those that get attention, short, snappy words are especially close friends. So a basket-handle becomes a confab, and a symposium becomes a confab. The epitome of this style of headline writing remains the alliterative banner over a 1935 article in Variety about rural moviegoers’ preference for stories of city life: “Sticks Nix Hick Pix.” See Alliteration (A).

It’s easy to see how that sort of writing becomes hackneyed pretty quickly, and in fact much of the old cant is falling or has fallen into disuse. Lawmakers are seldom called solons anymore, track-and-field athletes thinclads, or tickets ducats. But the short-verse verb—such as axe (= fire), balk (= object; oppose), hit (= adversely affect), inks (= signs), mull (= consider), nab (= arrest), nix (= refuse; veto), rap (= criticize), rout (= defeat handily), and slay (= murder)—are still common. Likewise, short nouns remain useful—words such as buzz (= chatter), cap (= limit), cut (= reduction), guru (= expert), probe (= investigation), and toll (= number of casualties; extent of damage).

ABBREVIATIONS, acronyms, and initialisms naturally fit the need for short forms, and well-known ones get plenty of use <State St. CEO: No Need for Fresh Capital> <EPA Weighs TV’s Duty in Cleanup> <FCC Fines 9 Cable Providers>. But editors rightly discourage or even ban the use of obscure initialisms as too reader-unfriendly <Host Agrees: ‘No Thanks’ to Gutted ESG>.

Finally, the use of nouns as adjectives is fairly common in headlines <Massey Ltd. Seeks Canada Financial Aid> <Okinawa Case Pressed in Court>. In text, a writer would be better off using the adjectival forms Canadian and Okinawan. See Functional Shift.

C. Peculiar Grammar of. Another effect of space constraints in headlines is the adoption of punctuation and syntax constructions that are not found in general prose. They would sound strange indeed in conversation.

Commas and semicolons serve unique purposes in headlines, largely because periods usually appear only in abbreviations. Commas routinely stand in for the conjunction and <Obama, Biden Take Oaths>. Semicolons stand in for periods and join two sentences, sometimes sentences that would not easily fit together as independent clauses in a compound sentence <Israel Speeds Withdrawal from Gaza; Efforts to Buttress Ceasefire Continue>.

Colons show up often in headlines, serving one of two purposes. They may follow an introductory tag <GOP: On the Road to Recovery?>, an attribution <Cops: Real-Life Horror at Cinema>, or the equivalent of a dateline <Illinois: Legal Team Quits Impeachment Defense>. Or they may be used traditionally, linking a statement with some explanation, supporting information, resulting outcome, or other related matter <As Flight Went Down, He Got Ready to Help at Exit: ‘I Thought, You Sat in This Seat, You Have to Figure This Out’>. Single quotation marks replace the double marks used in Aim/E text <Fond Memories of ‘Shoeshine Man’>. Headlines also show several oddities of syntax, all of which are also aimed at saving space. The articles

[14th ed. 1993]). In the 16th edition, the hand-wringing is gone: “Pronouns referring to God or Jesus are not capitalized” (§ 8.94, at 427 [16th ed. 2010]).

Many versions of the Bible itself—including the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and the English Standard Version—don’t capitalize he or him in reference to God. So while members of the clergy might capitalize these pronouns in letters to the congregation, other writers should make them lowercase.

*he/she. See he or she (b).
a, an, and the are often omitted altogether, as are be-verbs <Coke-Fired Plant [Is a] Bad Idea>. Having the option of using or omitting these words gives headline writers some flexibility in making heads fit the space allowed.

Verb tenses also differ from the traditional rules of English grammar. The present tense often denotes recent past events <Rain Delays Game 2 of Series> <Fiats, Chrysler Form Alliance>. And the infinitive often denotes future tense <Sears to Keep Layaway Option> <New Chief to Face Budget Crunch>.

D. Peculiar Style of. Some final points. First, as a matter of style, the passive voice is far more common in headlines than in general prose, where its overuse is a well-known fault. The reason for its acceptance in headlines is that once a writer has reduced the gist of a story to a mere handful of words, the most important thing about the story turns out to be the recipient of the action (the object), not the actor (the subject). The natural word order, then, becomes passive <Recount Ordered in Mayoral Election> <Dads Locked Up Till They Pay Up>. See passive voice.

Second, line breaks should reflect logical and grammatical breaks as closely as possible. Sometimes a break can create a miscue. Consider the headline Political / ads blitz / — — —, for example. After reading the first two lines, the reader might think that's the subject, a three-word noun phrase, and expect a verb such as planned to follow. When the final line turns out to be viewers, the reader might hesitate and then look back before realizing that blitz is the verb. Even when no miscue is possible, it's best not to split a preposition from its object between lines, for example, or to from the verb in an infinitive.

In a similar vein, the importance of hyphenating phrasal adjectives becomes apparent in the close quarters of a headline. Consider this headline: “Wall Street Retreats as Bank Fears Crash Party,” Orlando Sentinel, 21 Jan. 2009, at B7. Which bank is afraid of a crash party? That could have been Bank-Fears Crash Party or Banks’ Fears Crash Party.

E. Guidance for Journalists. Over the years, newspaper editors and web designers have developed many pointers for effective headline writing. Among the principal ones are these:

- Capsulize the gist of the piece. Use words that apply so specifically to the story that they couldn't be used to headline another one <Pa. Race Won't Tip Superdelegates>.
- Make a definite statement with a concrete idea that can be easily grasped. Always prefer a tangible example over a general concept <50 Iraqis Die in Suicide Bombing> (as opposed to Violence Continues in Middle East).
- Ensure that the headline reflects the right tone for the publication and for the specific article, be it serious and sober or light and sensational <All 155 Aboard Safe as Crippled Jet Crash-Lands in Hudson (N.Y. Times)> <CRASH RESCUE A REAL SLAM DUNK / GEESE KO ENGINES (N.Y. Post)>.
- Include a verb <A Dash of Wit Salts Obama’s Speech>. even if it's only implied <Scalia, Long Shy of News Media, Now More Open> (in which Is is implied after Media).

Hence every headline is a statement. If suppressed, the verb must be readily supplied by the reader’s mind—its feeling remains <Air Trips Slowest in Past 20 Years>.

- Use the present tense, not past <Chaos Rules at Nevada Polygymist Hearing> (not Chaos Ruled . . .).
- Use an active verb if possible <Attacks Rooted in Religion Energize Faith in Many>. Avoid the word was <B.U. Ex-President Named as Man on Drifting Barge> (as opposed to Man on Drifting Barge Was Ex-President of B.U.).
- Don’t repeat any important word in any part of the same headline <Businesses Absorb Oil Costs> (as opposed to Business Costs Rise with Oil Costs).
- Omit articles unless necessary for the sense <3 Charged with Arlington Heights Apartment Break-In>.
- Avoid ending lines with fizzle-words. Put the punch word at the end. <Icicles Can Hurt Roofs, Interiors of Homes, and, of Course, Passersby>.
- Avoid cramming in too much information <To Nest Best, Feather Together> (as opposed to To Pamper Their Parrots, Cockatiels, and Macaws, Bird Lovers Are Creating a Whole New Species of Rooms).
- Avoid a clutter of punctuation <School Woes Aren’t Over Yet> (as opposed to Political Animals of Public Schools; So the Amarillo Unified School Board Has Finally Been Assimilated by the Recall/Reform Movement: Problem Solved, Right? Nope!).
- Don’t use a comma as a substitute for any word except and <Pet Owners, Landlords Need Win–Win Strategy>.


headlong. See headstrong.

headquarters. This noun commonly takes a plural verb, as in the first two examples listed below. But the singular predominates when the reference is to a building, as in the third example, or to authority (as opposed to a place), as in the fourth example:


Of course, if you’re torn by this dilemma, you can usually recast the sentence <the company has its headquarters in St. Louis>.

headstrong, adj.; headlong, adv. Headstrong (= stubborn, obstinate) is sometimes misused for the adverb
headlong (=[1] headfirst; or [2] in a blindly impetuous way)—e.g.:

- "While my parents' generation rushed headstrong [read headlong] into adulthood, mine has tried to postpone it as long as possible." Don McLeese, "Birth Rights or Wrongful Births?" Austin Am.-Statesman, 1 May 1997, at E1.

Sometimes the senses truly seem to merge, as headstrong takes on an adverbial quality more evocative than headlong—e.g.: "Creationists have run headstrong into teachers and scientists who have effectively lobbied their state and local school boards," Michael Janofsky, "New Mexico Rules Out Teaching Creationism," Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 10 Oct. 1999, at A13.

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headstrong misused for headlong: Stage 1

**head up, vb.; heads-up, n. & adj.** A. head up, vb. This phrasal verb is voguish in business and academic jargon—e.g.:

- "At Rocco, Ranelin will head up a superb band that includes greats John Heard on bass and Roy McCurdy on drums and rising pianist Danny Gassett," Zak Stewart, "Valley Life Ticket to Slide," L.A. Times, 8 Dec. 2000, at B5.
- "Reedy, of the school of computer science, heads up something called the Aura project." Steve Hamm, "Net Culture," BusinessWeek, 11 Dec. 2000, at 102.

B. Heads-up, n. & adj. As a noun, this casualism is a voguish substitute for "warning"—e.g.: "[Louis W.] Uccellini said this new forecasting method should . . . give local governments a heads-up to get out their snow plows and call in their snow-removal crews." Scott Burke, "Better Forecasts in the Future?" Capital (Annapolis), 17 Nov. 2002, at A1. As a phrasal adjective, it is informal for "alert"—e.g.: "Franco Wakhissi tied it at 1–1 in the 73rd minute with a heads-up play," Will Parrish, "Eagles Meet Coastal for BSC Title, NCAA Berth," Herald (Rock Hill, S.C.), 17 Nov. 2002, at D3.

**heal.** See cure.

**healthcare; health care.** In actual usage—especially among healthcare providers—the one-word version is well on its way. It seems inevitable. The problem with health care as a noun phrase is that it requires a hyphen when used attributively, as a phrasal adjective <health-care issues>—and few people seem to have patience for this nicety. And healthcare is different from managed care and medical care because it's a compound formed from two one-syllable words.

**heathful; healthy.** Strictly speaking, healthy refers to a person (or personified thing) in good health, healthful to whatever promotes good health. E.g.: "Low-fat dairy products . . . will keep us feeling healthy and good about ourselves, she says. A vegetarian, Barnes takes healthful dishes to parties," Pat Dooley, "Dreaming of a Lite Christmas," Dayton Daily News, 17 Dec. 1996, Metro §, at 1. In fact, though, many writers use healthy when they mean healthful, and healthy threatens to edge out its sibling altogether. Such a development would be unhealthful, since it would lead to a less healthy state of the language. Although the phrase healthful recreation was more common in print sources from 1770 to about 1960, since that time healthy recreation has become predominant in AmE and BrE alike.

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healthy for healthful: Stage 4

**hear.** See listen.

*hearken back. See hark back (A).

**heart-rending** is sometimes wrongly written

*heart-rendering—e.g.:

- "He's proudest, perhaps, of his non-musical work, including heart-rending [read heart-rendering] shots taken during the early '60s of the Appalachian poor and the civil-rights movement in the South," Craig Marine, "Wild at Heart," S.F. Examiner, 26 May 1996, at M6.
- "He returns to his regular style on a cover of Larry Graham's R&B classic, a heart-rendering [read heart-rend -


Of course, the verb rend (= to split, tear) has nothing to do with the verb render (= to make, perform, provide). The errant phrase is particularly unpleasant because one definition of render is "to boil down (fat)."

See rend & malapropisms.

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*heart-rending for heart-rendering: Stage 1

Current ratio (heart-rending vs. heart-rendering): 72:1

**hearty.** See hardy.

**heave > heaved > heaved.** The past-tense hove is archaic in all uses except the nautical phrases heave
into view and heave into sight, both meaning “to become visible”—e.g.:

- “We were waiting for a table when Jerry Simpson hove into view, at the helm of a 23-foot fiberglass boat.” Peter Rowe, “How Hot Is It?” San Diego Union-Trib., 14 Nov. 1996, at E1.


Some writers incorrectly understand the past-tense hove as a special present-tense verb. The error is most prevalent in BrE—e.g.:


- “Not long after, the O2 Arena—completing the trinity of London’s major tennis venues—hoves [read heaves] into view.” Andy Murray & Mike Dickson, “I’ve Got to Make the Most of This Because It Won’t Last Forever,” Daily Mail, 27 June 2015, at 108.

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**heaven’s sake.** So written—not (as often erroneously written) *heavens sake, *heavensakes, *heaven sakes, or *heavens sake.*

Current ratio (in order of terms in entry): 204:7:5:2:1

**hecto-; centi-**. Hecto- derives from the Greek hektaton, centi- from the Latin centum (both meaning “one hundred”). Whereas the root hecto- means “multiplied by 100,” centi- means “divided by 100.” Hence a hectometer is 100 meters; a centimeter is a hundredth of a meter.

**he'd better; he better.** See better (A).

**hegemony** /hi-jem-ә-nә/ is fundamentally a political term ("political dominance; the leadership or predominant authority of one state of a confederacy, union, or region over the others") that has been imported into commercial and nonpolitical contexts. E.g.:


The term verges on being a vague word.

The corresponding adjective is hegemonic—e.g.:

- “As history shows, hegemonic empires almost automatically elicit universal resistance, which is why all such aspirants eventually have exhausted themselves.” Christopher Layne & Benjamin Schwarz, “U.S. Can Become Less of a Target,” Times Union (Albany), 18 Nov. 2002, at A7.

**hegira** /hi-jә-rә/ (= a journey undertaken to escape a troublesome situation) is the standard spelling. *Hejira* is a variant (although the Arabic word for “emigration, flight” is *hijra*). When used in reference to Muhammad’s flight from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622, the word is capitalized: Hegira.

**height** has a distinct /t/ sound at the end. To pronounce or write this word as if it were *heighth* is less than fully literate—e.g.: “Second-seeded Syracuse had intermittent difficulties with No. 15 Coppin State’s zone defenses, but Syracuse’s *height* [read height] and strength won out.” “Tourney Was Here in ’90,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 15 Mar. 1996, at D3. The mistake may occur for any of several reasons: (1) other words conveying measurement end in -th (e.g., depth, width, breadth); (2) people might confuse its ending with that of eighth; or (3) *heighth* is an archaic variant once used in southern England. See class distinctions & pronunciation (b).

**heinous** /hay-nәs/—rhyming with “pain us”—is one of our most commonly mispronounced words. It is also frequently misspelled *heinous*—e.g.: “[It was as if] Maris had committed some heinous [read heinous] crime in threatening Ruth’s record.” Sean McAdam, “All Ripken Wants Is to Play, Play and Play,” Providence J.-Bull., 11 Aug. 1995, at D1. See pronunciation (b).

For the misuse of onerous for heinous, see onerous.

**heirless.** Despite the feminine ending (see sexism (d)), this word shows no signs of obsolescence in denoting a woman who has inherited wealth—e.g.:

- “So far five young women have claimed to be the missing heirress.” Mary Evertz, “Romance Writer Takes a Turn at Mystery and Intrigue,” St. Petersburg Times, 23 July 1995, at D7.

- “Like so many of the repressed characters in the novels of Henry James, Isabel Archer, a young American heirress who has the notion that she will find happiness abroad, is a psychosexual tuning fork.” Tom Gliatto et al., “Screen,” People, 27 Jan. 1997, at 21.

- “Mistress America’ also harks back to an even earlier age, when madcap heiresses played by Claudette Colbert or Carole Lombard would traipse around Manhattan with louche abandon.” Ann Hornaday, “Mistress America’ Celebrates Women, Screwball Comedies,” Denver Post, 28 Aug. 2015, at 7C.
Although *heirress-apparent* is more strictly correct, *heirress* is also commonly used to denote a woman who stands to inherit—e.g.: “[Paris] Hilton stands to inherit $30 million of her family fortune, but in 2005 she made a reported $7 million on her own. The hotel *heirress’s* name is emblazoned on everything from perfume to lip-enhancement serum.” Meghan Keane, “She’s with the Brand,” *N. Y. Sun*, 21 Aug. 2006, at 16. Purists frown on that usage as loose.

*hejira*. See *hegira*.

**helix** yields the plural **helices** or **helixes**. The classical plural **-ces** vastly predominates in modern print sources. Cf. *Appendices*. See *Plurals* (b).

**helm**, vb. Originally a nautical term meaning “to steer,” *helm* has been borrowed by the entertainment industry in the sense “to direct or produce (a film, play, album, etc.).” This extended sense, now entrenched in showbiz talk, is likely to strike many readers as newfangled and catchphenny—e.g.:• "The multiple-director system works sometimes, as witness Zucker/Abrahams/Zucker *helming* the hits ‘Airplane!’ and ‘Ruthless People.’" "The Movies: Blank Checks," *L.A. Times* (Mag.), 27 May 1990, at 22.

• “Shadowy friend Steve Albini will be *helming* Schneider’s second solo effort, and has tentatively assembled bands to alternately back the quirky vocalist.” Kieran Grant, “Shadoowy Doings,” *Toronto Sun*, 26 Aug. 1995, Entertainment §, at 38.


**help**. See *assist*, v.t.

**help but.** See cannot help but.

**helpmate; helpmeet.** *Helpmeet,* now archaic, was the original form, yet folk etymology changed the spelling to -mate, which is now the prevalent form. (See *Etymology* (d).) In fact, *helpmate* is now about twice as common as *helpmeet*.

Here’s the story behind the development of the words. *Helpmeet* is a compound “absurdly formed” (as the *OED* puts it) from the two words *help* and *meet* in Genesis: “an help meet for him” (Genesis 2:18, 20), in which *meet* is really an adjective meaning “suitable.” Some writers still use *helpmeet*—e.g.: “Naturally, I am a loyal and patient *helpmeet* whose only reward is a smile on the lips of my beloved—a smile, and ceaseless extravagant praise.” Jon Carroll, “Movie at Our House,” *S.F. Chron.,* 3 Sept. 1996, at D8. But *meet* was widely misunderstood as *mate*, and the form *helpmate* sprang up and has been predominant since the 18th century—e.g.: “She leads the choir, works with its youth and is her husband’s steadfast and (usually) cheerful *helpmate*.” Marie Rhodes, “These Real-Life ’Preacher’s Wives’ Both Defy, Embody Stereotypes,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 4 Jan. 1997, Seminole Times §, at 8.

*Helpmate* means “a companion or helper,” and it need not refer to a spouse—e.g.: “We need to talk about the frustrations you face when you rely on a computer—Mac or IBM-compatible—as electronic *helpmate*.” Bill Husted, “Mac–IBM Battle Hides Bigger Problem,” *Palm Beach Post*, 13 Jan. 1997, at 7.

**help to.** In most contexts, the better practice is to use a bare infinitive after *help* (if the choice is between a fully expressed infinitive [with to] and a bare one [without to])—e.g.: “Critics called this a bookkeeping gimmick that helps disguise the true cost of the bill.” Janet Hook, “Lawmakers Reach Deal on Tax Relief,” *L.A. Times*, 26 May 2001, at A1. Notice how two writers, on the same day and in the same publication, handled the word:


• “An accord with the United States that will open North Korea’s nuclear program to inspection should help resolve nuclear tensions once and for all; North Korea’s top negotiator said Tuesday.” “Accord Eases Tension with North Korea,” *Milwaukee J. Sentinel*, 18 Oct. 1994, at A1.

The bare-infinitive form after *help* overtook the to-form in the late 1960s and remains more than twice as common with various verbs.

**hemoglobin; haemoglobin.** *Hemoglobin (= the red protein that transports oxygen in the blood of vertebrates) has been the standard AmE spelling since about 1900. Haemoglobin was the established BrE spelling from the late 19th century, but the levels of *hemoglobin* in BrE print sources surged in the 1970s, and the two spellings have vied for supremacy ever since. So far, *haemoglobin* holds a slight lead in BrE.

In AmE and BrE alike, *a* (not *an*) precedes the word. See a (A).

Current ratio (World English): 4:1

**hemorrhage; haemorrhage.** *Hemorrhage (= an escape of blood from a ruptured blood vessel) has been the established AmE spelling since about 1800. Haemorrhage the established BrE spelling since about 1850. Since the late 1970s, however, BrE has increasingly tended toward *hemorrhage*: the two spellings are now locked in rivalry in BrE.

In AmE and BrE alike, *a* (not *an*) precedes the word. See a (A).

Current ratio (World English): 4:1

**hence.** This adverb has several meanings, listed here in decreasing order of frequency: (1) “for this reason; therefore” <your premise is flawed; hence, your
henceforth. A. And *henceforward. The latter is a
NEEDEDLESS VARIANT.

B. *From henceforth. This phrase is an ARCHAISM
that the OED records as having last been current in the
17th century. Today the word from ought to be rooted
out of the phrase—e.g.:

- “We are told that they have just remastered that disc, and
all orders from hence forth will be [read will hence forth be]
filled using the new one, not the one Mr. Bauman
1994, at 190.

- “From hence forth [read Henceforth], Connerly sug-
gested last week, applicants to the UC system no longer
should petition by name.” Peter H. King, “Under Every
Rock, Agents of Diversity,” L.A. Times, 16 Mar. 1997,
at A3.

- “IMPORTANT!!! We can no longer refer to the Freedom
Fuel Initiative,” John Sullivan, a deputy assistant at the
Energy Department wrote in a memo. ‘From henceforth
[read Henceforth] it is to be referred to as ‘The President’s
Hydrogen Fuel Initiative.’” * H. Josef Hebert, “U.S. Finds
It Isn’t Free to Use Zippy Phrase,” Chicago Trib., 15 Feb.
2003, News §, at 8.

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*from henceforth for henceforth: Stage 3
Current ratio (Henceforth vs. *From henceforth
at start of sentence): 38:1

C. Misused for hence. Whereas henceforth means
“from this point on,” hence can mean “after now.” Idi-
omatically, one speaks of two years hence, not *two
years henceforth—e.g.: “But there are simply too many
happy and successful quarterbacks who have been left
in Fassell’s wake to think that Brown won’t be joining
that list at some point henceforth [read hence].” Bob
Glauber, “Brown Ultimate Test for Fassel,” Newsday

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henceforth misused for hence: Stage 1

D. For thenceforth. When you’re discussing past
or future events, and you mean “from that time
forward”—and you don’t mind sounding extremely formal—the word you want is thence forth, not
henceforth. E.g.: “The film sank without trace but
Denholm’s part in it lived on in the memories of cast-
ing directors. Henceforth [read Thenceforth or After
that], he found his greatest success as a failure.” Susan
Elliott, “The Day Denholm Said He Wanted an Open
thenceforth is accurate, a better wording is usually
possible, such as then, from that time, from then on,
later, or after that—e.g.: “The jewel in the crown of
the museum this year will be the reopening in late
September of what will thenceforth [read, perhaps,
then] be known as the Janet Annenberg Hooker Hall
of Geology, Gems, and Minerals.” Hank Burchard,
“Coming Soon to a Museum Near You,” Wash. Post, 3

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henceforth misused for thenceforth: Stage 1
he or she. A. Generally. The traditional view, now
widely assailed as sexist, was that the masculine pro-
nouns are generic, comprehending both male and
female. One way to avoid the generic masculine he, his,
and him is to use—not at every turn, but sparingly—he
or she, his or her, and him or her. These expressions, in
occasional use from the 17th century on, have been
very much on the rise since the early 1970s. E.g.: “The
notion that a business can teach a customer about his
or her desires will reshape industries, he says.” “Strategy

Another way to avoid the problem—not possible
in all contexts—is to pluralize the antecedent of the
pronoun. E.g.: “If children think they look different—
because they feel a lot bigger or a lot smaller or a
lot thinner than their peers—it calls extra attention to
them and can make them uncomfortable.” Nancy
1997, at 51. The disadvantage of such a wording is that
it often too strongly suggests a singleness of mind in
the group, as opposed to the uniqueness of an indi-
vidual mind. This despite, in the example given, an
implication of unique differences.

He or she is by no means a newfangled concession
to feminism. In 1837, the English Wills Act stated: “And
be it further enacted, That every Will made by a Man
or Woman shall be revoked by his or her Marriage
(except a Will made in exercise of Appointment . . .).”
See sexism (b).

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he or she for he: Stage 5

B. *He/she. One big problem with using this con-
trived device is that once you start you can’t stop.
Sometimes this gets quite out of hand. But it’s rare
to see such an exquisite example as this: “If a child
is not corrected when he/she first misses a word,
by the time he/she is in eighth grade, the errors are
so ingrained they are never even noticed . . . . I think
it is a disservice to the child to let him/her go along
for seven years and then tell him/her that the spell-
ing is all wrong.” Letter of M. Ann Davis, “Spelling
Important,” Ariz. Republic/Phoenix Gaz., 9 Sept.
1995, at B8. What about letting him/her go seven years using
*he/she and *him/her, when reasonable readers will
otherwise think that he/she is off his/her rocker? See
punctuation (q).

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*he/she for he or she: Stage 2

herb, n.; herbal, adj. Although herb is pronounced
/arb/, herbal has traditionally been pronounced
/har-bal/. In BrE, a herbal has predominated in usage
since 1890. In AmE, a and an vied closely until the early 1970s, when an decisively won. Today, /ər-bəl/ predominates in AmE. It therefore seems more natural to most American readers to sip an herbal tea, not a herbal tea. But herbicide, with an aspirated h-, should be preceded by a, not an. See a (A). Cf. homage & humble.

In BrE, the aspirated h in herb has been restored since the early 19th century. It's a telltale distinction in pronunciation between AmE and BrE.

Herculean is pronounced either /hәr-kyo-lee-an/ or /hәr-kyә-lee-an/. Traditionally, the first of these was considered the better pronunciation, but today the second predominates.

hereabout(s), adv. This formal word, meaning "in this vicinity," has been predominantly spelled with the final -s since the 17th century. The shorter form is a variant.

Current ratio: 5:1

hereditary. See heritable.

heretofore. See hitherto & up to now.

herewith. See *enclosed please find.

heritable; inheritable; hereditary. As between the first two—both meaning "capable of being inherited"—heritable has been standard since 1800. It is more than three times as common as inheritable. E.g.: "Robert Pilarski counsels and tests patients who may be at risk for heritable forms of cancer, considered to be 5 percent to 10 percent of all cancers." Betsy Wittman, "Genetic Testing, the Pluses and Minuses," N.Y. Times, 2 Nov. 1997, at CN14. Somewhat surprisingly, a differentiation seems to be emerging: heritable almost always refers to traits and genetic characteristics, and inheritable refers more commonly (though not exclusively) to wealth, titles, and goods. E.g.: "Memberships will be inheritable and will carry no annual fee for at least the club's first five years of operation." Jerry Dean, "Boathouse, Club to Anchor Waterfront," Knoxville News-Sentinel, 9 Nov. 1997, at D1. The negative forms are nonheritable and uninheritable. One notable exception is the Western Heritable Investment (a major landlord in the New York City diamond district).

Hereditary = (1) descending by inheritance from generation to generation <hereditary privileges customary in European societies>; or (2) transmitted genetically from parent to offspring <fat under the eyelids is hereditary>. Although *an hereditary was once common, since the 1930s a hereditary has predominated in AmE and BrE alike. See a (A).

hers, an absolute possessive, is sometimes wrongly written *her's—e.g.:

- "One man, who had started the somewhat lengthy process of filling out his forms, stood up and said, 'I don't have time for this,' ripped up his form, took his wife's form out of her hand and tore her's [read hers] up, too." Natasha Koreck, "Workers Scramble to Correct Poll Glitches," Daily Herald (Chicago), 4 Apr. 2001, at 4.
- "Arthur is excited about planning his birthday, until he finds out his friend Muffy is planning her's [read hers] on the same day." Gretchen Marie-Goodie, "Arthur's Celebration," Hartford Courant, 3 May 2001, at 24.
- "Let the mother remember that the daughter's mistakes are her's [read hers] to make." Barbara Donlon, "Wishes for a Daughter Who's Growing Every Minute," Boston Herald, 13 May 2001, at 55.

See possessives (c).

*herstory. See sexism (c).

hesitancy; *hesitance; hesitation. Strictly speaking, hesitancy is a quality ("the state of being hesitant; reluctance"), while hesitation is an act ("the act of hesitating"). So the better usage is to say that you have no hesitancy about doing something, not to say that you have no hesitation. But hesitation may well drive hesitancy out of the language. In word frequency within modern print sources, it vastly predominates over hesitancy. Meanwhile, *hesitance is a NEEDLESS variant of hesitancy.

Current ratio (hesitation vs. hesitancy vs. *hesitation): 87:8:1

heterogeneous; *heterogenous. The first is the correct spelling of the term meaning "diverse in some characteristic" (the university strives to achieve a culturally heterogeneous student body). The preferred six-syllable pronunciation is a mouthful (/he-to-raj-een-ee-әs/). A less rigorous elided pronunciation (/he-to-raj-jә-nәs/) corresponds to the second spelling, which the OED calls "less correct." Because heterogeneous has predominated since the 17th century and is about 28 times as common in modern print sources as *heterogenous, the latter ought to be considered a NEEDLESS variant. Still, it does appear with some regularity in otherwise well-edited publications—e.g.:

- "In District 5, he will represent the county's most heterogeneous neighborhoods . . . . One in five district residents is Latino, many of them recent immigrants." Michael H. Cottman, "Broad Support Powered Latino to Historic Win," Wash. Post, 10 Nov. 2002, at C1.
- "One line of research, for instance, shows that all students learn better in racially heterogeneous [read heterogeneous] settings than in racially homogenous [read homogenous] ones." "The Big One Hits the Court," Atlanta J.-Const., 1 Apr. 2003, at A12.

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
*Heterogenous is also an obsolete medical term describing foreign tissue. For the antonyms, see homogeneous.

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*heterogenous for heterogeneous: Stage 1 Current ratio (heterogenous vs. *heterogenous): 28:1

**hew. A. And hue. Hew, vb., = (1) to chop, cut; or (2) to adhere or conform (to). Thus sense 1: “Other pieces in this amazing residence include functional tables, chairs and benches, typically hewed from a single piece of wood and incised with a variety of designs.” Laura Pope, “Where Furniture, Sculpture Collide,” Union Leader (Manchester, N.H.), 25 Aug. 1996, at E1. And sense 2: “So many actors pretend not to be seeking fame and fortune that Firth’s protestations naturally arouse skepticism. But he has hewed to this line from the start.” Bart Mills, “That Tortured Look,” Chicago Trib., 2 Jan. 1997, Tempo §, at 11.

There are actually two words spelled hue. One, deriving from Anglo-Saxon, means (1) “color” <a yellowish hue>, or (2) “appearance, complexion” <partisans of every hue>. The other derives from Old French and means “a loud shout made by someone pursuing a suspected felon” <they raised the hue and cry>—or, by extension, “an uproar.” In any event, apart from its use as a past-participial adjective <multihued image>, the word is consistently a noun.

But some writers misuse the word for the verb hew—e.g.: “Mr. Major hued [read hewed] to a more middle-of-the-road strategy, arguing that a common currency would certainly not happen by the end of the century.” John Darnton, “Major’s Scorecard,” N.Y. Times, 7 July 1995, at A2.

For the misuse of hew for hue in the set phrase hue and cry, see hue and cry.

**Language-Change Index**

hued misused for hewed: Stage 1 Current ratio (hewed to vs. *hued to): 20:1

**B. Inflections.** In sense 2, the preferred past participle is hewn in BrE and hewed in AmE. For an American publication, the following example gets the form wrong: “His campaigning this fall shows how closely he has hewn [read, in AmE, hewed] to that strategy.” John F. Harris, “Out Loud, Clinton Puts Little Emphasis on His Party,” Wash. Post, 24 Oct. 1996, at A17.

In sense 1, the exceptional form in AmE is the past-participial adjective rough-hewn. See irregular verbs.

Current ratio (has hewed to vs. *has hewn to): 6:1

**heyday. A. Spelling.** So spelled—not *heyday or *hayday. E.g.:

- “However, the children of those who played in the club’s heyday [read heyday] are becoming old enough to play, and are bringing the club back to where it used to be.” Mike Allende, “Can-Am Summer 7s Rugby Tournament,” Bellingham Herald (Wash.), 15 July 2001, at D1.

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heyday misspelled *heyday or *hayday: Stage 1 Current ratio: 1,519:7:1

**B. And field day.** Each term most often appears in its distinct set phrase: in (its, his, her, their) heyday (= in [its] prime) and having a field day (= having an extraordinarily good time). Dwight Bolinger was perhaps the first to note that when the terms are switched in these phrases, the result is a classic malapropism: “The columnist Peter Weaver wrote Professional bill collectors are having a heyday, confusing heyday with field day; the two are faintly related in the common notion of ‘prosperity.’ Heyday itself may have developed in a similar way from an exclamation heyda ‘hey there!’ used to express exaltation and later applied to a time of excitement, causing the -da part to be identified with day.” Language: The Loaded Weapon 23 (1980).

The error isn’t common, but heyday does sometimes displace field day—e.g.:

- “Critics had a heyday [read field day] with Sheffield last season when he didn’t want to dive for balls on artificial turf because it causes rug burns.” Joe Christensen, “Devo, Diving Don’t Mix,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 4 May 2000, at E6.

The opposite error is quite rare.

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heyday misused for field day: Stage 1 Current ratio (had a field day vs. *had a heyday): 24:1

**hiatus.** The standard plural has been hiatuses since about 1800. The Latinate plural hiatus is not only rare but also liable to cause confusion. (See plurals [b].) *Hiati is a malformed plural—e.g.: “They have offers from Columbia for four movies during their hiatus [read hiati].” Army Archerd, “Just for Variety,” Daily Variety, 10 Nov. 1992. See hypercorrection (A). Cf. apparatus.

**Language-Change Index**

*hiati for hiatuses: Stage 1 Current ratio (hiatuses vs. *hiati): 49:1

**hiccup; hiccough.** The first is the standard spelling; the second is a variant form arrived at through folk etymology. See etymology (b).

Hiccup, vb., traditionally makes hiccuped and hiccuping in AmE and BrE alike. See spelling (b).

Current ratio: 5:1

**hie (= to hurry or hasten) makes the present participle hicing—e.g.: “Many of the 28,000 fleetfeet and plodders hicing the 26.2 miles of Sunday’s New York City Marathon were at the starting line because of Dr. George Sheehan.” Colman McCarthy, “Running on a Higher Plane,” Wash. Post, 16 Nov. 1993, at B11. The
verb is often reflexive—e.g.: “As they bustle about, sometimes hieing themselves off to unseen corners of their establishment, we meet their clientele.” John Coulbourn, “Less Is More with Two,” Toronto Sun, 27 Nov. 1996, Entertainment §, at 7.

hierarchical; *hierarchic. The latter is a needless variant that is not nearly as common as the standard term, hierarchical. See -ic.

Current ratio: 37:1

highfalutin (= pretentious, pompous) has been the standard spelling since the mid-19th century, as opposed to *highfaluting, *highfalutin, or *hifalutin. But the variants persist—e.g.: “Chief among these are the geo people—those apostles of geopolitics, geostrategies and all the hifalutin [read highfalutin] rest—who argue against the ‘sentimentality’ of human rights and democratic concerns.” Meg Greenfield, “No Hard Feelings?” Newsweek, 27 Sept. 1993, at 80. The W11 spelling is highfalutin, without the apostrophe and with high spelled out. The OED, recording the word as an Americanism dating from the mid-19th century, has two spellings: highfalutin (first) and *highfalutin. The Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary (1942) records *hifalutin (without the apostrophe) as a variant spelling; the main entry is under highfalutin. (Other variants listed there are *hifaluten and *highfaluting.) The best course is to do two things: spell the word highfalutin, and avoid being what it denotes.

*highjack. See hijack.


Current ratio (highlighted vs. *highlit): 4,258:1

highly regarded. See regard (n).

high-tech. So written—not *hi-tech.

*highth. See height.

**highjack. Vehicles and airplanes are hijacked, not people. E.g.: “It’s horrifying, because it’s like a kidnapping,” said Greg Britt, a 34-year-old language instructor from Atlanta who was hijacked [read abducted or held up] in a cab at knife point last year, then ordered to make 12 separate withdrawals from automatic-teller machines—six before midnight and six after the new day began, when he was able to withdraw more.” Steve Fainaru, “Mexico’s Risky Ride: The Hazards of Hailing a Cab in Capital,” Boston Globe, 6 Feb. 1997, at A1. Cf. skyjack.

The word is often misspelled *highjack—e.g.: • “Buildings are bombed and planes are hijacked [read hijacked],” Anita G. Nicholls, “Jerry Falwell Isn’t This Nation’s Problem,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 28 May 1997, at A8. • “The need for such work became clear to Karadja in December 1994, during the highjacking [read hijacking] of an airplane in which her daughter and sister were on board.” Chris Peterson, “Amid Algeria’s Massacres,” Christian Science Monitor, 9 Jan. 1998, Int’l §, at 1.

Current ratio (highjack for hijack: Stage 1) (highjack vs. *highjack): 30:1

**hindmost; *hindermost. The latter has long been a needless variant.

Current ratio: 6:1

hindrance (= [1] someone or something that makes the accomplishment of something difficult, or [2] the act of making something difficult for someone to do something) is two syllables: /hin-drin[t]/. Avoid the epenthetic schwa between the two syllables: there is no hinder in hindrance.

Current ratio (hindrance vs. *hinderance): 28:1

hippocampus (= [1] a mythical sea monster with the head and front legs of a horse and the tail of a dolphin or fish, or [2] a ridge along the lower section of each ventricle of the brain, where memory is stored) has predominantly formed the plural hippocampi since the 18th century—in AmE and BrE alike. *Hippocampuses is a rare variant.

Hippocratic oath. So spelled, after the name of the Greek physician Hippocrates (known as the “Father of Medicine”). But the main word is often misspelled *Hypocritic—e.g.: • “Astaphan said he began prescribing performance-enhancing drugs for Canada’s top athletes earlier in 1983 because he believed the Hypocritic [read Hippocratic] oath required him to do so.” “Johnson on Steroids Since ’81, Doctor Says,” L.A. Times, 24 May 1989, at A8. • “Chefler also wonders whether any physician who performs [a] surgical castration [as] provided for in Shurden’s bill would be in violation of the Hypocritic [read Hippocratic] oath, which states a doctor’s first priority is to
The far less common mistake is misusing historical for historic—e.g.: “Gary Pinkel didn’t know what to expect after Toledo and Nevada found themselves going into a historical [read historic] overtime in the Las Vegas Bowl.” “Vegas Bowl Passes OT Test,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 16 Dec. 1995, at E5. See -ic.

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1. historic for historical: Stage 3
   Current ratio (historical development vs. *historic development): 23:1
2. 2. historical for historic: Stage 3
   Current ratio (historic occasion vs. *historical occasion): 3:1

**B. A historic(al); *an historic(al).** On the question whether to write a or an historic(al), see a (A).

**hi-tech.** See high-tech.

**hither; thither; whither.** All three are archaisms in decline, hither (= here; to this place) being the most
common. Except in the phrasal adjective come-
with ( = sexually appealing) or the quaint expres-
ion hither and yon, the word hither is best replaced 
with a more modern term—e.g.: “They are men who 
have come from Europe—German, Irish, French and 
Scandinavian—men that have come from Europe 
themse-
thes or whose ancestors have come hither and 
settlement here [read here and settled], finding them-
selves or their equals in all things.” Andrew Delbanco, “The 

Thither (= there; to that place) is even more strik-
ingly archaic, but it sometimes appears with hither for 
a pleasant touch of humor and euphony—e.g.: “We 
have forfeited this joy and peace for the tinsel and glit-
ter, the rushing hither and thither.” Kathy Hogan, “The 
True Meaning of Christmas,” Indianapolis News, 11 

Whither (= where; to what place) is the most old-
fashioned of all <at Chelsea Square, whither we had 
gone>. It has virtually no place in modern writing. For 
a misusage, see wither.

hitherto; thitherto. Hitherto = heretofore; up to this 
time. Thitherto = theretofore; up to that time. These 
archaisms are hardly worth using, since the terms 
just used in defining them—heretofore and thereto-
fore—are perfectly equivalent and much more com-
mon. Cf. up to now.

HIV virus. For this redundant acronym, see abbre-
viation (b).

hoard; horde. A hoard is a stash of something, usually 
hidden away. To hoard items is to accumulate them 
and stash them away. A horde is a throng or teem-
ing crowd (originally a nomadic tribe). Like many 
other pairs of homophones, these give writers trouble. 
Hoard often displaces horde—e.g.: • “Ice-cream melted 
in seconds, sweat beads trickled down faces and 
hoards [read hordes] of residents hurried to the 
beach to avoid the scorching temperatures that scorched 
the county Saturday afternoon.” Jody Kleinberg. “Heat 
Sizzles to 8-Year High,” Press Democrat (Santa Rosa), 21 

• “A dry winter wasn’t enough to reduce the roving 
hoards [read hordes] of Africanized honey bees 
that have swarmed the region in recent years.” Joyeshka 

• “Thanks to the movie ‘Titanic,’ hoards [read hordes] of 
teenagers head to the railings to mimic the famous scene 
in the movie in which the ship’s hero shouts, ‘I’m king of 
the world.’” Anne Veigele, “Set Sail for Fascinating Jour-
ney Through Navy Museum,” Wash. Times, 10 Aug. 1999, 
at E5.

Likewise, horde (exclusively a noun) sometimes dis-
places the verb hoard—e.g.: • “They prefer to binge 
on points rather than hording [read hoarding] a stash.” Ryan Ori, “Seminifal Victors Turn Foes 

• “No ticket hording [read hoarding] allowed, though.” 

• “The U.S. is poised for a spate of even more heightened 
deal-making after years of slow growth and hording [read 
hoarding] cash.” Alexander Coolidge, “Merger Mania Hits 
Home with 2 Takeovers in 1 Week,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 

Finally, through a mistaken association of the two 
words, the misspelling *hoarde often crops up—e.g.: 
“This has provoked hoardes [read hordes] of ethnic 
Albanian refugees to return to their homeland before 
if it is safe.” “Civilized Nations Should Never Resort to 

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. hoard misused for the noun horde: Stage 2 
Current ratio (hordes of vs. *hoards of): 6:1
2. horde misused for the verb hoard: Stage 1 
Current ratio (hoarding of vs. *hording of): 61:1
3. horde misspelled *hoarde: Stage 1 
Current ratio: 3,213:1

*hoarhound. See houndreich.

hobo (= [1] a homeless, impetuous vagrant, or [2] 
a migratory worker), an Americanism dating from 
the late 19th century, has always predominantly 
formed the plural hoboes—not *hos. See plurals (d).

Current ratio (hoboes vs. *hobs): 1:1:1

HOBSON-JOBSONISM. This term denotes the principle 
that with loanwords, foreign-sounding phonemes 
of the original language are modified to approximate the 
phonemes available in the borrowing language. Hence 
Rodriguez, pronounced in Spanish with two instances 
of the guttural r, is normally pronounced with the 
usual English r in English-speaking contexts—even 
when spoken by a Spanish speaker. An insistence that 
Rodriguez be enunciated just as it would be in Span-
ish—with the concomitant idea that an anglicized 
pronunciation is a “mispronunciation”—is perverse.

Most English speakers, for example, don’t have 
trilled r’s or guttural ch’s—hence terza rima comes out 
/tart-zah reem/-/ and Bach comes out /bakh/. To insist 
that Johann Sebastian’s last name must have a gut-
tural aspiration at the end is sheer pedantry and pre-
tension: Johann can naturally be said /yoh-bahhn/, but 
Bach cannot naturally be said /bakh/. I once watched a 
European music critic spend 15 minutes trying to 
teach an accomplished American music professor how 
to say the name Leos Janáček authentically. In the end, 
/lay-ohs yah-nah-chehk/ was as close as the available 
prononcement made it possible to come. Frustrated, the 
music critic ended up declaring his efforts unsuc-
cessful. Cf. pronunciation (d).

The term got its name from Hobson-Jobson, an 1866 
glossary of South Asian terms collected during the 
British rule of India, each term having been roughly 
transcribed into approximate English pronunciations.
The book was written by Henry Yule and A.C. Burnellin and updated in 1903. The title comes from an entry in the glossary denoting a ritual Muslim procession called *Ya Hasan, Ya Husain*. The authors’ “transliteration” was widely considered pejorative.

Hobson's choice. A. Generally. This ever-spreadcatchphrase has loosened its etymological tether. Tradition has it that Thomas Hobson (1549–1631), a hostel in Cambridge, England, always gave his customers only one choice among his horses: whichever one was closest to the door. Hence, in literary usage, a *Hobson's choice* came to denote no choice at all—either taking what is offered or taking nothing.

Though purists resist the change, the prevailing sense in *AmE* is not that of having no choice, but of having two bad choices—e.g.: • “Meanwhile, the women—if we can believe them—had a *Hobson's choice*: Either lie and ruin men's careers and lives; or tell it like it was and learn to live with hell in this man's Army.” Deborah Mathis, “Race Becomes Issue in Aberdeen Rape Cases,” *Fla. Today*, 15 Mar. 1997, at A11.


• “The city then foists a *Hobson's choice* upon its electorate: Either vote to tax the city's property owners with a sizable bond issue, or just endure the increasingly unsafe streets and bridges.” Lester Kleinberg, “Seattle's Crumbling Roads,” *Seattle Times*, 26 June 1997, at B5.

In a sense, this usage isn't much of a *slipshod extension*. After all, the choice of either taking what is offered or taking nothing must often be two poor options.

B. Article with. Traditionally—and still in *BrE*—the phrase takes no article; that is, you are faced not with a *Hobson's choice* but with *Hobson's choice*. In *AmE*, though, the phrase usually takes either *a* or *the* (as in the preceding examples).

C. *Hobbesian choice*. Amazingly, some writers have confused the obscure Thomas Hobson with his famous contemporary, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). The resulting *malapropism*, while increas-

ingly common since the early 1980s, is still beautifully grotesque:

• Henry A. Kissinger, “How to Live with a *Hobbesian Choice*” [read *Hobson's Choice*], *L.A. Times*, 11 June 1995, at M2. (Kissinger probably wasn't responsible for the headline.)


• “If you have to shoot yourself in the foot, should it be the right or the left? Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi faced that *Hobbesian choice* [read *Hobson's choice*] last week.” Malcolm Beith, “Decisions,” *Newsweek*, 24 Dec. 2001, at 8.

• “But there was a *Hobbesian choice* [read *Hobson's choice*] to be made: To get an hour-long 'Letterman,' *ABC* also would have to kill 'Nightline.'” Verne Gay, “Letterman's One-Night Stand,” *Newsday* (N.Y.), 8 July 2002, at B23.

**See double bobbles.**

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*Hobbesian choice* for *Hobson's choice*: Stage 1

Current ratio (*Hobson's choice* vs. *Hobbesian choice*): 41:1

**hoec**, vb., makes *hoeing* and *hoeable*. See *row to hoe*.

*hoi polloi* (= the common people, the masses). Because *hoi* in Greek means “the (plural);” the *hoi polloi* is technically redundant. But the three-word phrase has spread since about 1850, has become common, and ought to be accepted.

What shouldn't be accepted, though, is the growing misuse of *hoi polloi* to refer to the elite. This might occur through a false association with *hoity-toity* (= arrogant, haughty) or *high and mighty*—e.g.: “You may shell out $75 or $80 per person, sans tax and tip, for the Tribute experience, but, trust me: This is money very well spent. Which is why Tribune has been drawing Detroit power brokers and the *upper-end hoi polloi* [read, perhaps, *upper crust*] since it opened in April.” Jane Rayburn, “Restaurant Reviews,” *Detroit News*, 3 July 1997, at F5.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *the hoi polloi* for *hoi polloi*: Stage 5

2. *hoi polloi* in the sense “elite”: Stage 1

**hoist(ed)** with *one's own petar(d)*. This Shakespearean phrase, meaning “ruined by one's own scheming against others,” raises several editorial issues.

First, the actual line in *Hamlet* is *hoist with his own petard* (3.4.207). The form *petar* is an archaic variant of *petard*, meaning “an explosive device used in ancient warfare to blow open a gate or to breach a wall.” So *hoist with one's own petard* literally means to blow oneself into the air with one's own bomb. In modern print sources, *petard* greatly outnumbers *petar*—in journalism by a 66-to-1 ratio. So almost every writer who uses the phrase updates Shakespeare by using *petard*. Or more likely, they're relying on editions of Shakespeare in which the spelling has been modernized.

Second, the verb is ordinarily inflected *hoist > hoisted > hoisted*. But Shakespeare used *hoist* as the past participle for the archaic verb *hoise* (= to raise aloft). Many writers update *hoist* and make it *hoisted*; that is the usual form by a 2-to-1 ratio in modern journalistic sources. E.g.: “In these areas, feminists are in danger of being *hoisted by their own petard*.” Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Harassment and Politics Are Poor Bedfellows,” *Newsday* (N.Y.), 19 Jan. 1997, at A46. But in published books *hoist* predominates by a 7-to-1 ratio and has done so since 1850. Book authors and publishers have tended to treat *hoist with his own petard* as a set phrase.

Third, as illustrated in the quotation just above, there is a question about what preposition to use. Shakespeare's was *with*, not *by*, and that preference has consistently been reflected in book publishing since...
the early 19th century. But by now preponderates by a 4-to-1 ratio in journalism. Some writers mistakenly use on, possibly from the false notion that petard refers to a sword or lance. Whatever the reason for the mistake, on makes no literal sense—e.g.: “Mr. Family Values, the holier-than-thou little butterball, hoisted on [read with or by] his own petard.” Margery Eagan, “Naughty Newtie Samples America’s Moral Decay,” Boston Herald, 10 Aug. 1995, at 4.

In sum, almost every contemporary writer who uses this popular phrase misquotes Shakespeare in some way—and it would be pedantic to insist on hoist with his own petar. The usual renderings are hoist with his own petard and hoisted by his own petard. Some preference might be given to the first of those. See literary allusion.

hold out. See phrasal verbs.

hole in one. Pl. holes in one—not *hole in ones. See plurals (g).

holistic (= [1] of, relating to, or involving holism, i.e., the theory [esp. as applied in medicine] that organisms have an existence other than as the mere sum of their parts; or [2] relating to or concerned with complete systems rather than with their component parts) is so spelled. But the word is fairly often misspelled *wholistic, a blunder that began spreading in AmE in the 1930s and in BrE in the 1950s. E.g.: • “So Duke started the long journey toward recovery, sampling traditional veterinarian medicine, canine acupuncture, obedience techniques, wholistic [read holistic] medicine, and animal behavior modification.” Michelle Dally Johnston, “Behavior Modification: Problem Dogs Can Be Helped, but It Takes Time,” Denver Post, 18 Aug. 1997, at F1.
• “The Ursuline Sophia Center . . . provides local women with programs and services that foster wholistic [read holistic] growth and health in body, mind, heart and spirit.” Marcus Gleisser, “Nun Named Spiritual Director of Sisters of Charity Hospitals,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 2 Sept. 1997, at C2.
• “Barker is still highly motivated to lead her team to victories, but Barker has developed a much more wholistic [read holistic] approach to dealing with her players.” Bob Buttitta, “Coaching Calling,” Ventura County Star, 11 Feb. 2015, at C3.

holocaust (Gk. “burnt whole”) is one of our most hyperbolic words, beloved of jargonmongers and second-rate journalists. The historical sense from World War II, of course, is beyond question. Figurative applications of the term, however, are often questionable. Here it is used to no avail in reference to a scandal: “He would soon be engulfed in a holocaust of painful controversy that would maim several lives, wound hundreds of other people, and jostle the foundations of the fashion industry.” Inherent in the sense of the word, whether literal or figurative, is the idea of a complete burning; hence it may be used appropriately of fires, but not, for example, of floods.

Also, of course, it brings to most modern minds the Nazi campaign to exterminate European Jews during World War II. When referring to that ghastly series of atrocities, the word is capitalized. And because of its association with those acts of genocide, the word is generally seen as inappropriate when used in reference to deaths that are (1) not caused by malice and (2) not on a massive scale. E.g.: “History has a way of repeating itself, doesn’t it? I consider what happened in Chicago this summer—the poor dying in their own apartment buildings [from the heat wave]—America’s own Holocaust . . . Who is responsible for this inhumane negligence?” Kathy Arthur, “Heat and Negligence Are Killers,” Roanoke Times, 31 July 1995, at A4. (That terrible heat wave in Chicago caused nearly 200 deaths, but it shouldn’t have been called a holocaust—especially not with a capital H.) See etymology (c).

The knowledge gained from these conferences informs the holocaust in reference to death brought about by natural causes (e.g., the holocaust caused by the African famine): Stage 3 homage is best pronounced /hom-ij/. It is a silly (but quite common) pretension to omit the /h/ sound. Cf. herb & humble.

home in, not *home in, is the correct phrase. In the early 20th century, the metaphor referred to what homing pigeons do; by the early 20th century, it referred also to what aircraft and missiles do.

And by the late 20th century, some writers had begun mistaking the phrase by using the wrong verb, hone (= to sharpen) instead of home—e.g.: • “While Mr. Bradley homed [read homed] in on healthcare, Mr. Gore scolded his opponent as lacking a comprehensive education plan and for supporting a school voucher program when he was in the Senate.” Richard L. Berke, “Bradley, in Debate with Gore, Goes on the Attack,” N.Y. Times, 18 Dec. 1999, at A12.
• “The knowledge gained from these conferences informs the intervention and helps the instructional team hone [read home] in on the specific strategies that will help the


In modern print sources—both AmE and BrE—the collocation *homing in on the ~* predominates over *homing in on the ~* by a 2-to-1 margin. For more on these competing phrases, see pp. ix–x.

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*home in* for *home in*: Stage 4

**homely; homey.** These two words have undergone differentiation. *Homey* means “characteristic of a home; homelike.” *Homely* originally shared this sense, but it was gradually extended to mean “simple, unpretentious.” From there, the word was extended further to the sense that is prevalent in AmE (but not BrE) today: “unattractive in appearance; plain.” R.W. Burchfield points out that if *homely* refers to a British woman, it means that she is “adept at housekeeping, warm and welcome” (FMEU3 at 363). A *homely* American woman, however, is simply unattractive. *Homey* has been predominantly so spelled in AmE since about 1905 and in BrE since about 1915. Before that time, *homy* was the standard spelling.

**homeopathy** (= a therapeutic system, developed in the 18th century, premised on the idea that “like cures like,” that infinitesimally small doses of medicine are best, and that only one medicine should be taken at a time) is pronounced /hoh-mee-ah-pa-thee/. The corresponding adjective is *homeopathic* /hoh-mee-ah-path-ik/.

**homeowner.** One word.

**home page** (the first page encountered by a website visitor) is predominantly spelled as two words in both AmE and BrE—though unification seems inevitable. Cf. website & webpage.

**homestead, v.t.** The past tense is *homesteaded*, not *homestead*. Someone who homesteads is a *homesteader*.

**homey.** See homely.

**homicide** refers not to a crime (as is commonly thought), but to the killing of a person, whether lawful or unlawful. The word is frequently misspelled *homoide*. See *murder* (A) & -cide.

Further, the word is preferably pronounced /hom-ah-id/—not /hoom-ah-id/.

*hommos. See hummus.

**homocentric.** See anthropocentric.

**homogeneous; *homogenous.** Although strictly speaking these words are distinct, they have become thoroughly conflated through confused misuse and mispronunciation. The more common term is *homogeneous* /hoh-ma-jen-e-ahs/, which means “of uniform characteristics” <Japan is a more homogeneous society than the United States>. *Homos* /hoh-ma-jen-ee-ahs/, meanwhile, is a slightly archaic biological term describing genetically related tissue or organs. The terms have a long history of causing trouble. In 1934, W2 recorded *homogeneous* as a variant spelling of the technical term *homogenous*, but not vice versa. In 1961, W3 recorded each spelling as a variant of the other.

To further complicate matters, *homogeneous* is routinely mispronounced in four syllables, like the medical term, instead of five. Naturally, that only encourages the spelling confusion. Add to this the cognate four-syllable verb *homogenize* and its four-syllable participle that’s familiar on milk products: *homogenized*. Actually, it’s amazing that anyone uses the original spelling and pronunciation anymore.

Yet the two spellings appear in print with remarkable homogeneity: a March 2003 newspaper-database search found 774 instances of *homogenous* and 787 instances of *homogeneous* in the previous six months, including these from *The New York Times* during the same month:

• “The $425 million foundation . . . has financed such plans in Oregon and South Dakota, in communities that are smaller and more *homogenous* [read *homogeneous*].” Stephanie Strom, “A Withdrawn Aid Offer Leaves Yakima Bruised,” *N.Y. Times*, 6 Mar. 2003, at A20.

• “‘Beyond the Melting Pot’ . . . scoffed at ‘the notion that the intense and unprecedented mixture of ethnic and religious groups in American life was soon to be blended into a *homogenous* end product.’” Adam Clymer, “Daniel Patrick Moynihan Is Dead,” *N.Y. Times*, 27 Mar. 2003, at A1 (quoting Moynihan).

Writers are best advised to use *homogeneous*, and to pronounce all five syllables. It corresponds nicely to its antonym, *heterogeneous*. See heterogeneous.

The scientific community has moved on from the theft of its four-syllable term, *homogenous*, and today uses *homologous* instead.

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1. *homogenous* for the traditional *homogeneous*: Stage 3

   Current ratio (homogeneous vs. *homogenous*): 5:1

2. *homogenous* pronounced nontraditionally with four syllables: Stage 4

**homophobe, n.** This word, together with its cognates *homophobia* and *homophobic*, dates from the mid-1960s but didn’t become widespread until the 1980s. Some writers object to the words on etymological grounds—e.g.: “The gays’ most recent coinage is ‘homophobic’, their epithet for anyone they accuse of being against them. But that is an error . . . since it would not translate as anti-homosexual but . . . as ‘somebody fearing or disliking *himself*.’” Gary Jennings, *World of Words* 71 (1984). Jennings’s analysis, of course, depends on translating from Greek, in which the noun *homos* means “same.” If you instead interpret the prefix *homo* as an abbreviation for *homosexual*, then the term *homophobe* makes sense. Besides, it’s
surely better than *homosexualphobe, and it appears quite often in print—e.g.:

* "There is no doubt that [Patrick Buchanan] is a dangerous *homophobe; in more than one column, he argued that the people he calls the 'pederast proletariat' deserve to die of AIDS," Robert Scheer, "Why I Can't Stand Pat," *Playboy*, July 1992, at 47.

* "Now researchers armed with naughty movies and a device that measures male sexual arousal have collected evidence suggesting that many *homophobes may be sexually aroused by men." Richard Morin, "New Facts and Hot Stats from the Social Sciences," *Wash. Post*, 8 Sept. 1996, at C5.


See etymology (A).

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*homophone: Stage 5

**honey.** See homely; homey.

*honcho (= leader, chief, boss) is a slang term derived from the Japanese word hancho (lit., "squad leader"). The word typically appears in the set phrase head honcho; although some consider that phrase redundant, it is thoroughly established.

Journalists have recently begun using the word as a verb, the effect being breezy and voguish-sounding—e.g.:


As in the last example quoted, this verbal use is so vague that one can claim to have "honchedo" without ever being accused of claiming too much credit. See functional shift (d).

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*honcho as a verb: Stage 2

*hone in.** See home in.

*honeyed, not *honied, is the standard form in AmE and BrE alike—e.g.: "This is a mold that weakens the skins and allows the water to escape at the same time imparting an extraordinary *honeyed [read honeyed]


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honeyed misspelled *honied: Stage 1

Current ratio: 9:1

Hong Kong: Hongkong. The spelling preferred by the major dictionaries and stylebooks is the two-word *Hong Kong.* A few publications, such as *The Economist,* use the one-word form.

Current ratio: 48:1

Hong Konger; *Hon Kong; Hong Kongian.* The first is standard throughout the English-speaking world. The others are needless variants. See denizen labels.

*honied.** See honeyed.

*honorand.** See honoree.

honorarium. Pl. honoraria or honorariums. Though the latter has much to commend itself as a homegrown plural—and is *The New York Times* preferred plural—honoraria generally prevails in AmE and BrE alike. See plurals (b).

Current ratio: honoraria vs. honorariums: 5:1

*honoree; honorand.* In the 19th century, these two forms sprang up, both denoting a person who receives an honor. Both words are acceptably formed. The *OED* records only honorand, which predominates in BrE but appears only occasionally in AmE—e.g.: "But as President Harry S. Truman's newly appointed secretary of state, Marshall was one of 12 honorands at the following year's Commencement."

Current ratio: honorand more common than *honoree.* See needless variant because *honoree* has taken the field—e.g.:


* "The evening, hosted by the Arkansas Game and Fish Foundation, began with the Governor's Reception for the *honorees* and their families." Cary Jenkins, "100 Years on Record," *Ark. Democrat-Gaz.*, 30 Aug. 2015, at 40.

hoof. This word, pronounced either /huuf/ or /hoof/, has undergone a curious change in its plural. From 1700 to about 1975, the predominant form in English-language print sources was *hoofs,* analogous to *roofs.* But in the early 20th century, *hooves* emerged as a competing plural and became predominant first in BrE (1960) and later in AmE (1975). In modern journalistic sources, *hooves* is now five times more common; in book publishing, the two forms are about

Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxi, 1-4.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
hoof-and-mouth disease

equally common. Traditionalists will stick to *hoofs, just as they do to *roofs. See *roof & *plurals (c).

Current ratio (*hooves vs. *hoofs): 1:1:1


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*hooved for *hoofed: Stage 1
Current ratio (*hoofed vs. *hooved): 10:1

*hoop-de-do. See *whoop-de-do.

Hoosier; Indianan; *Indianian. The first is the standard name for someone who hails from or lives in Indiana. The second and third forms are fairly rare variants (the second less rare than the third). See *denizen labels.

Current ratio: 63:1.3:1

*hooved. See *hoofed.

hopeful, n. When used in the sense “a candidate,” this word smacks of journalese. It came into vogue especially after World War II. E.g.: • “Garcia and nine other City Council hopefuls [read candidates] are vying for an appointment that will fill the District 4 council seat left vacant after Cook was elected mayor on Nov. 7.” Roberto Hernandez, “10 Seeking Colton Council Seat,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 15 Dec. 2000, at B3.
• “When Fox turned over the very same Friday 10 p.m. hour to presidential hopefuls [read candidates] Al Gore and George W. Bush in October, only 2.9 million watched.” Lisa de Moraes, “For NBC, Julie Andrews Brings the Sound of Memory,” *Wash. Post*, 20 Dec. 2000, at C7.

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hopeful for candidate: Stage 4

hopefully. A. Generally. Four points about this word. First, it was widely condemned from the 1960s to the 1980s. Briefly, the objections are that (1) hopefully properly means “in a hopeful manner” and shouldn’t be used in the radically different sense “I hope” or “it is to be hoped”; (2) if the extended sense is accepted, the original sense will be forever lost; and (3) in constructions such as “Hopefully, it won’t rain this afternoon,” the writer illogically ascribes an emotion (hopefulness) to a nonperson. Hopefully isn’t analogous to curiously (= it is a curious fact that), fortunately (= it is a fortunate thing that), or sadly (= it is a sad fact that). How so? Unlike all those other sentence adverbs, hopefully can’t be resolved into any longer expression involving a corresponding adjective (hopeful)—but only the verb hope (e.g., it is to be hoped that or I hope that). See slipshod extension. Cf. *thankfully.

Second, whatever the merits of those arguments, the battle is now over. The AP Stylebook, considered the bible of U.S. newspaper copy desks, controversially accepted the “it is hoped” or “let’s hope” sense in its 2012 edition. Hopefully is now a part of AmE, and it has all but lost its traditional meaning—e.g.: • “Hopefully, other guests will join in the ensuing brawl.” Mike Royko, “Why Perot Sings Wedding Bell Blues,” *Dallas Morning News*, 31 Oct. 1992, at A31.
• “That way, if one of them gets stuck in traffic on the way to the ceremony, the other will—hopefully—still make it there in time.” Ed Brown, “The Most Glam Job in Accounting,” Fortune, 31 Mar. 1997, at 30.
• “Hopefully, one day we will all grow older.” Pamela DeCarlo, “Never Too Old for HIV Prevention,” *San Diego Union-Trib.*, 26 Nov. 1997, at B7.

Sometimes the word is genuinely ambiguous (if the original meaning is considered still alive)—e.g.: “Dave Krieg will take the snaps and, hopefully, hand off to RB Garrison Hearst.” Larry Weisman, “NFC East: Teams Aim at Dallas Dozen,” *USA Today*, 1 Sept. 1995, at E14. (Is Krieg hoping for the best when Hearst runs? Or is the writer hoping that Krieg won’t pass the football or hand off to another running back?) Indeed, the original meaning is alive, even if moribund—e.g.: • “But if one can’t very hopefully go about understanding the learning process, one can with more confidence try to figure out the thing learned, the grammar.” Graham Wilson, *Foreword, A Linguistics Reader* xxiii (Graham Wilson ed., 1967).

Third, some stalwarts continue to condemn the word, so that anyone using it in the new sense is likely to have a credibility problem with some readers—e.g.: • “Where we do not move forward, we regress. To be sure, it begins with slight lapses. Errors of usage—confusing ‘disinterest’ with ‘uninterest,’ using ‘hopefully’ for ‘it is to be hoped’—and then, with astonishing swiftness, the rot sets in.” Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Canon Confidante,” *N.Y. Times*, at 1.
• “In the 1969 Usage Panel survey [hopefully] was acceptable to 44 percent of the Panel; in the most recent survey it was acceptable to only 27 percent.” *AHD3* at 871.
• “Professor Michael Dummett, an Oxford logician, condemns the new usage of hopefully because only a person can be hopeful, and in many such cases there is nobody around in the sentence to be hopeful.” “Christopher Howse’s Grammar School Lesson XXVII,” *Daily Telegraph*, 11 Dec. 1996, at 21.
• “Although various adverbs may be used to modify entire clauses, hopefully isn’t among them—yet. I only hope I won’t have to concede that it is until I’m an old, old woman.” Barbara Wallraff, *Word Court* 120 (2000).

Fourth, though the controversy swirling around this word has subsided, it is now a skunked term. Avoid it in all senses if you’re concerned with your credibility: if you use it in the traditional way, many readers will think it odd; if you use it in the newish way, a few readers will tacitly tut-tut you.

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*Hopefully* as a sentence adverb: Stage 4

| Current ratio |  (I hope it won’t vs. Hopefully it won’t): 17:1 |

**B. History.** Throughout the late 20th century, the common wisdom was that the use of hopefully as a sentence adverb began sometime around the early 1930s. Then, in 1999, the lexicographic scholar Fred R. Shapiro, using computer-assisted research, traced it back to Cotton Mather’s 1702 book, *Magnalia Christi Americana,* in this sentence: “Chronical diseases, which evidently threaten his Life, might hopefully be relieved by his removal” (p. 529). The evidence then skips to 1851, and then to the 1930s. See Fred R. Shapiro, “Earlier Computer-Assisted Evidence on the Emergence of Hopefully as a Sentence Adverb,” *75 Am. Speech* 439 (1999).

**Horde.** See hoard.

**Horehound** (= a minty herb sometimes used for medicinal purposes) has always been the standard spelling. *Hoard* is a variant. Current ratio: 10:1

**Horns of a dilemma.** See dilemma.

**Horrific; horrendous; horrible; horrid.** The words are listed in decreasing degree of horror.

**Hors d’oeuvre.** Although this noun serves as both the diminutive and the plural in French, the anglicized plural *hors d’oeuvres* became standard in English during the 20th century. See plurals (b) & spelling (a).

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*Hors d’oeuvres* as a plural of *hors d’oeuvre*: Stage 5

| Current ratio | (horsy face vs. *horsy* face): 1.5:1 |

**Hospitable** is traditionally pronounced /hos-pit-a-bal/, though /hah-spit-a-bal/ is now widespread and acceptable. Cf. inhospitable.

**Hostler; ostler.** *Hostler* (= [1] someone who takes care of horses or mules, esp. at an inn or stable; or [2] someone who moves a railroad engine or a truck at the end of a trip) is so spelled in AmE—and has been, predominantly, since about 1850. The BrE spelling has always been *ostler*—representing the mute h- that has typified the word’s pronunciation in BrE beginning in Middle English. Sense 2 does not apply in BrE.

**House; home.** In the best usage, the structure is always called a *house.* So it is not good form to speak of a recently built *home* that hasn’t yet been sold. Nor should one point to the building and call it *one’s home:* it’s a *house* except in non-U speech. (See class distinctions.) The word *home* connotes familial ties. The plural *houses* should be pronounced /hauz-әz/, not /haws-әz/.

**Houseful.** Pl. housefuls. See plurals (g).

**Hove.** See *heave.*

**Hovel (= a small dirty habitation) is preferably pronounced /hov-әl/ to rhyme with *shovel*—not /hoh-val/ or /hah-val/. For a hovel in the mountains, see *eyrie.*

**Hover, vb., pronounced /hav-ә/, is surprisingly often mispronounced /hoh-var/.

**Howbeit.** This literary word, a true archaism, means “nevertheless” and begins principal clauses—e.g.: “Bryan suspects Megan of murder but is *loathe* [read *loath*] to arrest her; there are simply not enough facts. *Howbeit* there are rumors aplenty.” Mary Starr, “Historic [read Historical] Tome Captures Your Attention,” *Telegraph Herald* (Dubuque), 18 Feb. 2001, at E6. (For the reason for changing *loathe* to *loathe*, see *loathe.* See also *historical* (A).) But it can always be replaced by some better, more modern word, such as *still* or *nevertheless.* And when it is used—almost always pretentiously—it’s usually the wrong word. That is, modern writers who use it tend to put it into a subordinate clause and wrongly make it equivalent to *albeit,* *though,* or some other word—e.g.: “Everyone in Texas had come from somewhere else, *howbeit* [read *albeit* or *though*] several generations removed.” Uladine Harrison McIntyre, “Demise of the Stairs of Bedias,” *Houston Chron.*, 29 Mar. 1992, Tex. Mag. §, at 4.

“…this is a form of isolationism, *howbeit* [read *albeit* or *though*] selective.” Robert A. Seiple, “Peace Is an Integral Part of the Fight Against Hunger,” *Seattle Times*, 28 Nov. 1996, at B7.


Cf. *albeit.*

**Language-Change Index**

*Howbeit* for *though*: Stage 2

**How come** is a casualism for *why.* Although it has an ancient lineage, avoid it in serious writing.

Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

| Stage 1 | Rejected |
| Stage 2 | Widely shunned |
| Stage 3 | Widespread but... |
| Stage 4 | Ubiquitous but... |
| Stage 5 | Fully accepted |

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
how dare. See dare (f).

however. A. Beginning Sentences with. It seems everyone has heard that sentences should not begin with this word—not, that is, when a contrast is intended. But doing so isn’t a grammatical error; it’s merely a stylistic lapse, the word But or Yet ordinarily being much preferable. (See but (A).) The reason is that However—three syllables followed by a comma—is a ponderous way of introducing a contrast, and it leads to unenunciated sentences. E.g.: • “However, Gross forced third baseman Alan Andrews to pop up,” Timothy Sullivan, “Dave Kolar, Manager of the Ambridge-Baden Economy,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 8 July 1997, at D3. (Better: But Gross forced third baseman Alan Andrews . . . .)

• “However, Nets sources report, when Keith Van Horn got into a tussle with Utah’s Karl Malone during a preseason game, Williams stepped in and defended the honor—and the game—of his rookie teammate.” Jackie MacMullan, “No. 7 New Jersey Nets,” Sports Illustrated, 10 Nov. 1997, at 126. (Better: But Nets sources report that when Keith Van Horn . . . .)

• “However, these small issues should not take away from what is a detailed, and intellectually stimulating collection.” Ni Bhroimeil Una, “Identity and Governance,” Irish Lit. Supp., Fall 2015, at 9. (Better: But these small issues . . . .)

But when used in the sense “in whatever way” or “to whatever extent,” however (not followed by a comma) is unimpeachable at the beginning of a sentence. E.g.: “However we manage to perform the feat of perceiving productive relationship, we may be thankful that we can.” Max Black, The Labyrinth of Language 67 (1968). 1700 ratio (But vs. However as sentence-starter): 28:1

1800 ratio: 19:1

1900 ratio: 24:1

2008 ratio: 3:1

B. Emphasizing Certain Words. Assuming that however isn’t put at the front of a sentence, the word has the effect of emphasizing whatever precedes it. If you say, “Jane, however, wasn’t able to make the trip,” you’re presumably contrasting Jane with others who were able to go. But if the story is about Jane alone, and the fact that she had been hoping to make a trip, however, there wasn’t a slot available.” One cure, of course, is a semicolon after trip. But the better cure is usually to give the sentence an initial Although-clause: “Although I wanted to go on the trip, there wasn’t a slot available.”

hub-and-spoke, adj. See airlines.

hue. See hew (A).

hue and cry = (1) formerly, a general call to citizens to chase down and capture a suspected criminal; or (2) commonly, a general clamor or uproar. Hue here is used in a sense (= an outcry) that is now obsolete except in this set phrase.

The phrase is occasionally misrendered *hew and cry—e.g.: • “It would not be surprising to see airlines charge Coach passengers for checking their bags. Or at least trial balloon it. The hew and cry [read hue and cry] would be loud, but you can never tell what carriers will do.” Alfred Borcover, “Is Checked Baggage Going the Way of the Free Lunch?” Chicago Trib., 29 Apr. 2007, Travel §, at 2.


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*hue and cry for hue and cry: Stage 1

Current ratio (hue and cry vs. *hew and cry): 253:1

human, n. Purists long objected to human as a shortened form of human being, but today it’s so pervasive—even in formal writing—that it should be accepted as standard. References to humans as opposed to human beings became predominant in AmE about 1978 and in BrE about 1985.

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human as a noun equivalent to human being: Stage 5

humankind; mankind. Humankind, a 17th-century creation, is unexceptionable, while mankind is, to many people, a sexist word. The prudent writer will therefore resort to humankind—e.g.: “They are so convinced of its authenticity and importance to humankind that they have created the Turin Shroud Center, a research facility that mixes hard science and deep faith.” Dick Kreck, “105 Degrees West Longitude,” Denver Post, 30 Nov. 1997, at 4. See sexism (c) & womankind.

Current ratio (mankind vs. humankind): 4:1

humaness. So spelled—not *humaness. But the misspelling is fairly common—e.g.: “Humaness [read restrict our attention to the years before 1989, the year of reunification.)

D. Playing a Role in Run-On Sentences. Like a few other adverbs—notably therefore and otherwise—however often plays a role in run-on sentences. These sentences don’t appear nearly as often in print as they do in informal writing, student papers, and the like. They read something like this: “I wanted to go on the trip, however, there wasn’t a slot available.” One cure, of course, is a semicolon after trip. But the better cure is usually to give the sentence an initial Although-clause: “Although I wanted to go on the trip, there wasn’t a slot available.”

See humankind (c).
**humble** is now preferably pronounced with the h-sounded: /hәm-bәl/. But the pronunciation without an aspirated h- has long been common. In fact, humble was recognized as having a silent h- as early as the 17th century: “In Latin [letters] are to be pronounced as often as they are written: and in particular the letter h, as in haeres, homo, humilis, though it be not sounded in the English words, as in heir, honour, humble.” Elisha Coles, *Syncrisis* 2 (1677).

In Humble, Texas (near Houston), the residents all say /әm-bәl/. That pronunciation has led local writers to use an before the proper name—e.g.: “West Brook got on the board early in the second quarter following an Humble fumble.” Brian McTaggart, “Ambres, West Brook Stun No. 1 Humble,” *Houston Chron.*, 16 Nov. 1997, at 19. Most out-of-town readers would probably find that phrase odd-looking. But locals know better—and proudly so. See a (A). Cf. *herb* & *homage*.

**hummus; *hommos*. The standard spelling for this paste of ground chickpeas and tahini has long been *hummus*. It first appeared in 19th-century English as the anglicized Arabic word for chickpea. The alternative spelling, *hommos*, was equally common until 1880, but *hummus* predominates today by a 549-to-1 ratio. There are at least 18 more variant spellings, but all are rare. The only one worth mentioning is *humus*, which is the modern Turkish spelling.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 549:1

**hundred** /ha-n-drid/ is sometimes mispronounced /ha-n-drit/ or /ha-nard/. See PRONUNCIATION (B).

**hung**. See *hanged*.

**hurl; hurdle; hurdle, vb. To *hurl* (/hәrl/) is (1) to throw or fling mightily *hurl a javelin*, (2) to speak (epithets, etc.) vehemently *hurl abuse*, or (3) to vomit *hurled three times last night*. Sense 3 is * slang. To *hurtle* (/hәrl/) is to move or make something else move with great velocity, especially in a reckless or uncontrolled manner and often with a collision resulting *the car hurtled down the street, scraping vehicles parked on both sides* <the symphony had already begun as the usher hurtled us to our seats>. To *hurtle* (/hәrl/) is (1) to jump over (an obstacle) while running or jogging *he hurled two suitcases on his way to the airline’s gate*, or (2) to overcome (difficulties, etc.) *<with some deft politicking, she hurled opposition to the proposal>*. Of course, *hurtle* is also (and primarily) a noun denoting an obstacle or barrier.

The *OED* notes that *hurtle* is “sometimes confused with *hurl*,” distinguishing the two in this way: “the essential notion in *hurtle* is that of forcible collision, in *hurl* that of forcible projection.” A more appropriate distinction today is that *hurl* denotes a greater degree of separation between the propelling force and the thing propelled than *hurtle* does: you *hurl* a discus but *hurtle* down the hallway.

Although collision was an essential part of *hurtle*’s original meaning (dating from the 13th century), the word took on a collisionless sense in the early 16th century. Today the idea of violent impact depends largely on the preposition that follows the verb: *against, into, or together* denotes a collision *hurtled against [or into] a tree* <the knights hurtled their steeds together>, whereas *along, by, down, past, and up* tend to denote collisionless rushing *the car hurtled by [or past] the crowd* <the horse hurtled along [or down or up] the road* <the plane hurtled up into its flight pattern>.

The essential idea of *hurtle* is leaping over obstacles. Sometimes the word is misused for *hurtle*—e.g.:  
- “You have people *hurdling* [read *hurling*] down the road in machines that weigh several tons.” Julie M. King, *Post-Standard* (Syracuse), 19 Dec. 2002, at 2.

The opposite error, *hurtle* for *hurtle*, is somewhat less common but does occur—e.g.:  
- “It was awkward hearing the applause and congratulations, as if I had *hurt* [read *hurtled*] a major obstacle.” Mary Awosika, “Don’t Cry Out Loud,” *Sarasota Herald-Trib.*, 6 July 2001, at 12.

**hurricane; typhoon; cyclone.** All three terms refer to massively destructive storms that form over oceans and generate high winds. *Hurricane* is the term used by meteorologists for North America, the Caribbean, Hawaii, and the northeastern Pacific Ocean. *Typhoon* is used for storms in Asia, from the northwestern Pacific down to the China Sea. *Cyclone* is the most common term used for storms in the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

**hurt > hurt > hurt.** The past form which has been nonstandard from the 18th century, appears

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most frequently in quotations from dialectal speakers—e.g.: “She hurted me to the point where I just walked up to her and shanked her probably like six, seven times,” said Bell, then 24, who was charged with murder for the July 2000 stabbing of his mother, Netta.” Ken Armstrong, Steve Mills & Maurice Posley, “Coercive and Illegal Tactics Torpedo Scores of Cook County Murder Cases,” Chicago Trib., 16 Dec. 2001, at C1. For more on nonstandard tense forms, see dialect.

Current ratio (had hurt vs. *had hurted): 2,656:1

hurtle. See hurl.

*hutzpa(h). See chutzpah.

huzza, an exclamation of joy or approval for formal occasions, has been the predominant spelling since the late 1600s. *Huzzah is a variant. Of course, hurrah and hurray are more common—and much less formal. Current ratio (huzza vs. *huzzah): 2:1

HYBRIDS, or words composed of morphemes from different languages (such as teleprinter [Gk. tele- + OF preint]), became quite common in the 20th century. In fact, they have existed for a very long time in English: grandfather (dating from the 15th century) has a French prefix and an English root; bicycle (dating from the mid-19th century) has a Latin prefix and a Greek root. One occasionally finds hybrids criticized in older literature—e.g.:

- “Ize and ist are Greek terminations, and cannot properly be added to Anglo-Saxon words. Ist is the substantive form, ize the verbal.’ Jeepardize is one of the monsters made by adding ize to an English verb. Jeepardize means to put in peril—and jeepardize could mean no more . . . . So, also, is the Anglo-Saxon er (sign of the doer of a thing) ‘incorrectly affixed to such words as photograph and telegraph’; the proper termination is ist: photographist, telegraphist, the same as paragraph–paragraphist. Geographer and biographer are exceptions firmly fixed in the language.” Ralcy Husted Bell, The Worth of Words 149–50 (1902).

- “A- (not) is Greek; moral is Latin. It is at least desirable that in making new words the two languages should not be mixed.” H.W. Fowler & E.G. Fowler, The King’s English 50 (3d ed. 1930).

- “Neologisms . . . should be formed with some regard to etymological decency; the marriage of a so very English word as swim with a so very Greek vocable stud strikes one as an uneasily miscellaneity.” Eric Partridge, U& A at 202.

Today, though, only a few Classics professors object. As an American lexicographer once observed, “Not many people care whether a word has Greek and Latin elements mixed in it.” Mitford Mathews, American Words 93 (1959). Perhaps this is because of our increasing ignorance of Classical tongues. Whatever the cause, though, modern neologists have little regard for the morphological integrity of the words they coin.

Virtually all the hybrids condemned by H.W. Fowler in FMEU1 (e.g., amoral, bureaucracy, cablegram, climactic, coastal, coloration, gullible, pacifist, racial, speedometer) are now passed over without mention even by those who consider themselves purists. Other hybrids that Fowler didn’t mention also fall into this class:

| antedate | meritocracy |
| antibody | merriment |
| aqualung | monorail |
| automobile | naturopathy |
| biocide | postwar |
| clausrophobia | retrofit |
| ecocide | riddance |
| epidural | semiyearly |
| likable | telegenic |
| lumpectomy | television |
| megaton | tranship |

We also have our own fringe hybrids: botheration, raticide, scattering, and monokini (the last being a morphological deformity as well).

One rarely hears complaints about hybrids, though Mario Pei once called the legal term venireman a product of “the worst kind of hybridization (. . . half Latin, half Anglo-Saxon).” Words in Sheep’s Clothing 83 (1969). The nonexistent veniremember, of course, solves that problem. See venireman.

Other hybrids are widely accepted. Breathalyzer (formerly drunkometer) has become standard, although in 1965 Ernest Gowers wrote that the term was “stillborn, it may be hoped” (FMEU2 at 253). Creedal is a near-commonplace hybrid. And Fowler may not be resting in peace.

hygienic (= [1] of, relating to, or involving healthfulness or cleanliness; or [2] healthful) is often misspelled *hygenic—e.g.: “But that, Mr. Deedrick subsequently told Ms. Clark, could stem from the different hygienic [read hygienic] conditions Mr. Simpson has encountered in jail, or even the different brand of shampoo he was using.” David Margolick, “After 92 Days of Testimony, Simpson Prosecution Rests,” N.Y. Times, 7 July 1995, at A1, A12.

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hygienic missspelled *hygenic: Stage 1

hymeneal; hymenal; hymenial. Though related etymologically, these words have taken on quite distinct senses. Hymeneal = of, relating to, or involving marriage. E.g.: “In the evening, the party streamed off to the medieval hilltop town of Asolo, . . . along whose streets groups of men spontaneously and undrunk-enly came together to sing hymeneal numbers to the couple.” Alex Hamilton, “Italy: The Wedding Procession,” Guardian, 3 June 1995, at 56. Hymenal = of, relating to, or involving the hymen. E.g.: “If the pain is superficial, it might be caused by hymenal strands or lack of vaginal lubrication.” Allan Bruckheim, “Health Line,” Chicago Trib., 23 Dec. 1996, at C7. Hymenial = of, relating to, or involving the superficial layer of spore-producing cells in fungi. See differentiation.

HYPALLAGE /hɪ-pəl-æ-o-j/,

known also as the transferred epithet, is a figure of speech in which the proper subject is displaced by what would logically be the object (if it were named directly). Usually hypallage
is a mere idiomatic curiosity. It has a distinguished lineage—a famous example being Shakespeare's line from *Julius Caesar*: "This was the most unkindest cut of all" (3.2.183). It was not the cut that was unkind, but rather the cutter. Hence the object has become the subject.

In any number of everyday phrases, an adjective logically modifies not the noun actually supplied, but an implied one—e.g.: angry fight black colleges cruel view disgruntled complaints drunken parties elementary classroom English-speaking countries feminine napkin gay marriage Greek neighborhood handicapped parking hasty retreat healthy foods humble opinion nondrowsy cold medicine overhead projector permanent marker provincial attitude unfair criticisms vulnerable period well-educated home

Generally, this figure of speech is harmless, even convenient. Pedants who complain about almost any phrase like the ones listed ("But the marker itself isn't permanent, is it?") are simply parading their own pedantry. Perhaps the phrase that most commonly gives rise to spurious objections is *The book says . . . —which is perfectly good English.***

**hyperbaric.** See hyperbolic (b).

**hyperbola** /hɪ-pər-bə-lə/ (= in geometry, a curved line that moves so that the difference of its distances from two fixed points is constant) has formed the standard plural **hyperbolas** since the 18th century—the classical plural *hyperbola* (/hɪ-pər-bə-lə/) being both a variant and an unfortunate homophone of **hyperbole**. Current ratio (hyperbola vs. *hyperbola*): 5:1

**HYPERBOLE.** See overstatement.

**hyperbolic. A. Two Meanings.** It's no exaggeration to say that this word has two remarkably different meanings, one rooted in the abandon of rhetoric and another in the rigors of mathematics. In fact, though, it is essentially two separate adjectives. The more common by far answers to **hyperbole** (= the rhetorical device of deliberate overstatement)—e.g.: "He has written a book . . . that may never be confused with, say, 'War and Peace' or 'Wuthering Heights', but it's a book with a more provocative title—including a hyperbolic exclamation point—'Perfect I'm Not!'" Ira Berkow, "Colorful Pitcher, but Not a Stand-Up Guy," *N.Y. Times*, 3 Mar. 2003, at D3. The other one answers to **hyperbola** (= in geometry, a pair of open and infinite curves mirrored about their vertices)—e.g.: "Against notable losses in recent years, such as famed architect I.M. Pei's hyperbolic paraboloid when the Adam's Mark hotel expanded in 1997 and Curriagan Hall, conference attendees were generally optimistic." J. Sebastian Sinisi, "State's Preservationists See Reasons for Optimism," *Denver Post*, 11 Feb. 2003, at F9.

**B. And hyperbaric.** Hyperbolic is sometimes mistakenly used in place of **hyperbaric** (= of, relating to, or involving a pressurized chamber used in scientific experiments and medical treatment)—an odd error: "Hyperbolic [read Hyperbaric] oxygen chambers have been used successfully by several National Hockey League clubs, and that has not gone unnoticed in the National Football League." Vinny DiTrani, "High-Tech Rush for Giants?" *Record* (N.J.), 12 June 1995, at S2.

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hyperbolic misused for hyperbaric: Stage 1
Current ratio (hyperbaric oxygen vs. *hyperbolic oxygen*): 319:1

**C. And *hyperbolical*.** The standard adjective has been hyperbolic since the late 19th century—not *hyperbolical*.

**HYPERCORRECTION.** Sometimes people strive to abide by the strictest etiquette, but in the process behave inappropriately. The very motivations that result in this irony can play havoc with the language: a person will strive for a correct linguistic form but instead fall into error. Linguists call this phenomenon "hypercorrection"—a common shortcoming.

This foible can have several causes. Often, it results from an attempt to avoid what the writer wrongly supposes to be a grammatical error. (See superstitions.) At other times, it results from an incomplete grasp of a foreign grammar, coupled with an attempt to conform to that grammar. Yet again, it sometimes results from a misplaced sense of logic overriding a well-established idiom. A few of the most common manifestations are enumerated below.

**A. False Latin Plurals.** One with a smattering of Latin learns that, in that language, most nouns ending in -us have a plural ending in -i: *genius* forms *genii*, *nimbus* forms *nimbi*, *syllabus* forms *syllabi*, *terminus* forms *termini*, and so on. The trouble is that not all of them do end in -i, so traps abound for those trying to show off their sketchy knowledge of Latin:

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Hypercorrection

A. *Between you and I. Some people learn a thing or two about pronoun cases, but little more. They learn, for example, that it is incorrect to say It is me or *Me and Jane are going to school now. (See it is I.) But this knowledge puts them on tenterhooks: through the logical fallacy known as "hasty generalization," they come to fear that something is amiss with the word me—that perhaps it's safer to stick to I. They therefore start using I even when the objective case is called for: "She had the biggest surprise for Blair and I [read me]." / "Please won't you keep this between you and I [read me]." These are gross linguistic gaffes, but it is perniciously surprising how many otherwise educated speakers commit them. See between (c) & pronouns (b).

Many writers and speakers try to avoid the problem by resorting to myself, but that is hardly an improvement. See myself.

C. Number Problems. Sometimes, in the quest for correctness, writers let their sense of grammar override long-established idioms. They may write, for example, *A number of people was there, when the correct form is A number of people were there. Or they will write, *A handful of problems arises from that approach, instead of A handful of problems arise from that approach. For more on these correct but "antigrammatical" constructions, see synesis & number of.

D. Redundantly Formed Adverbs. The forms doubtlessly, much, and thus are adverbs, yet some writers overcompensate by adding -ly, thereby forming barbarisms: *doubtlessly, *muchly, and *thusly. See adverbs (c).

E. As for like. When writers fear using like as a conjunction, they sometimes fail to use it when it would function appropriately as a preposition or adverb. Thus She sings like a bird becomes *She sings as a bird. But the latter sentence sounds as if it is explaining the capacity in which she sings. The hypercorrection, then, results in a miscue. See like (c).

F. Whom for who. Perhaps writers should get points for trying, but those who don't know how to use whom should abstain in questionable contexts. That is, against whom, for whom, and the like may generally be instances in which the writer knows to choose whom. But things can get moderately tricky—e.g.: "In 'An Independent Woman,' Barbara is confronted by an African-American burglar, whom [read who] she realizes is well-educated but desperate." Jocelyn McClurg, "At 82, Fast Has Slowed but Hasn't Stopped as a Writer," Fresno Bee, 3 Aug. 1997, at G2. Although whom in that sentence may seem to be the object of realizes, in fact it is the subject of the verb is. See whom & pronouns (b).

G. Unsplit Infinitives Causing Miscues. Writers who have given in to the most widespread of superstitions—or who believe that most of the readers have done so—avoid all split infinitives. They should at least avoid introducing unclear modifiers into their prose. But many writers do introduce them, and the result is often a miscue or ambiguity—e.g.: "Each is trying subtly to exert his or her influence over the other." Mark H. McCormack, What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School 26 (1984). In that sentence, does subtly modify the participle trying or the infinitive to exert? Because we cannot tell, the sentence needs to be revised in any of the following ways: (1) Each is subtly trying to exert his or her influence over the other, (2) Each is trying to exert his or her influence subtly over the other, (3) Each is trying to subtly exert his or her influence over the other, or (4) Each is trying to exert his or her subtle influence over the other. See split infinitives.

H. Unsplit Verb Phrases. A surprising number of writers believe that it's a mistake to put an adverb in the midst of a verb phrase. The surprise is on them: every language authority who addresses the question holds just the opposite view—that the adverb generally belongs in the midst of a verb phrase. (See adverbs (a).) The canard to the contrary frequently causes awkwardness and artificiality—e.g.: "I soon will be calling you." (Read: I will soon be calling you.) See superstitions (c).

I. Prepositions Moved from the Ends of Sentences. "That is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put," said Winston Churchill, mocking the priggishness that causes some writers and speakers to avoid ending with a preposition. See prepositions (b) & superstitions (a).

J. Borrowed Articles for Borrowed Nouns. When a naturalized or quasi-naturalized foreignism appears, the surrounding words—with a few exceptions, such as hoi polloi—should be English. So one refers to finding the mot juste, preferably not *finding le mot juste. But see hoi polloi.

K. Overrefined Pronunciation. Some foreignisms acquire anglicized pronunciations. For example, in AmE lingerie is pronounced in a way that the French would consider utterly barbarous: /lon-jo-ray/, as opposed to /la[n]-zhree/. (See lingerie.) But for a native speaker of AmE to use the latter pronunciation sounds foolish. Another French word that gives some AmE speakers trouble is concierge: it should be pronounced /kon-see-erzh/, not /kon-see-er/. See concierge.

Similarly, American and British printers refer to the typefaces without “feet” (small projections coming off the straight lines) as sans serif /sans ser-i/, not /sahnz sa-reef/. The latter pronunciation may show a supposed familiarity with the French language (though serif is Dutch), but it betrays an unfamiliarity both with publishing and with the English language.

Even native-English words can cause problems. The word often, for example, preferably has a silent -t-, yet
some speakers (unnaturally) pronounce it because of the spelling. The next logical step would be to pronounce administration /ad-min-ə-tər-ee/ann/, and all other words with the -tion suffix similarly. See pronunciation (a) & often (a).

**hypertension** is medical jargon for high blood pressure. Because of the confusing terminology, some writers confound hypertension with nervous tension, as those in medicine know: “Hypertension and ‘nervous tension’ are not the same thing. Some people can feel very tense and have normal blood pressure, and others can feel quite relaxed and have high blood pressure.” “Hypertension,” HealthTips, Dec. 1992, at 45.

**hyphenate; hyphen**, vb.; *hyphenize. Hyphenate had become the standard verb in AmE by 1900 and in BrE by 1940. In BrE, *hyphen* is a variant. *Hyphen* is a needlessly variant in both AmE and BrE—except perhaps in the sense analogous to *hyphenization* described in the immediately following entry.

Current ratio (hyphenated vs. hyphenized): 1,446:33:1

**hyphenation; hyphenization. Hyphenation is the standard form for the literal use of hyphens to separate words into syllables—e.g.: “Since the demise of typewriters and the universal use of computers in the newsroom, *hyphenization* [read hyphenation] is done automatically by the computer.” Jean Otto, “’Van’ or ’Von?’” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 1 Jan. 1995, at A106.

Although *hyphenization*, dating from the mid-19th century, has traditionally been just a needlessly variant of *hyphenation*, some degree of differentiation now appears to be emerging: increasingly, the word denotes the designation of ethnic origins by using compound forms such as *African-American, Asian-American, Mexican-American*, and the like. With its -ize suffix, *hyphenization* carries negative connotations of divisiveness—e.g.: • “While she sometimes describes herself as Indo-American, Mukherjee deplores the ghettos of ethnic hyphenization.” John Habich, “Mukherjee Is Inspired by Struggles of Immigration,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 24 Mar. 2002, at E1.

• “They sometimes face school boards or parents who worry that lessons that used to focus on a unified sense of ‘America’ are falling by the wayside in an era of *hyphenization*.” Stacy A. Teicher, “Opening the Book on Race,” Christian Science Monitor, 18 June 2002, Features §, at 14.

Inconsistently enough, though, we use the term *hyphenated Americans*, dating from the late 19th century—not *hyphenized Americans*.

**hyphenize. See hyphenate.**

**HYPHENS. See punctuation (i) & phrasal adjectives.**

**hypothesize** is not, as some believe, a synonym of *hypothecate* (= to make an hypothesis, i.e., a proposition put forward for discussion). *Hypothenese* is a legal term meaning “to pledge (property) without delivery of title or possession.”

President George H.W. Bush occasionally misused *hypothesize*—e.g.:

• “So I’m not going to speculate or *hypothesize* [read *hypothecate*] beyond that. I want to see them out of...
anyone asks a server for a glass of /isd tʃi/. But despite this indistinct pronunciation, iced tea shows little evidence of following the progression of *iced cream to ice cream. See ADJECTIVES (F). Cf. fine-toothed comb, skim milk & stained glass.

Current ratio: 8:1

-ics. It can sometimes be difficult to decide whether to use a singular or plural verb with words such as acoustics, athletics, and politics. If a word is used as the name of an academic discipline, it is singular <linguistics is the study of human languages>. Otherwise, it is plural <this theater's acoustics are terrible>. A good clue that a plural verb is needed is the presence of a pronoun, article, or possessive before the -ics word <statistics guides decision-making> <your statistics are misleading>.

ID; I.D. The first is preferable for this shortened form of identification. In the second, the periods should indicate that the initials f and D each stand for something. But they don't: everybody knows that I.D. is simply shorthand. Given the illogic of the periods—and the trend in AmE away from periods in abbreviations—the form ID is better. See ABBREVIATIONS (A).

As an abbreviation with periods (I.D.), it can mean many different things to different people, such as "intradermal" to the dermatologist, "inside diameter" to the physiologist, "infective dose" to the bacteriologist—and those are just the medical senses.

id. See ibid.

I'd better; I better. See better (A).

ideal. See ADJECTIVES (B) & idyll (B).

*ideology. See ideology.

identical takes either with or to. Historically, with has been considered better because one has identity with something or someone, not to it. Identical to was not widely used until the mid-20th century. The OED's illustrative examples contain only the phrase identical with. But since the mid-1970s in AmE and the mid-1980s in BrE, identical to has been the predominant form in print sources.
The phrase *same identical*—more often heard than seen—is redundant. E.g.:  
- “No one who has not traveled the same identical [read same] road could possibly know the mountains that were climbed, the blood, sweat and tears and the fear like punches in the gut in a barrage in which few professional fighters could or would tolerate.” Patricia Tedesco, “Utica Community Was There When the Times Were Tough,” Observer-Dispatch (Utica, N.Y.), 6 Aug. 2015, at A7.  

**Language-Change Index**  
Identical to for identical with: Stage 5  
Current ratio (to vs. with): 2:1

**Identify**  
1) to treat as or consider identical <he identified his parents’ interests with his own>; 2) to ascertain or demonstrate what something or who someone is <the building in the photograph has not yet been identified>; 3) to associate or affiliate with <she has never been identified with the impressionist school>; 4) to consider (oneself) as being associated or affiliated with <nevertheless, she identified herself with the impressionists>; or 5) to understand sympathetically or intuitively, esp. through experience. Sense 5 is often disapproved of because when used in that way, *identify* is a vogue word—more specifically, a pop-psychology casualism—bearing a nontraditional sense. Sometimes it is followed by *with,* sometimes not—e.g.:  
- With: “Let’s face it, this is one governmental service that the people can identify closely with.” *Superior Court to Soon Appear No Longer a Mirage,* Ariz. Republic, 2 June 2001, at 2.  
- With: “While many parents haven’t suffered as many difficulties as Cheever has, most can identify with the ‘accidental’ manner in which she has gained some important insights.” Rosemary Herbert, “Growing Pains,” Boston Herald, 10 June 2001, at 51.  
- No with: “We’ve all experienced workplace politics . . . . It’s duplicity and hardball. It’s serious emotions. We can identify.” Diana Lockwood, “Feeling Good,” Columbus Dispatch, 6 June 2001, at F2 (quoting Mark Burnett, producer of the television series Survivor).  

In each of those sentences, a more conservative writer (or, in the final example, a more conservative speaker) would probably have used the verb *understand* in place of *identify* with or *identify*.

Here the cant phrase is inappropriately used in reference to early-19th-century historical figures: “In the end, the difference was that Jefferson identified with Virginia while Marshall identified with the United States.” J. Wade Gilley, “University’s Namesake Was Great for Many Reasons,” Charleston Gaz., 3 Feb. 1997, at A5. Neither Jefferson nor Marshall would have identified with writing like that. Cf. *relate to.*  

**Language-Change Index**  
Identify with (as in *I could identify with the main character*): Stage 4

**Ideology.** So spelled. But many writers misunderstand its etymology, believing that the word is somehow derived from our modern word *idea,* and so misspell it *ideology.* In fact, like several other words beginning with *ideo-* (e.g., *ideograph,* *ideology* passed into English through French (*idéologie*)) and has been spelled *ideo-* in English since the 18th century. Although the bungled spelling has become common enough that it’s listed in some dictionaries, that isn’t a persuasive defense of its use. Cf. *minuscule.*  

**Language-Change Index**  
Ideology misspelled *ideology* Stage 2  
Current ratio: 3,781:1

**Id est.** See i.e.

**Idiosyncrasy.** So spelled, though often erroneously rendered *idiomsyncrasy* (as if the word denoted a form of government)—e.g.: “Their *idiomsyncracies* [read *idiomsyncrasies*] are patrician.” David Margolick, “Similar Histories, and Views, for 2 Court Finalists,” N.Y. Times, 30 May 1993, at 9. Fortunately, in modern print sources, the correct spelling outnumbers the erroneous one by a 12-to-1 ratio. For the many words properly ending in -cracy, see governmental forms.

**Language-Change Index**  
Idiosyncrasy misspelled *idiomsyncrasy* Stage 2  
Current ratio: 12:1

**Idolize; idolatrize.** The first has been standard since the 17th century. The second is a needlessly variant. E.g.: “We’re free, free at last from the bombardment of the media for the Super Bowl and the idolatrizing [read idolizing] of the combatants.” *Glad Football Idolatry Over,* Ariz. Republic, 3 Feb. 1996, at B6.

**Language-Change Index**  
*Idolatrize for idolize: Stage 1  
Current ratio (idolize vs. *idolatrize*): 247:1

*I doubt that; I doubt whether; *I doubt if.* See doubt (A).

**Idyll.** A. Spelling and Pronunciation. *Idyll* (= [1] a poem or prose composition depicting rustic simplicity; or [2] a narrative, esp. in verse, resembling a brief epic) is the standard spelling. *Idyl* is a variant. Either way, the word is pronounced /i-dәl/, like *idle.*

B. Adjective Misused. *Idyllic* = of, belonging to, or resembling an idyll; full of pastoral charm or rustic picturesqueness. E.g.: “But after a pretend visit to Antarctica, it’s easy in Christchurch to decide to spend

To say that the governor of New York has an idyllic (= pastoral, countrified) life is preposterous. In fact, the meaning here seems to be ‘suggestive of a story-book; fairy-tale’. It’s hard to say what role, if any, Mr. Spitzer’s escalating disappointment in Albany played in his extraordinarily risky, self-destructive behavior, and it remains unclear when his once seemingly idyllic life went so awry." Danny Hakim & Michael Powell, "A Leader Recalled as Focused but Unable to Bend," N. Y. Times, 23 Mar. 2008, at 18.

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idyllic misused for ideal: Stage 3

-IE. See diminutives (g).

**i.e. A. Generally.** The abbreviation for id est (L. "that is") introduces explanatory phrases or clauses. Although the abbreviation is appropriate in some scholarly contexts, the phrase that is or the word namely is more comprehensible to the average reader.

**B. And e.g.** i.e. is frequently confounded with e.g. (short for exempli gratia [L. "for example"])—e.g.: • "Our increased expectation is due to the company growing its presence in the $2 billion U.S. meal-replacement market through increased advertising in national magazines (i.e. [read e.g.], People, Readers Digest, Parade) and newspapers (i.e. [read e.g.], Globe and Enquirer),” Taglich Brothers, "How Analysts Size Up Companies," Barrons, 18 Nov. 2002, at 35 (that use of i.e. indicates that advertising will not be placed in other magazines and newspapers).

• "The production staff and Gateway reps huddle. They shoot a screen test of a fuller-figured blonde cast as an extra and decide that she—-with some work (i.e. [read e.g., unless that was all the work needed], ditch the suede pants)—looks more like a mom.” Frank Ahrens, "Gateway Ditches Cow Motif for a Sleeker Image," Miami Herald, 18 Nov. 2002, at 27.

• "I have many electrical items that no longer work, i.e. [read e.g.]; cameras, video recorder, outlet strip, video rewinder, to name a few." Sandy Shelton, in question to "Post Your Problems," Pitt. Post-Gaz., 19 Nov. 2002, at A14 (and since e.g. means "for example," to name a few is redundant).

See e.g.

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i.e. misused for e.g.: Stage 2

**C. Style and Usage.** As with other familiar abbreviations of Latin phrases such as etc., et al., and e.g. (and despite their appearance here, where they are being discussed as terms), i.e. is not italicized <the state capital, i.e., Jefferson City>. And like the others, i.e. is best confined to lists, parenthetical matter, footnotes, and citations rather than used in text, where some substitute such as namely is more natural <the state capital, which is Jefferson City>.

Formerly it was said that in speaking or reading, the abbreviation should be rendered id est. But this is never heard today, whereas the abbreviated letters i.e. are occasionally heard.

**D. Punctuation.** Generally, a comma follows i.e. in AmE (though not in BrE). E.g.: • “The implicit assumption is that the fountains were designed for wading—i.e., ‘interactive’ participation.” Tempest in a Memorial Pool," Wash. Post, 3 Aug. 1997, at C8. • “There was absolutely no need for any U.S. network to ‘cover’ (i.e., ‘interpret’) the funeral.” Letter of Mary L. Spencer, “Too Much Talk," Indianapolis Star, 2 Oct. 1997, at E7.

**I enjoyed myself.** Though literalistic pedants sometimes criticize this idiom as hopelessly illogical (which it is), it is standard—e.g.: • “And I enjoyed myself, so it doesn't seem that I failed.” Dan McGrath, "For Better or Worse, This Gig Was Fun," Sacramento Bee, 20 Aug. 1995, at A2. • “In all, I really enjoyed myself, even if there was no yapping.” Tony Kornheiser, "I May Not Know Opera, but I Know a Major Babe When I See One,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 26 Jan. 1997, at B6. • “I enjoyed myself and the children seemed to enjoy listening to me read.” Frank Roberts, "Reading to Children Takes Real Talent," Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 17 Aug. 1997, Suffolk Sun §, at 7.

For some similar idioms, see illogic (a).

**if. A. And whether.** It’s good editorial practice to distinguish between these words. Use if for a conditional idea, whether for an alternative or possibility. Hence Let me know if you’ll be coming means that I want to hear from you only if you’re coming. But Let me know whether you’ll be coming means that I want to hear from you about your plans one way or the other.

**B. If, and only if.** Ordinarily, this adds nothing but unnecessary emphasis (and perhaps a rhetorical flourish) to only if. E.g.: “Such a ‘homocentrist’ position takes the human species to define the boundaries of the moral community: you are morally considerable if, and only if, [read only if] you are a member of the human species.” Colin McGinn, “Beyond Prejudice,” New Republic, 8 Apr. 1996, at 39. The variation if, but only if, which sometimes occurs in legal writing, is unnecessary and even nonsensical for only if.

Yet in math and logic, if and only if marks a relationship in which if either proposition is true (or false), both are true (or false).

**C. For though, even if, or and.** Some writers use if in an oddly precious way—to mean “though,” “though perhaps,” “even if,” or even “and.” Though several
dictionaries record this use, it's not recommended because it typically carries a tone of affectedness—e.g.:

- “On one level of analysis these are unrelated ‘accidents.’ But on another they are concrete, if [read though] mainly unconscious and uncoordinated, responses to industry’s need for concentrated and specialized learning.” Richard Ohmann, *English in America* 289 (1976).


- “Trump regularly puts his mouth in gear before his brain and the results are usually fascinating, if [read even if] sometimes offensive.” Michael Putney, “Whatever Happened to the Summer Doldrums?” *Miami Herald*, 21 July 2015, Opinion $.$

Cf. *if not.*

**if and when.** A. Generally. The single word *when* typically conveys everything this three-word phrase does. Although the full idiom does emphasize both conditionality and temporality, if a thing is done at a certain time it *is ipso facto* done. Still, the phrase helpfully sets up two conditions: (1) I won't perform my duty unless you perform yours, and (2) I don't expect me to go first. As a popular idiom, *if and when* is not likely to disappear just for the sake of brevity.

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**if and when for if; Stage 4**

B. *And when and if.* Perhaps in an attempt to get out of a rhetorical rut, some writers reverse these words and make it *when and if* with no change in nuance intended. But that construction loses any words and make it with no change in out of a rhetorical rut, some writers reverse these

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*if ever there was* 481

if ever there was; if ever there were. When posing a question beginning with one of these phrases, the writer or speaker almost invariably means to raise a question of historical fact—not to state something contrary to fact. So the past-indicative *was* is called for, not the subjunctive *were.* (See *subjunctives.*) If the subjunctive were in order (now, that's counterfactual!), it would be the past subjunctive: *if ever there had been.* But this wording is clearly erroneous and undiomatic. In modern print sources, the correct phrasing (*if ever there was*) is more than four times as common as the incorrect one—e.g.: “A dark horse *if ever there was* one. Beaver was suddenly thrust into the limelight.” Colin Eatock, “A Dark Horse on a Rescue Mission,” *Globe & Mail* (Toronto), 7 Aug. 2002, at R3.

The phrasing also raises questions of verb tense. The ordinary sequence of tenses is to have a past-tense verb in the principal clause when the subordinate clause is in the past tense, as in If *ever there was an artistic genius, he was it.* Many published examples exhibit this sequence of tenses—e.g.:

- “That was followed by the terror of anthrax and by the threat in Afghanistan, an unlikely combination *if ever there was* one.” Douglas Gould, “It’s Been an Astonishing, Unpredictable Year,” *Globe & Mail* (Toronto), 28 Dec. 2001, at 11.

- “*If ever there was* a gimmie, this was it.” Wright Thompson, “Risk and Reward,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 30 Dec. 2001, Sports $§$, at 1.

Yet many others violate this grammatical sequence by having the principal verb in the present tense, as in *If ever there was an artistic genius, he is it.* Nearly a third of the examples in modern print sources have the main clause in the present tense—e.g.:

- “*If ever there was* a team in need of validation, it's Nebraska.” Eric Olson, “Defensive Huskers Dig In,” *Wash. Post*, 27 Dec. 2001, at D1.

- “*If ever there was* a character created for the modern world of media, Jimmy seems to be it.” Eric Elkins, “Paving the Way for Gold,” *Denver Post*, 30 Dec. 2001, at E1.

- “*If ever there was* a time to make your move, it's now.” Trevor Delaney, “Five Tempting Sectors,” *Wall Street J.*, 30 Dec. 2001, at 3.

To change any one of those last three examples to *If ever there has been . . .* might seem unnatural and pedantic, yet many fastidious writers do it to good effect. E.g. “*If ever there has* been a franchise that had a hold on a region, it's the Leafs.” Bill Griffith, “Turning Over All the Leafs in Toronto,” *Boston Globe*, 24 Aug. 2001, at E10. The logic is certainly heightened with the more punctilious sequence. See *tenses* (B).
iffy (= uncertain) is a casualism dating from the mid-20th century—e.g.: "Hair growth? It's iff. Some say yes; others no. You would think that female hormones in the birth-control pills would reduce facial hair growth." Paul Donohue, "Immune System's Been in the News a Lot Lately," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 15 Nov. 1996, Everyday Mag. §, at E2.

"We also believe Michael Jordan can wheeze, struggle, brick, shoot air balls, be frozen by Allen Iverson and depend on iff officiating calls to win games he normally devours like a chew toy." Jay Mariotti, "Next Heroics for MJ Involve Taking a Seat," Chicago Sun-Times, 20 Mar. 1997, at 118.

"The two banks' fit had been iff from the start." Peter Galuszka, "Will Keycorp Be Shark Bait?" BusinessWeek, 7 Apr. 1997, at 121.

if it be. See subjunctives.

if need be. This phrase can lead to problems of tense-shifting. For example, in the sentence "We always did what we had to do, if need be," the tense abruptly switches from past (did) to present (be). Eric Partridge suggested if need were as a substitute (Un-E-A at 150), but that phrase is both archaic and unidiomatic. The best course is often to rephrase with if necessary—though in the example above, the phrase is redundant and could be dropped without any loss of meaning. See tenses.

if not is often an ambiguous phrase to be avoided. It may mean either (1) "but not; though not"; or (2) "may be even." Sense 2 is exemplified in the following sentences, but in each one it's possible to misread the phrase as bearing sense 1:

- "If all this is true, the President [Reagan] should go down in history as one of the greatest, if not the greatest." William L. Jones, "The President, Iran, and the Boland Amendment," San Diego Union-Trib., 20 Dec. 1986, at B11.
- "One of the best, if not the best, predictors of health care expenditure levels in a given geographic area or political jurisdiction is family or per-capita income." Lawrence D. Cohen, "Managed Care Can Right Its Own Ship," Hartford Courant, 16 Feb. 1997, at B3.

Sense 1 is confusing if, as is quite likely, the reader first thinks of the phrase in terms of the more common sense 2. It would be clearer to substitute though for if:


Generally speaking, when an understated term such as adequate or competent precedes if not, it has sense 1; when a more laudatory term precedes the phrase, sense 2 applies. Cf. if.

-IFFY. See -FY.

if you will. This phrase typifies the language of those who engage in word patronage. An elliptical form of if you will allow me to use the phrase, the phrase is almost always best deleted. Cf. as it were.

ignis fatuus (= will o' the wisp; a delusive hope or desire) forms the plural ignes fatui. But even the few readers who understand the singular Latinism are likely to puzzle over the plural.

ignitable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not ignitible. See -ABLE (A).

ignominy is accent ed on the first, not the second, syllable: /ig-na-min-ee/.

ignoramus. Until 1934, if a grand jury in England considered the evidence of an alleged crime insufficient to prosecute, it would endorse the bill ignoramus, meaning literally "we do not know" or "we know nothing of this." Long before, though, the word ignoramus had come to mean, by extension, "an ignorant person." In 1615, George Ruggle wrote a play called Ignoramus, about a lawyer who knew nothing about the law; this fictional lawyer soon gave his name to all manner of know-nothings, whether lawyers or nonlawyers.

The modern nonlegal meaning appears most frequently—e.g.: "There's no surprise—or challenge—in watching a sycophantic, misogynistic ignoramus like Burdette win out over the self-effacing, truth-loving Hutchinson." Lawrence Bommer, " Lip Service Subtle as a Sledgehammer," Chicago Trib., 5 Aug. 1997, at 2.

The plural is ignoramuses. The form *ignorami is a pseudo-learned blunder, since in Latin ignoramus is a verb and not one of the Latin nouns ending in -us. This erroneous form reached the peak of its popularity in print (often in jocular contexts) in the 1920s but today is relatively infrequent. See plurals (b) & hypercorrection (A).

The word is preferably pronounced /ig-na-ray-mas/—not /ig-na-ram-as/.

Current ratio (ignoramuses vs. *ignorami): 32:1

ignorant; stupid. Stupid refers to a lack of innate ability, whereas ignorant refers merely to a lack of knowledge on a particular subject. Geniuses are ignorant of many facts, but that doesn't make them stupid. But stupid people can't grasp that they are ignorant of even the most basic facts.
-ILE; -INE. Most words with these endings are best pronounced with the -i- short rather than long. Thus: agile /aj-i/-l, not /aj-ii/-l; genuine /jen-yoo-in/-l, not /jen-yoo-in/-l. But as with any other rule of pronunciation, there are many exceptions, among them infantile /in-fan-til/, magazine /mag-a-zeen/, and turpentine /tor-pan-tin/.

Also, the animal adjectives ending in -ine may go either way, but they tend to have the long -i-, as in feline and asinine.

ilk. A. Meaning. Originally, this Scottish term meant "the same"; hence of that ilk meant "of that same [place, territory, or name]" <McGuffey of that ilk>. By extension during the 19th century—from a misunderstanding of the Scottish use—ilk came to mean "type" or "sort" <Joseph McCarthy and his ilk>. Because there is little call outside Scotland for the original sense, the extended use must now be accepted as standard—e.g.: • "That those of the ilk who call themselves journalists succumb is something to be loudly denounced—and roundly rejected." Jane Ely, "Multiple-Choice Puzzle Circles Diana's End," Houston Chron., 3 Sept. 1997, at A25.


• "It's composed essentially like Nickeland and bands of the similar ilk." B.J. Lisko, "Excellent Label Debut from Akron Rockers," Repository (Canton, Ohio), 27 Aug. 2015, at E14.

Still, one occasionally encounters puzzling uses that seem worthy of disapproval—e.g.: "It is also maddening to know there exists the human ilk that would, for whatever twisted motive, drag our young over the line." Gil Griffin, "Essayist Takes Race Relations Personally," San Diego Union-Trib., 24 Nov. 1997, at E11. The sentence would surely be improved by changing there exists the human ilk to that there exist people who.

B. Connotation. The word’s accepted definition is hardly defamation. But the word increasingly conveys derogatory connotations (perhaps from sound association with the expletive ick?)—e.g.: "The book wrestles with the excruciating ethical dilemmas facing America . . . in battling Osama bin Laden and his ilk." Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Duty Bound," Wash. Post (Book Rev.), 6 Apr. 2003, at T4. It has been known to give offense—e.g.: "Larouche wrote her own letter to the editor . . . to attack me and my opinions personally, such as by calling me and my ‘ilk’ (whenever they are) ‘hypocrites in Birkenstocks.’” Letter of Hanna Bordas, Boston Globe, 6 Apr. 2003, Mag., §, at 3.

ill. The comparative form of this adjective is worse, the superlative worst. The adverb is ill, *illy being an illiterate nonword that is acceptable neither in formal writing nor in nondialectal informal writing. Ill itself acts as an adverb—e.g.: "There he had knocked a hole in the roof and poured in gasoline, a primitive technique that illy fit [read ill-fitting or that ill fitted] the Waldbaum evidence." Murry Kempton, "Standing by Convictions, Wrongly," Newsday (N.Y.), 19 Aug. 1994, at A8. For other adverbs with a superfluous -ly, see adverbs (c).

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illy for the adverb ill: Stage 1

ilation (= the act of inferring or something inferred) is a learned term little used today, though a few philosophers are quite fond of it. (See sesquipedality.) Inference serves just as well—and it's more understandable.

illegal; illicit; unlawful. These terms are fundamentally synonymous, although illicit carries moral overtones <illicit love affairs> in addition to the basic sense of all three: "not in accordance with or sanctioned by law." Since 1800 or so, illegal has been the most frequently used, followed by unlawful and then illicit. During most of the 18th century, unlawful appeared in print somewhat more frequently than illegal. Illegal is not synonymous with criminal, though some writers mistakenly assume that it is. Anything against the law—even civil statutes—is, technically speaking, illegal, but only violations of criminal law are criminal. See legal.

For two malapropisms involving illicit, see illicit.

illegal immigrant; illegal alien; undocumented immigrant; undocumented alien. The terminology relating to those who come to live in another country without official permission is highly charged—increasingly so since about 1980. From 1930 on, illegal immigrant has been the usual phrase in BrE, but only from about 1945 to 1970 was it the predominant term in AmE.

About 1970, illegal alien surged into common use in AmE, and it remains predominant today. But some think it doubly tendentious: coupling the dysphemistic alien with the negatively charged illegal makes it easy, the argument goes, to dehumanize people who struggle to improve their lives without complying with bureaucratic requirements for entry. People who hold views something like this consider illegal alien a snarl-phrase and prefer instead a euphemism such as undocumented immigrant (or, even more euphemistically, undocumented worker).

Those who, on the other hand, prefer illegal alien note that alien is the age-old legal term for a noncitizen within a country—that there are resident aliens who have green cards that allow them to stay indefinitely. Those taking this position note that both unsanctioned
entry into the United States and overstaying one’s visa are infractions—hence illegal. On this view, illegal alien is therefore a denotatively accurate phrase for someone who is present in a country in violation of the immigration laws. People with this view scorn undocumented as doublepeak because the word ordinarily means “unaccounted for” but in this instance seems to bear the anodyne sense “not having the requisite documents to enter or stay in a country.”

There are those who take the (very) long view that, anthropologically speaking, people have always migrated across land masses according to their needs. Notions of national sovereignty, they might say, are relatively recent constructs.

Although few might be thought to share this radical view, something like it has become fairly mainstream. On 7 March 2015, addressing the nation from Selma, Alabama, 50 years after Martin Luther King Jr’s famous march, President Barack Obama said (as part of a long litany): “We are the people who swim across the Rio Grande in search of a better life.” In his very next utterance (after completing the litany), he disclaimed the idea that “some of us are more American than others.”

In such a climate, the phrase illegal alien is perceived as hostile—mostly by those on the left. Undocumented immigrant has gradually become preferable in their eyes. Yet that phrase is viewed as hopelessly evasive and misleading by those on the right.

So the terminology is shifting. Big data tell us that as of 2008, illegal alien remained prevalent in AmE print sources, followed closely by illegal immigrant, which itself was nearly three times as common as undocumented immigrant. Least common of all was undocumented alien. Meanwhile, in the Republican-primary presidential debates of 2015, the attributive noun illegals was used by moderators and candidates alike—which is rather like the 1920s habit of referring to people afflicted with tuberculosis as tuberculars.

The resolution of these political and terminological struggles is yet to be documented.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 11:9:3:1

illegal; unreadable. Illegible = not plain or clear enough to be read (used of bad handwriting or defaced printing). Unreadable = too dull, obfuscatory, or nonsensical to be read (used of poor writing).

illegitimate child. Although the phrase is still often used, and although it's undeniably better than bastard, it's also undeniably insensitive. Since the mid-1970s, it has been falling in frequency of use. As a far-sighted judge once observed, “There are no illegitimate children, only illegitimate parents.” In re Estate of Woodward, 40 Cal. Rptr. 781, 784 (Dist. Ct. App. 1964) (Yankwich, J.). Increasingly, the phrase child out of wedlock or nonmarital child is displacing illegitimate child. See euphemisms & natural child.

illicit. This adjective, meaning “illegal,” appears in two malapropisms. First, it is sometimes used for elicit (= to bring out)—e.g.:

- “Few comments illicit [read elicit] more disbelief, disgust, and downright anger than suggestions that the economy has performed as well during George W. Bush’s presidency as during Bill Clinton’s.” Bob Rayner, Editorial, “Horrors! Bush’s Record Betters Clinton’s,” Richmond Times Dispatch, 27 June 2007, at A11.

This misuse caught the attention of a famous linguist during the first half of the 20th century: “Illiterate spellers will often write illicit for elicit, enumerable for innumerable, etc.” Otto Jespersen, Growth and Structure of the English Language 146 n.25 (9th ed. 1938).

Second, and perhaps more surprisingly, the word is sometimes misused for solicit—e.g.:

- “Pele was banned from the World Cup draw last December after accusing Texiera of illiciting [read soliciting] bribes for Brazilian television rights.” Mike Mulligan, “Havelange Gets Sixth Term,” Chicago Sun-Times, 17 June 1994, World Cup §, at 129.
- “Yet, it is those volunteers and the community-spirited donations they illicit [read solicit] that keep the doors open at nearly every food pantry you’ll find.” Jerry Nunn, “Hunger Pains,” Bay City Times (Mich.), 30 Nov. 2007, at E1.

For more on the word, see illegal.
for example, fret over the synonymy of fat chance and slim chance, burn up and burn down, or miss and near miss. We should instead smile at the playful genius of the language. Applying “linguistic logic” to established ways of saying things is a misconceived effort.

We see this misconception today when armchair grammarians insist that grammatical error is an Irish bull; that I don’t think so is wrong in place of I think not (see don’t think); that the reason why is wrong (no more so, certainly, than place where or time when); that a number of people must take a singular, not a plural, verb (see synesis); that none must always take a singular verb; or that, in Don’t spend any more time than you can help, the final words should be can’t help. When logic is used for such purposes, it is worse than idle: it is harmful.

That does not mean, of course, that logic is of no concern to the writer. For rhetorical purposes, logic is essential. Some readers will seek out holes in the logic; but almost all readers will be distracted if they notice this type of problem. In evaluating our own writing, therefore, we should strictly follow idiom and usage, but otherwise apply logic.

The exercise will tighten your prose. Since idiom does not yet prefer *could care less, much less require it, write couldn’t care less. Logically speaking, if you say that you *could care less, then you’re admitting that you care to some extent. (See couldn’t care less.) Logic will help you avoid saying *I was scared literally to death, because you’ll recognize the literal meaning of literally—and you’re still alive to report how scared you were. Likewise, logic would have you banish thoughtless words such as *preplanned.

Logic promotes clear thinking. To avoid the ills catalogued below, consider closely how your words and sentences relate to one another.

B. Illogical Comparison. This lapse occurs commonly in locutions such as *as large if not larger than, which, when telescoped, becomes *as large than; properly, one writes as large as if not larger than. (See cannibalism.) Similar problems occur with classes of things. For example, when members of classes are being compared, a word such as other must be used to restrict the class: “Representative democracy is better than any [other] political system in the world.”

Another problem of comparison occurs when the writer forgets the point of reference in the comparison:

• “Like the hard-hitting Dianne Feinstein, a candidate for California’s governorship, Silber’s views are striking [read Silber strikes] a chord among many Democrats tired of losing,” Mike Graham, “Democrats’ New Breed Upsets the Party Old Guard,” Sunday Times (London), 15 Apr. 1990, at A23. The sentence compares a person to someone’s views.

• “Like many others in Los Angeles, the quake helped Mr. Becker decide to leave.” “Deciding to Escape Los Angeles,” N.Y. Times, 18 Feb. 1994, at A10 (photo caption). This is a fine dangling modifier: the quake joined many others in L.A. in persuading Mr. Becker to leave.

• “But the bone marrow transplant Mr. Getty is to receive is different from the earlier cases [read ones or transplants] because the marrow is being processed so that it consists of only two types of cells.” Lawrence K. Altman, “Hope in AIDS Case Is Put in Marrow from Baboon,” N.Y. Times, 15 Dec. 1995, at A1. A16. You don’t compare a transplant to a case, which in medicine comprises the whole situation—the patient, the doctors, the injection, and everything else relating to the patient’s problem.

• “Significantly, although industrial relations is regarded as more important than when the survey was last conducted, in September, it does not rate in the top 10 most dominant issues.” Michael Gordon, “Voters Swing Back to ALP on Issues,” Weekend Australian, 20–21 Jan. 1996, at 1. Insert the word now after important. Otherwise, it seems as if you’re comparing industrial relations to a given time. In fact, we’re comparing the importance of the issue then and now.

For related issues, see best of all, better than any (other), everyone . . . not, every other (A) & vice versa.

C. Danglers and Misplaced Modifiers. Every dangler or misplaced modifier perverts logic to some degree, sometimes humorously—e.g.: “I saw the Statue of Liberty flying into Newark.” To avoid these disruptions of thought, remember that a participle should relate to a noun that is truly capable of performing the participle’s action. Another example: “The 1993 law, which was invalidated before it went into effect, required pregnant teen-agers or their doctors to notify a parent or guardian at least 48 hours before undergoing abortions.” Aaron Epstein, “High Court Leaves Intact Abortion Rule,” Amarillo Daily News, 30 Apr. 1996, at A1. Who is getting abortions? This sentence literally suggests that doctors are getting abortions, but that they must notify their parents first.

For a fuller discussion of these matters, see danglers & miscues (h).

D. The Disjointed Appositive. Phrases intended to be in apposition shouldn’t be separated—e.g.:

• “A respected English legal authority on the common law, the view of William Blackstone permeated much of the early thinking on freedom of expression.” John Murray, The Media Law Dictionary 11 (1978). (Blackstone himself, not Blackstone’s view, is the respected authority.)

• “As the editor of Godey’s Lady’s Book from 1837 to 1877—years in which this widely read magazine almost never mentioned the Civil War because war was not the business of ladies—Hale was regarded as one of America’s most influential women.” Mark Kurlansky, Salt: A World History 305 (2002). (The author’s assertion for the years 1837 to 1860 is illogical—the Civil War didn’t begin until 1861, so of course it wasn’t mentioned before then.)

See appositives.

E. Mistaken Subject of a Prepositional Phrase. This problem crops up usually when a word or phrase intervenes between the noun and the prepositional phrase referring to that noun. Often, as in the example below, the noun (school bus) functions as an
illude

adjective: “Wallin was the school bus driver in which [read Wallin was driving the school bus in which] Hillman and Ellington and Kleven were passengers.” Cf. REMOTE RELATIVES.

F. Poor Exposition of Sequence. Don’t ask your readers to assume what is not logically possible by your very assumptions—e.g.: “The twin-engine turbo prop Merlin Fairchild 300 carrying driver Alan Kulwicki and three other men suddenly dropped off the radar screen and crashed shortly before landing.” Karen Allen & Erik Brady, “Motor Sports,” USA Today, 5 Apr. 1993, at C9. (The plane crashed before it would have landed, but as it happened the plane never did land in any normal sense of the word. And if you take the crash itself as a landing, the logic of the temporal sequence is absurd.)

G. *Times less than. Brand Y may cost twice as much as Brand X, but that doesn’t mean Brand X is twice as cheap as Brand Y. Farburg may be two times as far away as Nearville, but that doesn’t mean Nearville is two times closer than Farburg. Big Dog may be twice the size of Little Dog, but that doesn’t mean Little Dog is two times smaller than Big Dog.

One time is 100% of the cost, distance, size, or any other measure. If you take away “one time” something, you’ve taken away all there is. If you walk toward me and cover all the distance, you can’t get any closer—you can’t be twice as close as you were before. If the price is discounted one time or 100%, the item is free. *Two times cheaper, if it means anything, might imply that the store will pay you the full price of Brand Y if you will take Brand X home with you. That mangles the meaning of cost, and it surely isn’t what the writer means.

What does the writer mean? Probably “half,” but who can say for sure? Yet despite the illogic of the phrase, it is used all the time, even in scientific literature—e.g.:

• “It came within just 4,000 miles of the 10-mile-wide nucleus of the comet, or about 10 times closer than [read much closer than] any of the other four missions to Halley’s Comet.” Bernie Reim, “One Eye’s on Planets, One’s on Spring,” Portland Press Herald, 28 Feb. 2001, at C3.

• “Virus levels in the one animal were intermittently higher but still more than 100 times lower than [read less than 1% as much as] those in four control animals that had not received the vaccine.” HIV Vaccines: New Prime-Boost Strategy Shows Promise in Monkeys,” Gene Therapy Weekly, 22 Mar. 2001, at 9.

• “States were further required to limit soot from power plants, cars and other sources to 2.5 microns, or 28 times smaller than [who can be sure what this means?]” the width of a human hair.” “EPAs Tougher Clean Air Rules Cloud the Michigan Economy,” Detroit News, 5 Apr. 2001, at 2.

H. *Times more than. A problem similar to but far less egregious than the illogic of *times less than comes up when we say that X is *two times more than Y. The common understanding is that if Y is 1, then X is 2. But strictly speaking, one time more than Y could also be 2, because more implies that the result of 1-times-X is added to X to arrive at Y. The more precise and unambiguous wording is “X is two times as much as Y.”

1. Miscellaneous Other Examples. For various other brands of poor thinking, see ADJECTIVES (b), all (b), between (t), contiguous, every other (A), *ex-felon, *least worst, much less, much-needed, same (c), temperature (b), *these kind of, underestimate, *up to — off and more, wean, within, *without scarcely & yet (n).

illude. See allude (b).

illuminate; illumine; *illume. Illuminate is most common by far. Illumine is archaic except in poetry. *Illume is obsolescent.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 104:10:1

illusion; delusion. These words are used differently despite their similar meanings. An illusion exists in one’s fancy or imagination. A delusion is an idea or thing that deceives or misleads a person. Delusions are dangerously wrong apprehensions; illusions are also wrong perceptions, but the connotation is far less dire. Cf. hallucination.


For a misuse of illusion for allusion, see allusion.

illustrate, in modern usage, means “to provide a good example of (something); to exemplify.” In the following sentence it is used ambiguously: “Jennings's analysis illustrates the fallacy of accepting the theory too literally.” The writer here wasn’t claiming—as the sentence seems to do—that Jennings’s analysis is itself a good example of “the fallacy of accepting the theory too literally.” Rather, the sentence was intended to hold up Jennings’s analysis as one that elucidates well the nature of this fallacy.

Illustrate is accented on the first syllable; /il-ə-strayt/.

illustrative. A. Pronunciation. The second syllable is accented: /i-las-tr-ə-tiv/, not /il-las-tray-tiv/.

B. And illustrious. Illustrative means “providing a good illustration or portrayal; representative.” Illustrious means “distinguished; acclaimed; renowned.” Occasionally, through word-swapping, illustrative displaces illustrious—e.g.:

• “Karloff received a great number of critical plaudits and many critics called the film a fine climax to a long


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illustrative misused for illustrious: Stage 1

illy. See ill.

IM-. See en-.

imaginative; imaginary. Imaginative (= creative) is occasionally misused for imaginary (= unreal)—e.g.:

- "Robin, foraging in a deserted plantation house for wine for the wounded, finds a book that recounts 'an unheard-of prodigy [that] . . . occurred in England during the reign of King Stephen.' This story both sustains Robin as the war becomes more horrific, and helps him to escape brutality in his imaginative [read imaginary] world." Mary A. McCoy, "The Blue and the Gray and the Green," Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 26 May 2002, Books §, at 5.


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imaginative misused for imaginary: Stage 1

imbecile; imbecilic. The preferred adjectival form of imbecile, n., was once thought to be imbecilic. But imbecilic, which emerged in the late 19th century, is now standard as well.

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imbecilic: Stage 1

imbibe is a formal word meaning "to drink"—e.g.: "She sees groups of women 'having some social interaction' over piping hot cups, but adds that men imbibe as well." Lisa Martin, "The New Brew," Ark. Democrat-Gaz., 13 Feb. 1997, at E1. The word often occurs in figurative senses—e.g.:

- "And young existentialists can imbibe the heady atmosphere of Ze Left Bank." Joe Williams, "Name Your Poison," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 6 Feb. 1997, at 29.

- "He personifies the new breed of musicians, South Asian in origin, who haven't forgotten their roots but have imbibed the culture they're placed in." Vivien Goldman, "Gimmie Indi Pop!" Village Voice, 18 Feb. 1997, at 68.

The corresponding noun is imbibition /im-bi-bish-on/, which is not so rare as one might suspect—e.g.: "Wanda Morehead, a captain from Newark and secretary of the charter group, could recall only one customer in nine years whose imbibitions dangerously compromised his inhibitions." Dave Golowenski, "Skippers Deal with All Types on Charter Boats," Columbus Dispatch, 14 Apr. 2002, at D15. The word *imbibement is a needless variant—e.g.: "A 'made' mobster is formally inducted through a ritual that entails the commingling of blood, recitation of oaths and an imbibement [read imbition] of wine." Scott Ladd, "Why the Tough Should Get Going," Newsday (N.Y.), 26 Nov. 1991, at 43.

*imblaze. See emblazon.

imbroglio. Pl. imbroglios. See plurals (d).

imbue (= [1] to inspire [a person, group of people, etc.] with; or [2] to saturate; soak or stain) is subject to object-shuffling. Properly, a person is imbued with values; values aren't *imbued into a person. In the latter phrase, imbue appears to have been misused for instill. The mistake is fairly common—e.g.:


- "While the landscape at the Holt home might not be pristine, the sauciness she imbues in it [read imbues it with] more than makes up for the occasional weed." Susan Banks, "A Garden That's a Riff on Paintings," Pitt. Post-Gaz., 14 June 2014, at B1.

- "His parents David and Naomi would imbue [read instill] in him a strong sense of right and wrong; of justice and social equality." "Jeremy Corbyn, the Boy to the Manor Born," Sunday Telegraph, 23 Aug. 2015, News §, at 13 (the title here being a pun: see manner born, to the.)

See impart & instill.

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imbue misused for instill: Stage 1

Current ratio (instilling in them vs. *imbuing in them): 77:1

I'm enjoying myself. See I enjoyed myself.

imitation. See counterfeit.

immaculate conception. Even among Catholics, it's a common misconception that this phrase refers either to the birth of Jesus (properly called the virgin birth) or to the impregnation of Mary. In fact, the doctrine of the immaculate conception refers to the conception of Mary herself, not Jesus. According to the doctrine, at the time Mary was conceived in her mother's womb, God sanctified her by removing "all stain of original sin." The phrase is often misapplied to refer to the conception that led to the "virgin birth" of Jesus, even by those who purport to be knowledgeable about church doctrine—e.g.:

- "Orthodox Christianity allows priests to marry; the Roman Catholic Church does not. And Orthodox Christians do not believe in the immaculate conception of Jesus Christ [read immaculate conception of Mary]." Lois M. Collins, "Patriarchal Pilgrimage," Desert News (Salt Lake City), 4 Oct. 1997, at C1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
immanent

• “The last time a millennium turned in the parts of the world that date things from the immaculate conception [read birth] of Jesus Christ, no more than a hundred scholarly clerics supposed that it mattered,” Michael Heywood, “Forget These Zeros, Bring on the Tukes,” Canadian (Vancouver, Wash.), 31 Dec. 1999, at A9.

• “For decades, that pilgrimage was repeated each Dec. 8, which Catholics celebrate as the feast of Mary’s ‘immaculate conception’ of Jesus [omit of Jesus].” Carol Jeffares Hedman, Shrines Provide Peace on Earth, Tampa Tribune, 11 July 2000, Pasco §, at 1.

One writer gamely corrected his error: “I implied that the birth of Jesus was the result of the Immaculate Conception. Uh-uh. The term doesn’t refer to Mary conceiving the infant Jesus without sexual intercourse, but to Mary herself having been conceived without original sin in her soul. The friars back at St. Bonaventure must be so bummed with me.” Mark McGuire, “Fox News Can Start from Scratch,” L.A. Times, 25 May 1997, at J3.

The terms can be almost interchangeable, with the help of the right preposition or adverb. In the first example, emigrated to rather than into would properly convey the same meaning as immigrated into. In the second, immigrate here from Singapore would correct the meaning as well as the recommended edit, emigrate from Singapore.

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emigrate misused for immigrate: Stage 2

imminent; eminent; immanent. Imminent = certain and very near; impending <imminent danger>. Eminent = distinguished; unimpeachable <Moore is an eminent cardiac surgeon>. (See eminently.) Immanent (primarily a theological term) = inherent; pervading the material world <the immanent goodness of the divine will>.

These words are misused in more ways than one might suppose. Imminent, of course, ousted eminent from its rightful place (perhaps the most common misusage)—e.g.:

• “While making employees ‘raise their hands to go to the bathroom,’ may have a 19th century ring to it, such rules may be imminently [read imminent] sensible on assembly lines.” “Their Unappointed Rounds the Issue: Postmaster to Relax Work Rules Following Massacres,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 14 May 1993, at A62.


But eminent, likewise, sometimes wrongly displaces imminent—e.g.: “[A] judge indicated on a court document that Cho [Seung-Hui] ‘is mentally ill and in need of hospitalization, and presents an eminent [read imminent] danger to self or others as a result of mental illness . . . .’” Nancy Gibbs et al., “Darkness Falls,” Time, 30 Apr. 2007, at 36.

Finally, immanent (= inherent) sometimes appears where imminent belongs—e.g.:

• “Had it been an A priority—signifying present or imminent [read imminent] danger to life—any police car in the city would have been ordered to the scene, he said.” Ray Tessler, “S.F. Police Dispatcher’s Role Questioned in the Death of Carlsbad Attorney’s Son,” L.A. Times (S.D. ed.), 10 Oct. 1990, at B2.

emigrate to or into. And just as those other two pairs are sometimes misused, emigrate and immigrate sometimes get reversed—e.g.:


immaterial; nonmaterial, adj. Although both may mean “not consisting of a material substance,” immaterial tends to mean “of no substantial importance; inconsequential.” Nonmaterial, by contrast, generally means “cultural, aesthetic” <the nonmaterial rewards of a career in theater>.

immediately, used as a conjunction in the sense “as soon as, promptly when,” is obsolete in AmE but still occurs in BrE—e.g.: “He succeeded in persuading MPs to vote to restore the ban on benefits for all those who fail to claim asylum immediately they arrive in Britain.” Paul Eastham, “MPs Slam Door on Bogus Refugees,” Daily Mail, 16 July 1996, at 11. In AmE phrasing, the word when or after would be inserted after immediately.

immerse; *immerge. Both mean “to dip or plunge into liquid,” but immerse is now the standard term. *Immerge, which was infrequent in the 18th century and exceedingly rare today, is a NEEDLESS VARIANT—e.g.: “Fishing a bottle out of the pot, I carelessly immersed [read immersed] my fingers into the boiling hot water.” Stacie L. Bezduch-Moore, “I Was Pregnant at 16,” Teen Magazine, Mar. 1995, at 62.

Current ratio: 113:1

immigrant; emigrate. *Immigrate = to migrate into or enter (a country). Emigrate = to migrate away from or exit (a country). In other words, immigrate considers the movement from the perspective of the destination; emigrate considers it from the perspective of the departure point. Perhaps it was indicative of the relative worth of the two forms of government that before the Soviet Union collapsed in the late 20th century, the United States was plagued by illegal immigration and the Soviet Union by attempts at illegal emigration.

Emigrate is to immigrate as go is to come, or as take is to bring. People emigrate from or out of, and
immolate = (1) to kill or destroy as a sacrifice, esp. by fire; or (2) to kill or destroy for any reason, esp. by burning. Sense 1 is the classic sense—e.g.: “Sati was the Hindu practice where widows would allow themselves to be immolated on the funeral pyres of their late husbands as the ultimate proof of their loyalty.” Stephen Mansfield, “A City Caste in Royal Mold,” Daily Yomiuri (Japan), 20 Jan. 1996, at 7.

Sense 2 is a product of SLIPSHOD EXTENSION; the word loses its traditional nuance of sacrificial destruction—e.g.: “She immolates a closetful of fine clothing, then holds a fire sale to get rid of the rest of her soon-to-be-ex's possessions.” Michael Warren, “Bold, Determined, and Dangerous,” Des Moines Register, 18 Jan. 1996, Today §, at 2. This sense sometimes appears for purposes of INELEGANT VARIATION—e.g.: “Fearing that he looked presumptuous, Williams has already burned roughly 100 of the cards and is searching for the last 400, which he also hopes to immolate [read destroy or burn].” Christian Stone, “The Rose Bowl Seemed Far Away After Northwestern,” Sports Illustrated, 16 Sept. 1996, at 54.

Immolate is a transitive verb, not an intransitive one—nothing merely “immolates.” Rather, an agent of some kind, usually a person, immolates something else. But some writers misunderstand this—e.g.: “If a can of nitrate stock immolates [read catches fire or burns], he said, a deluge sprinkler system would kick in.” Steven Rea, “Preserving a Legacy in the Poconos,” Orange County Register, 25 Aug. 1996, at F13.

immoral; unmoral; amoral. These three words have distinct meanings. Immoral, the opposite of moral, means “evil, depraved.” The word is highly judgmental. Unmoral means merely “without moral sense, not moral,” and is used, for example, of animals and inanimate objects. Amoral, perhaps the most commonly misused of these terms, means “not moral, outside the sphere of morality; being neither moral nor immoral.” It is loosely applied to people in the sense “not having morals or scruples.”

immovable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *immovables. See mute e.

immune may take the preposition to or from, depending on nuance. What you’re immune from can’t touch you; what you’re immune to may touch you but it has no effect. The collocation immune to is now the more common phrase.

To be immune to something is to be impervious to it—e.g.:

- “Despite its considerable resources, Intel, which has $8 billion in cash, is not immune to market forces.” Alex Pham, “Intel to Use Technology for Building Tinner Chips,” L.A. Times, 14 Aug. 2002, Bus. §, pt. 3, at 1.

To be immune from something is to be free of some duty, liability, or restriction that others are subject to—e.g.:

- “The fact that Hale viewed husbands as immune from rape prosecution is not surprising.” Susan Estrich, Real Rape 73 (1987).

In this latter sense, the preposition from is preferable to to, but to is used so commonly that it can’t be stigmatized as incorrect—e.g.: “Commission member John O. Wynne of Norfolk, a former publishing executive, noted that the largest sectors of the Virginia budget, including education and Medicaid, will be immune to [read, preferably, immune from] Wilder commission cuts.” R.H. Melton, “Wilder Panel Adopts Guide for Va. Cuts,” Wash. Post, 15 Aug. 2002, at B1. Current ratio (immune to vs. immune from): 2:1

immunity; impunity. An immunity is any type of exemption from a liability, service, or duty—or (of course) a bodily resistance to an illness. Impunity is exemption from punishment; for a spreading misuse of this word, see impunity.

I’m not sure that; I’m not sure whether. The first phrase means “I doubt” <I’m not sure that we can make it in time>; the second means “I wonder if; I don’t know if” <I’m not sure whether Shakespeare died in the 16th or the 17th century>. (He died in the 17th—in 1616.) Cf. doubt (A).

impact, vi. & v.t. Impact was traditionally only a noun. In the mid–20th century, however, it underwent a semantic shift that allows it to act as a transitive or intransitive verb. So uses such as the following have
become widespread (and are also widely condemned by stylists):

- “The researchers concluded that this low level of intensity may have impacted [read affected] the results.” Katherine Preble, “Forget Warming Up,” Tampa Trib., 17 July 1997, BayLike, §, at 3.
- “Though the I-285/Georgia 400 interchange is squarely in the midst of our PCIDs, it impacts [read affects] traffic flow across metro Atlanta and the 29 counties included in our metro area.” Yvonne Williams, “Opening Our Own Wallets to Help Speed Traffic Flow,” Atlanta J.-Const., 1 Sept. 2015, at A8.

These uses of the word would be perfectly acceptable if impact were performing any function not as ably performed by affect or influence. If affect as a verb is not sufficiently straightforward in context, then the careful writer might use had an impact on, which, though longer, is probably better than the jarring impact of impacted. Reserve impact for noun uses and impacted for wisdom teeth. See functional shift (d) & vogue words.

Interestingly, impact as a verb might have arisen partly in response to widespread diffidence about the spelling of affect. In terms of word frequency, the verb use of impact skyrocketed after 1980. See affect.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. impact as a transitive verb <this could impact our decision>: Stage 3
   Current ratio (might affect the vs. *might impact the): 12:1

2. impact as an intransitive verb <this could impact on our decision>: Stage 3
   Current ratio (might affect the vs. *might impact on): 11:1

*impactful, adj., is barbarous jargon dating from the mid-1960s. Unlike other adjectives ending in -ful, it cannot be idiomatically rendered in the phrase full of [+ quality], as in beautiful (= full of beauty), regretful (= full of regret), scornful (= full of scorn), and spiteful (= full of spite). If impact truly denotes a quality, it does so only in its newfangled uses as a verb <it impacts us all> and as an adjective <the mechanic’s tool known as an impact driver>.

Whatever its future may be, *impactful is, for now, a word to be scorned. Among its established replacements are influential and powerful—e.g.-

- “If Labor Secretary John Dunlop can win labor and management support for such far-reaching changes . . . he will have made an infinitely impactful contribution to the fight against inflation.” M.S. Forbes Jr., “Help the City if It Helps Itself,” Forbes, 15 Aug. 1975, at 15. (A possible—and less hyperbolic—revision: If Labor Secretary John Dunlop can win labor and management support for such far-reaching changes . . . he will have made a truly significant contribution to the fight against inflation.)
- “Else makes several short but impactful [read memorable] appearances as Laura, the production’s assistant stage manager.” Christine Dolen, “A ‘Godot’ Parody at Thinking Cap Finds the Laughs in Waiting to Go On,” Miami Herald, 29 Aug. 2015, Entertainment §.

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*impactful for influential or powerful: Stage 2

impale (= to drive a stake or lance through [usu. a living body]) is the standard spelling, *empale being a variant spelling. Sometimes the word is misspelled *impail-e.g.: “Another pattern with a nautical basis is the ‘Pineapple,’ for returning sea captains impailed [read impaled] these fruits on their fenceposts as symbols of good luck.” William Zimmer, “Cozy Household Items Show Top Quality Artistry,” N.Y. Times, 30 Nov. 1986, §, at 38.


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1. impale misspelled *impail: Stage 1
   Current ratio (impaled vs. *impailed): 1,068:1
   2. *empale for impale: Stage 1
   Current ratio (impaled vs. *empaled): 192:1

impanel. See empanel.

impact = (1) to give (information, a quality, etc.) <the sage imparted wisdom to dozens of followers daily>; or (2) to make known or explain <she imparted the details of her plan>. In good idiom, you impart something to a person (as opposed to imparting a person with something)—e.g.-“While in the hole, she meets some truly deep roots who impart her with supernatural powers [read impart supernatural powers to her].”


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. *impact someone with something for impart something to someone: Stage 1
   2. impart misused for imbue: Stage 1
   Current ratio (imbued with vs. *imparded with): 124:1

impartable; impartible. These are two different words. Impartable = capable of being imparted (made known or bestowed). Impartible = indivisible. In the first, the
prefix im- is intensive; in the second, it’s negative. Historically, the word impassible has occurred with far greater frequency than impartible. See -able (a).

impartial. See partially (b).

*impass. See impasse.

impassable. See impassible.

impassable (= [1] a deadlock; or [2] a blind alley), a French loanword, is sometimes misspelled *impass—e.g.: “Finally Brearley broke the impass [read impasse], taking the puck around the back of the Renegades’ net and scoring on a wraparound shot at 19:01.” Katrina Waugh, “Roanoke Fights Back in 2nd,” Roanoke Times, 6 Dec. 1997, at C1.

impassibly. See impassible.

impassible. See impassible.

impassible; impassable. These words have separate origins and meanings. Impassible = incapable of feeling or suffering. Impassable = not capable of being passed. Since the 18th century, impassible has occurred with far greater frequency. See -able (a). Cf. passable.

Occasionally, impassible wrongly displaces impassable—e.g.:


impassionate. Because this adjective can mean either “impassioned” or “dispassionate,” it is best avoided in favor of one of those defining words. In short, it is a skunked term. Despite its absence from American desk dictionaries, impassionate is still used by journalists in both senses—e.g.:

- “An intense, impassionate [read impassioned] personality, even when she was young. Bush began putting on variety shows at age 5, charging the neighbors 15 cents to attend.” Joanne Kaufman, “Barbara Bush Rides Out the Pain of a Doomed Soap Opera Role,” People, 1 Feb. 1988, at 56.
- “But the National Rifle Association said crime has skyrocketed nationally and that impassionate [read dispassionate] statistics don’t back up Griffin’s stance.” Barbara Carmen, “Gun Bill Opposed by Council,” Columbus Dispatch, 13 June 1995, at C2.

*impass. See impasse.

impenitence (= the quality or state of not regretting something one has done and of having no intention of refraining in the future) has been the established form since the late 18th century. *Impenitency is a needless variant.

current ratio (an impass vs. *an impass): 699:1

impecunious (= poor; penniless) is sometimes misused in either of two ways. Some writers seem to think it means “unthrifty,” as in she was utterly impecunious with her earnings. Other writers mistake the word as meaning “hapless, unfortunate,” as in the impecunious junior left to work on the assignment through the night. For the antonym pecunious, see pecuniary.

impel. See compel.

impending. See pending.

imperative. See imperious (b).

imperial. See imperious (A).

imperil, vb., makes imperilled and imperiling in AmE, imperilled and imperiling in BrE. See spelling (b).

imperious. A. And imperial. Deriving from the same root (L. imper- “power over a family, region, or state”), these words have been differentiated by their suffixes. Imperial = of or belonging to an emperor or empire. E.g.: “Hoagland notes that the imperial collection now on view at the National Gallery was removed from the Forbidden City, but he fails to point out that the transfer occurred in the 1930s to avoid capture by the Japanese, not the Communists, as he suggests.” “Clues to China,” Wash. Post, 22 Feb. 1997, at A21.


B. And imperative. An imperative (= commanding, obligatory) tone can come from anyone in a position of authority; an imperious tone comes from someone who, in that position, tries to wield power in a dictatorial way.

impermissible. So spelled. See -ABLE.

 impersonation; *personation. The latter is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

 Current ratio: 10:1

impersuadable; *impersuasible. See persuadable.

impervious; *imperviable. Impervious = (1) not allowing something to pass through <the concrete in the basement is impervious to water>; or (2) not open to <some people are impervious to reason>. Sense 1, which is literal, most commonly (but not exclusively) refers to the soaking of water or some other liquid through a surface—e.g.:

- “Sunset Valley's subdivision regulations at the time allowed builders to cover as much as 70 percent of the land with impervious cover, such as parking lots or buildings that keep storm water from naturally filtering into the ground.” Steven Kreytak, “Sunset Valley Puts Development on Hold,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 2 Dec. 2002, at A1.

- “There is definitely a story—about Bolshevik resistance to the White Russians—and there is definitely a hero, the square-jawed, crazily handsome Timosh, who remains impervious to bullets when he bares his chest to attackers in the climactic scene.” Philip Kennicott, ”Ukraine's Dovzhenko, Auteur of the Proletariat,” Wash. Post, 3 Dec. 2002, at C1.

Sense 2 is figurative (”thick skull” comes to mind)—e.g.: “To be biased is to be settled on an issue because of one’s background, and to be impervious to reason and common sense.” Jay Evensen, ”It’s Rocky Who Is Divisive on Plaza Issue,” Deseret News (Salt Lake City), 24 Nov. 2002, at A1.

Avoid using impervious in the watered-down sense “not affected by”—e.g.: “And he says he is untroubled by the criticism from Congress. Much of it, he says, is domestic politics, aimed at President Bush, whose recent electoral victories have made him impervious [read immune] to other political broadsides.” Christopher Marquis, ”Saudi Tries to Calm U.S. Opinion,” N.Y. Times, 2 Dec. 2002, at A21.

*Imperviable is a NEEDLESS VARIANT that has seldom appeared in print.

Current ratio: 2,579:1

impetus. See impotence (b).

impinge; infringe. Impinge is intransitive only, followed by on or upon—e.g.: “He acknowledges that the line separating ’line’ art from craft is blurry in the present era. He even calls making such distinctions ’dangerous,’ likely to impinge on the creative ’elbow room’ of artists.” Anna Webb, ”Frame Job,” Idaho Statesman, 5 Nov. 2002, Thrive §, at 28. Infringe, by contrast, may be either transitive or intransitive—e.g.:

- “Lilly, in a federal lawsuit filed Tuesday in its Indianapolis hometown, said the generic treatment would infringe four patents related to the drug.” ”Lilly Sues to Block Osteoporosis Generic,” L.A. Times, 28 Nov. 2002, Bus. §, at 3 (transitive).


H.W. Fowler pointed out that infringe was historically transitive far more commonly than intransitive, “but 20th-century newspaper columns give a very different impression, viz that infringe can no longer stand at all without upon.” Nowadays things aren’t quite that bad, though: the two uses are split about evenly. The distinction is that patents and copyrights are typically infringed, while other rights are typically infringed on. As a matter of style, however, the transitive construction is almost always stronger.

Though impinge and infringe are often used as if they were interchangeable, we might keep in mind the following connotations from the literal senses: to impinge is to strike or dash upon something else; to infringe is to break in and thereby damage, violate, or weaken.

impious is pronounced /im-pi-әs/, not /im-pi-әs/.

implement = (1) to carry out or put into effect; to take practical steps toward the fulfillment of; or (2) to furnish with implements. In sense 1, which is more common, the word typifies bureacratic but is sometimes undeniably useful. Carry out is often better and less vague.

implementer. Although the variant spelling *implementor predominated for much of the late 20th century, today implementer is considered standard.

Current ratio: 4:1

implication is the noun corresponding to both implicate and imply. Thus it means (1) “the action of implicating, or involving, entangling, or entwining” <Smith’s implication of Jones in the crime>; (2) “the action of implying; the fact of being implied or involved” <by necessary implication>; or (3) “that which is implied or involved” <implications of wrongdoing>.

implicit (= implied) functions as a correlative of explicit (= express or expressed), just as implied is a correlative of express <no warranty, either express or implied>. H.W. Fowler called implicit ”a shifty word” and suggested that the language would be better off without it. The problem, he pointed out, is that while implied and express are neat opposites, implicit and explicit seem to overlap when they mean ”complete, unmitigated” <implicit trust> <explicit pornography>. In this sense, the words can sometimes become interchangeable—e.g.: “Gun enthusiasts, particularly those most active in the NRA, share no implicit [read innate] trust in a beneficent government. . . . Explicit faith is reserved for family and community.” Michael Powell, ”Call to Arms,” Wash. Post (Mag.), 6 Aug. 2002, at W8. (For more on using different words to mean the same thing, as with trust and faith in that quotation, see INELEGANT VARIATION.)
The OED labels this usage both obsolete and erroneous. But in fact it shows no signs of disappearing, and “erroneous” may be a bit harsh. Noah Webster used the word in this disputed sense: “To men who have been accustomed to repose almost implicit confidence in the authors of our principal dictionaries and grammars, it may appear at first incredible, that such writers as Johnson and Lowth, should have mistaken many of the fundamental principles of the language.” Noah Webster, A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language iii (1806). In that book, Webster defined implicit as “resting upon another, involved, real,” and implicitly as “absolutely, by inference.”

Logic is on the side of this usage: if one has implicit faith in something, no evidence or rationalization is needed to bolster that belief. The Century Dictionary recognized this sense of implicit in 1895: “involved in or resulting from perfect confidence in or deference to some authority or witness; hence, submissive, unquestioning, blind.” And the phrase implicit faith does not carry any negative connotation the way blind faith may. So in certain set phrases in religious contexts, the writer may have no choice. Even so, the Presbyterian Church USA muddied the waters a bit when it adopted a statement on faith in June 2002. That document contained the following implicit reference to non-Christians: “We neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith.”

Still, in most contexts the writer is well advised to seek an alternative wording—e.g.:

- “In an ideal situation, police, prosecutors and the medical examiner’s office should have implicit [read complete] confidence in the skill and professionalism of each other if justice is to be adequately served.” “Benz Should Make Graceful Retreat in Response to ‘No Confidence’ Vote,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 20 May 1996, at A8.

See impliedly.

- implied; express. These adjectives are correlative <there are no express or implied warranties>. Expressed is sometimes incorrectly contrasted with implied. See express.

- impliedly; implicitly. Though neither form is strictly incorrect, impliedly (answering to expressly) is awkward and characteristic of legalese. H.W. Fowler wrote merely that “implicitly is a bad form” (FMEU1 at 260). Though unknown to most people, it is a favorite of lawyers. Impliedly is old, dating in the OED from ca. 1400. Still, implicitly—long the usual term—is normally an improvement. See implicit.

- imply. See infer (b).

- import, n.; importation. A product that comes into a country from abroad is an import. The process of bringing it in is importation.

- importantly. This word is enjoying an odd vogue. Here, Meg Greenfield uses it puzzlingly: “But almost without exception, it seems, the thing [a politician’s prospective embarrassment] comes back and importantly it looks worse and gets worse the second time around.” Meg Greenfield, “We’re Wallowing Again,” Newsweek, 25 Apr. 1994, at 72. See more importantly & sentence adverbs.

- importune, v.; importunity. See import.

- *importunacy. See importunity.

- importune is a verb meaning “to beg or beseech; entreat.” It is also a needless variant of the adjective importunate (= troublesomely urgent) and an obsolete variant of inopportune. The intended meaning in the following sentence is not clear, but perhaps inopportune would have been the right word: “It is a minor comfort to learn that Soviet audiences in the 1950’s and 60’s coughed as importunely [read inopportunely] during concerts as their free-world counterparts.” Bernard Holland, “Classical View: Horsepower in Place of History,” N.Y. Times, 18 Feb. 1996, § 2, at 33.

- impossible. See adjectives (b).
*impossible to underestimate. See underestimate.
impostor; *imposter; imposture. The -or spelling is preferred over -er for the actor. Imposture, a term now rarely seen (though common in Early Modern English), is the act of fraud itself or a spurious thing (and of course, the spurious thing could also be the actor). See -er (A) & SPELLING (A).

Current ratio (impostor vs. *imposter): 3:1

impotence. A. And sterility. Impotence (/im-pa-tan[t]s/) refers to the inability of a male to copulate (esp. to achieve an erection), and sterility to anyone’s inability to procreate. Impotence in the modern literal sense should be used only in reference to men. *Impotency is a needless variant. See potency.

Current ratio (impotence vs. *impotency): 11:1

B. And impietus. Impotence for impetus (= force, impulse) is a malapropism worthy of Mrs. Malaprop, Mistress Quickly, or Archie Bunker. E.g.: “The main impotence [read impetus] for recruiting people who have published is to ensure that they are used to long hours.” This is a blunder that professional writers seldom make: most instances occur in unpublished documents.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
impotence misused for impetus: Stage 1

*impracticability. See empower.

impracticality (= practical impossibility) is sometimes misspelled *impracticibility—e.g.: “The impracticibility [read impracticability] of backing repository water back over Hanford reactor sites helped prevent construction of Ben Franklin Dam.” Bill Dietrich, “Ecology—An Opportunity or Embarrassment?” Seattle Times, 9 Nov. 1992, at D1.
impractical. A. And impracticable. Impractical = not manifested in practice; incapable of being put to good use. Impracticable = not workable or accomplishable; infeasible. Although impractical is considered an ordinary word today and impracticable an unusual one, that was not always true: from the late 17th century until the mid-20th, impracticable appeared far more commonly in print than its shorter sibling. Cf. practical.

B. And impractical. H.W. Fowler had a point in believing that “the constant confusion between practicable and practical is a special reason for making use of im- and un- to add to the difference in the negatives” (FMEU1 at 260). But unpractical has not been used much in AmE since about 1900, and it has been in decline in BrE since 1950. Even so, it occasionally appears (perhaps because of Fowler’s influence)—e.g.: “The letter on behalf of Mr. Underwood’s ‘Ketchup-Only’ bill is a spoof on the arguments being made for the English-only bill, an Underwood aide said, adding that the Guam Democrat is seeking to illustrate his point that making English the official language of the United States is unpractical.” “Spoof Pours It On in ‘Try to Nationalize Ketchup,’” Toledo Blade, 20 Oct. 1995. The word unpractical isn’t included in W11, and even in the (British) COD the entry under impractical is longer than the one under unpractical (which is moribund). See possible (A) & practical.

Current ratio (impractical vs. unpractical): 13:1

impregnable; impregnatable. Etymologically, these two words are unrelated—the g in impregnable having been added by Renaissance philologists who misunderstood the history of the Middle English imprecable (= not able to be taken). In any event, the meanings today are also quite distinct. Impregnable = not capable of subjugation by force; not subject to being taken by assault. Impregnatable = [1] capable of being made pregnant, or [2] capable of being permeated or saturated.
impresario. So spelled. See SPELLING (A).
impressive; impressive; impressionable. Impressive = likely to impress people <an impressive array of trophies>. Impressive (a fairly rare word) = easily impressed <if that doesn’t impress you, you’re not impressive>. Impressionable = easily influenced <impressionable children>.

Impressible is misused for impressive especially in the adverbial form—e.g.:
• “There is no doubt that Gayle Martin, who performed impressibly [read impressively] on the piano at the National Gallery last night, has developed her own personal musical style.” Joan Reinthaler, “Gayle Martin,” Wash. Post, 23 June 1980, at C9.
• “And as for whether Reeves can act, he does impressibly [read impressively] rise a notch above his usual mediocre performances.” Kris Dessen, “‘Speed’ Hits Perfect Pace,” News Trib. (Tacoma), 11 June 1994, at H2.
• “It was Higgins’ impressibly [read impressively] swinging, persistently groove-driven drumming—along with the sterling work of bassist Haden—that laid the foundation for the Coleman group’s free-jazz flights of fancy.” Jon Thurber, “Billy Higgins” (obit.), L.A. Times, 4 May 2001, Metro §, at 6.

Impressible is the preferred spelling—not *impressible. See -ABLE (A).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
impressibly misused for impressively: Stage 1

imprimatur; *imprimatura; *imprimature. The normal form for ordinary purposes is imprimatur (pronounced /im-prı-ma-tər/ or /im-prı-ma-tər/), meaning literally “let it be printed,” from the formula used in the Roman Catholic Church by an official licensor, approving a work to be printed. This term (now meaning “commendatory license or sanction; sponsorship”) takes the preposition on—e.g.: “The announcement . . . puts Pená’s imprimatur on a draft proposal that was announced two months ago.” “Rocky Flats Cleanup May Speed Up,” Salt Lake Trib., 8 Aug. 1997, at A14. *Imprimatura is a need-less variant.
*Imprimatur (= a print, impression) is an obsolete term sometimes wrongly used for *imprimature—e.g.: “He produced the special under the *imprimatur [read *improper] of his Daddy’s Krazee production company.” Allan Johnson, “Standup Guy,” Chicago Trib., 26 Dec. 1991, at C15.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
*imprimature for *improper: Stage 1
Current ratio (in order of headwords): 368:11:1

**improper noun. See proper noun.**

*improprious is a nonword that sometimes displaces improper—e.g.: • “We’ll try to come to grips with the facts and see if there was any *improprious [read *improper] activity.” Michael Eastman, “Supply Purchases for Greenbelt Homes Questioned,” Wash. Post, 29 Nov. 1979, Md. Weekly §, at 3 (quoting Joseph Jenkins). • “If somebody else feels it’s *improprious [read *improper] then they’re just going to have to live with it.” Colleen Heild, “Lottery Meeting Kept Quiet,” Albuquerque J., 4 May 1997, at A1 (quoting Bruce Wiggins).

*improprious is sometimes misspelled *improvize—e.g.: “Harrelson likes to gamble and *improvise [read *improvisation] his way out of jams.” Robert Denerstein, “Formula Derails This ‘Money Train,’” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 24 Nov. 1995, at D6.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
*improvisation misused for *improper: Stage 1
Current ratio (improper vs. *improprious): 11,972:1

improvise is sometimes misspelled *improvize—e.g.: “Harrelson likes to gamble and *improvise [read *improvisation] his way out of jams.” Robert Denerstein, “Formula Derails This ‘Money Train,’” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 24 Nov. 1995, at D6.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
improvisation misused for *improper: Stage 1
Current ratio: 235:1

improvisor; *improvisor; *improvisator. The usual term for “someone who improvises” is *improvisor. (The -or spelling is not preferred.) *improvisator is an archaic formalism. *improvisatore is an Italianate literary word meaning “someone who composes verse or drama extemporaneously.”

Current ratio (improvisor vs. *improvisor vs. *improvisator): 23:1:4:1

*improvise. See *improvisation.

imprudent; impudent. *Imprudent = rash; indiscreet. *Impudent = insolently disrespectful; shamelessly presumptuous.

impugn. A. And *oppugn; *repugn. *Impugn (= to challenge, call into question) has been the most usual of these three terms since the late 17th century. E.g.: “In a second ruling today, Judge Sweeney also appeared to *impugn the church’s handling of accused molesters who had been placed back in parishes after receiving therapy.” Pam Belluck, “Judge Denies Church’s Bid to Seal Records on Priests,” N.Y. Times, 26 Nov. 2002, at A18.

*Oppugn and *repugn are less frequently encountered. *Oppugn = to controvert or call into question; to fight against. *Repugn is an archaisms meaning “to offer opposition or strike against; to affect disagreeably or be repugnant to.”

B. For *impute. This is a strange error, *impute meaning “to ascribe or attribute.” E.g.: “Overall, Kupetz rejected the notion that a court should simply ignore the actual intention of the parties and *impute [read *impute] constructive intent in every instance.” Irving D. Labovitz, “Countering Fraudulent Conveyance and Voidable Preference Concerns in LBOs,” J. Commercial Lending, Mar. 1993, at 34. See *impute.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**
*impute (vs. *impugnament): 2:1

impunity. A. Meaning and Use. This word means “free from punishment or other adverse consequences”; it typically appears in the idiom with *impunity <she can fire her predecessor’s staff with *impunity>.

Sometimes this set phrase, with *impunity, gets mangled into *without *impunity (which seems to suggest that punishment or adverse consequences would follow, but that’s never the intended sense). This error appears most frequently in sportswriting—e.g.: • “Without Camby patrolling the middle, the Pacers drove to the hoop *without *impunity [read *with *impunity].” Marc Berman, “Knicks Say No Camby, No Excuses,” N.Y. Post, 11 Nov. 2001, at 102.

• “I would have the NCAA . . . [a]llow athletes to transfer to another school *without *impunity [read *with *impunity], should their head coach leave for a job elsewhere.” Kirk Bohls, “Some Prudent Suggestions for the NCAA,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 27 Jan. 2002, at C1.

• “Reggie Miller is 36, still firing jumpers [i.e., jump shots] *without *impunity [read *with *impunity], still building his Hall of Fame resume at a point when most great two-guards have lost their legs, lost their desire, lost their passion and nerve and mental edge.” Dave D’Alessandro, “Miller May Be Down to His Final Shot,” Star-Ledger (Newark), 28 Apr. 2002, Sports §, at 7.

For more on this word, see *immunity.
B. *Impugnity. Some writers apparently confuse the word "imputation" as having some association with "imputa- (to ascribe; to regard [usu. something bad] as resulting from or being possessed by)" takes to. There is a growing idiomatic bias in favor of "imputing undesirable things or qualities—e.g.: • “That in no way reflected my being,” she said in an interview, "imputing the nude photos to a few foolish days of being stupid.” Louise Continenti, “Vanessa’s Revenge,” Buffalo News, 23 June 1996, at G1.


• “Rambo seems reluctant to impute unsavory motives to either pastor, and there are no sex or accounting scandals in this church.” Margaret Gray, “Competition in Clergy,” L.A. Times, 24 Aug. 2015, Calendar §, at 3.

See impugn (n).

I myself. See myself & I personally.

IN-. See en- & negatives (A).

in; into. These prepositions aren’t ordinarily inter-changeable, and care must be taken in choosing between them: in denotes position or location, and into denotes movement. So a person who swims in the ocean is already there, while a person who swims into the ocean is moving from, say, the mouth of a river. There are many exceptions, however, especially with popular idioms <go jump in a lake>.

inability. See disability (A).

in absentia (= not present), typically used in legal contexts, is sometimes misspelled *in abstentia—e.g.: “Congress holds the key. It can permit courts to hold trials of defendants ‘in abstentia [read in absentia],’ with the defendants not present.” Dan Robinson, Nuevo Laredo: A Prelude to War 361 (2009).

in accord; in accordance. See accord, n.

in a . . . context. See context of.

in actual fact. See fact (c).

in actuality. This phrase, which became voguish during the 20th century, is virtually always inferior to actually.

inadmissible. So spelled. *Inadmissible is a common misspelling. See -able (A).

inadver ternce; inadvertency. The differentiation between these terms should be carefully observed. Inadver tence = an inadvertent act; a fault of inattention. Inadver tency = the quality or state of being inadvertent <the inadvertency of the act is not disputed.> *Inadver tency is a common misspelling.

inadvisable; unadvisable. The latter, though common in the 19th century, has become a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

inalienable; unalienable. The first is slightly better formed, with a Latinate prefix as well as suffix. And although Jefferson used unalienable in the Declaration of Independence (“unalienable rights”)—that form predominated in the 18th century—inalienable is nearly five times as common as unalienable in modern print sources. Hence inalienable is preferable in all contexts except those where the Declaration of Independence is directly quoted or cited. But even then, unalienable is often displaced—e.g.: “The Declaration of Independence offered a remarkable mission statement…’We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable [read unalienable] Rights.’” Tristram Hunt, “Can Obama Purge America’s Original Sin?” Times (London), 30 Aug. 2008, Features §, at 17.

*inalterable. See unalterable.

in a —— manner. See manner.

inanity; inanition. As the noun corresponding to inane, inanity means “intellectual or spiritual emptiness or shallowness; vapidity.” Inanition, by contrast, means “emptiness from lack of nourishment.” Inanition sometimes gets misused for inanity—e.g.: “Elvis didn’t have to appear in just ‘Elvis movies,’ those formulaic monuments to cinematic inanition [read inanity], full of females, fistfights, forgettable songs—and little else.” Mark Feeney, “Elvis Movies,” Am. Scholar, Winter 2001, at 53, 54.

See Impugnity Index
inaugurate

Grant White wrote that right now. But these are hardly absolutes: if you're temporary lack of ability <I'm unable to accept your offer incapable worker>, while inchoate, with perhaps a slight difference in connotation. The words are basically synomy-
calistic style is to omit both commas. For the comma to precede it, although typically one does. Modern jour-
need not follow this abbreviation—e.g.: "Pantheon, Inc." in behalf of; on behalf of.
See in back of.

inaugural, n.; inauguration. The ceremony for a pres-
rent entering office is the inauguration; the speech
the president makes on this occasion is the inaugu-
address, sometimes shortened to inaugural. The word
is correctly pronounced with the liquid -u- sound in the penultimate syllable: /i-naw-gy-ral/.
inchoate is a formal word (some might say pompous) for begin or start, being more formal even
than commence. Little has changed since Richard Grant White wrote that inauguration "is a word [that]
might better be eschewed by all those who do not wish to talk high-flying nonsense." Words and Their Uses, Past and Present 128 (2d ed. 1872). Cf. insomuch.
in back of. See back of.
in behalf of; on behalf of. See behalf.
Inc. Unless otherwise required by syntax, a comma

inflatable. Inflatable, which refers to peo-
means "lacking in artistic taste; not appreciative of art" <a workaday, inartistic writer of pulp fiction>. Unartistic, which refers to things, means "not relating or conforming to art" <an unartistic photograph>.
inasmuch as; in as much as; insofar as; in so far as. In AmE, the standard spellings are inasmuch as and insofar as. In modern BrE, usage is split: inasmuch as is standard, and in so far as is preferred as four separate words.
However the phrase is spelled, though, inasmuch as is almost always inferior to because or since. In fact, as H.W. Fowler noted, "its only recommendation as compared with since is its pomposity" (FMEU1 at 263). See insofar as. Cf. insomuch.
inartistic; unartistic. Inartistic, which refers to people, means "lacking in artistic taste; not appreciative of art". Inflatable, which refers to things, means "not relating or conforming to art".
incapacitation; incapacity. These words should be distinguished as follows: incapacitation = the action of incapacitating or rendering incapable; incapacity = lack of ability or qualification in some legal respect. See capacity.
in case; in cases in which. See case (A).

incase. See encase.
incentivize; *incent, vb. These neologisms—dating from the mid-1970s—have become vogue words, especially in American business jargon. E.g.:
• “Together, the programs represent the most aggressive incentivizing to date by Honda.” “Subaru, BMW Are Now Offering Consumer-Incentive Programs,” Atlanta J.-Const., 15 Mar. 1991, § 5, at 6. (A possible revision: Together, the programs provide the best incentives that Honda has ever offered.)
• “And you know, we shouldn't incent [read provide incentives for] all the wrong behaviors. Right now, what we're doing is incentivizing [read encouraging] young girls to leave home, to not marry the person they're . . . having a child with because they won't get the welfare check if they're married.” Jack Thomas, "Ann Romney's Sweetheart Deal," Boston Globe, 20 Oct. 1994, at 61.

*Incentivize, an -ize barbarism, is much more common than *incent, a back-formation. There is no good incentive to use either one.

inception; incipien
cipience. Both words mean “beginning, commencement, initiation.” The difference is that inception refers to the action or process of beginning, while incipience refers to the fact or state of having begun. Inception is far more often the appropriate word.
inchoate. A. Meaning and Pronunciation. *Incho-)ate, pronounced /in-koh-i/ in AmE and /in-koh-at/ in BrE (always three syllables), means “just begun; in the early stages of forming; not fully developed”—e.g.: “American understanding of Islamic terrorism then was still inchoate. Al-Qaida was barely on the screen.” Terry McDermott et al., "Al-Qaida 'Engineer' Slips Dragnet," Newsday (N.Y.), 27 Dec. 2002, at A42.

B. And chote. The prefix is an intensive in-, not a negative or privative in-. So the back-formation
choate (= complete)—premised, as it is, on the notion that inchoate is a negative—makes little sense. But it’s now established in law <choate lien>.

C. And chaotic. Because what is undeveloped is usually also confused and incoherent, the context in which inchoate is used often suggests those errant senses. The resemblance of -choate to chaotic probably reinforces this misunderstanding. For whatever reason, inchoate is often misused to mean something more like chaotic than aborning—e.g.:

- “But when Thursday night came, Satre found the words, talking about how it is possible to fall in love with institutions—Stanford, in his case—and ‘even something as inchoate [read chaotic?] as a company, Harrah’s,” Thomas J. Walsh, “Phil Satre Stepping into Elder Statesman’s Role,” Reno Gaz.-J., 12 Jan. 2003, at E1.

D. And innate. Harder to understand is the misuse of inchoate to mean “innate” or “inherent”—e.g.:

- “Music Man is not one of the most wise or even coherent products of American musical theater. . . . But, like Oklahoma, it can be mesmerizing in all its energy, optimism and certainty about the inchoate [read inherent?] goodness of the American character.” David Zurawik, “Forecast: Warm Glow Moves In from River City, Iowa,” Baltimore Sun, 16 Feb. 2003, at F14.

E. And incident. Although these words overlap, their primary senses are distinguishable. An incident is an occurrence or happening <several unfortunate incidents led to the curfew>. Though incidence sometimes bears this sense, it more often means “the rate of occurrence” <a high incidence of truancy>. In fact, whenever incidence appears where incident would fit, a switch is probably in order—e.g.:

- “In the last couple of years there have been several incidences [read incidents] of applause in the middle of movements.” Richard Dyer, “No Encore of This Audience, Please,” Boston Globe, 9 Oct. 1998, at D15.
- “Police don’t have simple answers for these unrelated incidences [read incidents], but they believe it could be a combination of drugs, gangs, population spurs, socioeconomics and heat-of-the-moment exchanges.” Javier Erik Olvera, “String of Homicides Stuns Tulare,” Fresno Bee, 16 Mar. 2003, at A1.

This error is common in educated speech. Also, beware that incidents and incidence are homophones that may give listeners trouble.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

incidence misused for incident: Stage 2

B. Incident Meaning “accident.” See euphemisms.

incidentally. A. Generally. This sentence adverb commonly introduces casual asides and minor digressions—e.g.:

- “The dictionary says a schmuck is a person who is ‘clumsy or stupid; an oaf: (Incidentally, there are four people named Oaf with phone listings.)” Mike Royko, “Downloading Some Lowdown Computer Statistics,” Houston Chron., 20 Jan. 1995, Houston §, at 2.
- “Incidentally, the best-tailored trousers have a cuff, from 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 inches wide.” Lois Fenton, “Flood Pants’ Shrink Image,” Chicago Sun-Times, 15 Feb. 1997, § 2, at 37.

H.W. Fowler’s observation, though too harsh, still holds a kernel of truth: “those who find it most useful are not the best writers” (FMEU1 at 264).

B. And incidently. Incidentally means “loosely, casually” or “by the way.” Incidentally (a rare word that the OED labels obsolete) means “so as to be incident to or resultant from; so as to depend on or appertain to something else.” The most common mistake with these words is to misspell incidently, no doubt because of the pronunciation—e.g.:

- “Incidently [read Incidentally], her openness is an indicator of the good quality of your relationship with her as well.” Sylvia B. Rimng, “Parents Sleeping Nude Shouldn’t Bother Child,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 18 Jan. 1997, at E2.

Cf. accidentally.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

incidence misused for incidentally: Stage 1

incident; incidence. A. Meanings. Although these words overlap, their primary senses are distinguishable. An incident is an occurrence or happening <several unfortunate incidents led to the curfew>. Though incidence sometimes bears this sense, it more often means “the rate of occurrence” <a high incidence of truancy>. In fact, whenever incidence appears where incident would fit, a switch is probably in order—e.g.:

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LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

incidence misused for incidentally: Stage 1

incident to; incidental to. Though to some extent interchangeable historically, these phrases have undergone a plain differentiation that has gained acceptance among stylists. Incidental to means “happening by chance and subordinate to some other thing; peripheral”—e.g.: “Inside a Niketown or the REI store in Seattle, shopping seems incidental to the spectacle of the store.” Hugo Kugiya, “What’s in Store?” Seattle Times, 19 Oct. 1997, at 16.

Incident to is a legalism meaning “closely related to; naturally appearing with”—e.g.: “The government
argued that the search of the Cadillac’s passenger compartment was permissible since it was incident to Adam’s arrest.” “Search & Seizure,” Chicago Daily Law Bull., 1 July 1994, at 1. Over the history of Modern English, incident to has appeared in print far more frequently than incidental to.

incipient. See inception.

incipient; insipient. The former means “beginning, in an initial stage”; the latter is an obsolete word meaning “unwise, foolish.” But incipient is often misspelled with an -s—e.g.: • “Mexico lost little time reasserting itself as a no-nonsense nation renowned for dealing in summary justice. Incipient [read Incipent] terrorism was brutally repressed for a couple of years, then burst forth between 1972 and 1975.” Bill Waters, “Guatemalan President Cautions,” Ariz. Republic, 4 May 1986, at C6. • “Allen devised a program for factory workers at Bridgeport Machines to detect the signs and symptoms of angina pain and incipient [read incipient] heart attacks.” James Lomuscio, “First a Checkup, Then to Baseball,” N.Y. Times, 6 Aug. 1995, at CN13. • “What’s more, [Ralph Nader] has tapped into an insipient [read incipient] social movement that raised its voice even before his candidacy came along.” Salim Muwakkil, “Gore: Our Defense Against a 3-Headed Beast,” Chicago Trib., 6 Nov. 2000, Commentary §, at 17.

Given the rarity of insipient, it’s a little surprising to see it used correctly—e.g.: • “But spare us the inevitable flood of self-satisfied, self-congratulatory interviews that will follow this insipient actor’s [i.e., Michael Caine’s] resurrection, rendering indigestible our morning coffee.” Letter of Richard Harris, “A Sharp Kick from a Man Called Horse,” Sunday Times (London), 6 Aug. 1995, § 3, at 8. • “Incipient proposals to create and raise taxes are hardly what D.C. officials had in mind when they established the commission in 1996.” Editorial, “Kill the Lawyers’ Tax,” Wash. Times, 4 May 1998, at A16. • “Some legislators tried to change the constitution to allow (and therefore guarantee) unequal and ineffective public education in Texas. Fortunately, they failed to convince their less insipient colleagues and the public of the merits of their ambition.” Editorial, “Texas Public School Finance Needs Efficiency Experts,” Houston Chron., 8 July 2001, Outlook §, at 2.

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incipent misused for incipient: Stage 1

incitement; *incitation. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 26:1

inclement (= unmerciful, stormy) is increasingly replaced by the malapropism and nonword *inclimate. Because inclement weather is such a common phrase—a set phrase, really—many have come to hear the phrase as a redundant comment on the climate as well as the weather. Hence the erroneous *inclimate weather—e.g.: • “Because of the soggy turf and inclimate [read inclement] weather Thursday, the Bears practiced at South Park instead of behind their traditional Halas Hall facility.”

In pronouncing the word, stress the second syllable, not the first.

**Language-Change index**

*inclimate weather for inclement weather: Stage 1*  
Current ratio (inclement weather vs. inclimate weather): 781:1

*inclose. See enclose.*

*inclosure. See enclosure.*

*includable. See includible.*

**include. A. Introducing Exhaustive or Nonexhaustive List.** The word has traditionally introduced a nonexhaustive list but is now coming to be widely misused for consists of—e.g.: “The Department of Public Safety report detailing the reprimand was released to the AP . . . one day after the all-male, three-member Public Safety Commission cleared the Rangers of wrongdoing in a separate sexual harassment charge.” Chip Brown, “Bush Defends Rangers Amid Allegations of Discrimination,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 14 July 1995, at B1. Only three people are on the commission, and all are named.

Hence the age-old lawyers’ phrase including but not limited to is, strictly speaking, a redundancy. See Antonin Scalia & Bryan A. Garner, Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts 132-33 (2012).

**B. To include.** Use of the phrase to include to mean including is a silly bit of officialese. Unfortunately, it’s much too common in military, healthcare, and legal writing—e.g.:  
• “Mrs. Vieira consented to a search of the home to include [read home, including] their home computer.” U.S. v. Vieira, 64 M.J. 524, 527 (A.F Ct. Crim. App. 2006).
• “As an initial matter, this case demonstrates that a hospital can be held liable for the acts of the personnel working at the facility, to include [read including] doctors.” Blake J. Delaney, “Improper Use of Forceps Results in Large Federal Tort Verdict,” Healthcare Risk Mgmt., 1 Feb. 2007.

**includible.** Predominantly so spelled in all varieties of English—not *includable. Weirdly enough, its antonym is spelled excludable. See -ABLE (A).**

Current ratio: 3:1

**inclusive.** This word is often helpful in expressing lengths of time. For example, the phrase from November 1 to December 15 inclusive makes it clear that both the starting date and the ending date are included; without the word inclusive, the meaning is debatable.

**incognito (= [1] in disguise; or [2] under an assumed name) is sometimes misused for incommunicado (= unable, unwilling, or forbidden to communicate with others)—e.g.:**

• “The crackdown, which began almost two weeks ago, has included the arrest and imprisonment of activists, some of whom are apparently being held incognito [read incommunicado] by Russian troops and the weeks that followed the prisoner exchange.” Jamie Dettmer, “Putin Revives Soviet-Style Media Curbs in Russia,” Wash. Times, 27 Feb. 2000, at C12.

• “Warring with this nation’s tradition of freedom, the Bush administration . . . [h]as rounded up hundreds of foreign nationals living in the United States and has held them incognito [read incommunicado].” Gregory Stanford, “Fight Against Terror Must Not Trample Rights,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 8 Sept. 2002, Crossroads §, at J1.

Although the traditional pronunciation was /in-kog-ni-toh/, the standard today is /in-kog-nee-toh/.

**Language-Change index**

**incognito misused for incommunicado: Stage 1**

**incommensurate; incommensurable.** See commensurate.

**in common with occasionally displaces like from its rightful place—e.g.: “Houdini, however, wanted to be special. In common with [read Like] many other entertainers of the time (including Al Jolson and Irving Berlin), he was the son of a rabbi.” Andrew Rosenheim, “Escapes of an Egotist,” TLS, 5 Nov. 1993, at 24. See like (c).**

**incommunicative.** See uncommunicative.

**incomparable; noncomparable; *uncomparable.** Incomparable (= so good as to be beyond comparison) is the usual word; it has been in common use since the 15th century. Noncomparable (= not similar enough to something else to allow comparison) emerged in the early 20th century to rival its synonym, *uncomparable. By 1940, noncomparable had been established as standard. *Uncomparable remains a NECESSARY VARIANT.**

The words are pronounced /in-kom-par-a-bel/ and /non-kom-par-a-bel/. Don’t stress the third syllable.

**incompetence; incompetency.** A growing distinction exists between these forms, especially in law. Reserve incompetency for contexts involving sanity or ability to stand trial or to testify; use incompetence when referring to unacceptable levels of performance. See competence.
Incomplete Sentences. A. Fragments. Grammarians typically define fragment as a part of a sentence punctuated as if it were complete. Usually denoting an error—as opposed to literary license—the term fragment (or frag.) appears frequently in the marginal jottings of high-school and college English teachers. That is to say, some high-school and college students don’t know how to write complete sentences. Hence elementary grammars warn against constructions such as the following one, in which a main clause and a subordinate clause are each written as a complete sentence:

We usually go to the fair in the evening. Because everything is more glamorous under the lights.


The fragment might be corrected in any of several ways:

We usually go to the fair in the evening because everything is more glamorous under the lights.

We usually go to the fair in the evening; everything is more glamorous under the lights.

We usually go to the fair in the evening. Everything is more glamorous under the lights.

This type of elementary problem rarely occurs in the writing of those who know enough about writing to be able to construct complete sentences. (The more frequent problem is run-on sentences, which occur when writers punctuate two sentences as if they were one.) Therefore, basic advice on avoiding fragments—“don’t write a phrase or dependent clause as if it were a complete sentence”—is of limited utility to most writers. Further, for reasons discussed in (8), that advice might be misleading.

B. Incomplete Sentences in Informal Writing. Grammarians’ definitions of the word sentence range widely. Here’s a sampling:

- “A sentence is a group of words containing a subject and a predicate and expressing a complete thought.” C. Rexford Davis, *Toward Correct English* 1 (1936).
- “Sentence [means] a group of words consisting of a finite verb and its subject as well as any complement that may be present and any modifiers that belong to the verb, to the subject, to the complement, or to the entire statement, the whole group of words constituting a grammatically complete statement, i.e., a statement that is clearly not part of a larger structure.” Ralph M. Albaugh, *English: A Dictionary of Grammar and Structure* 170 (1964).
- “A sentence is a combination of words so connected as to express a complete thought: Man is mortal. Is man mortal? How mortal man is!” James C. Fernald, *English Grammar Simplified* 161 (Cedric Gale ed., 2d ed. 1979).

Given that the word complete appears in each of those definitions, one might surmise—as many writers believe—that it is impossible to write an incomplete sentence and still be within the bounds of good usage. Yet the more sophisticated grammarians have long qualified the notion of “completeness.” The great linguist Otto Jespersen defined sentence as “a (relatively) complete and independent unit of communication . . . —the completeness and independence being shown by its standing alone or its capability of standing alone, i.e. of being uttered by itself.” *Essentials of English Grammar* 106 (1933; repr. 1964). Similarly but more specifically, C.T. Onions defined sentence as a group of words—or sometimes a single word—that makes a statement <I’m a tennis enthusiast>, a command <Open the window>, an expression of a wish <Let’s go>, a question <How are you?>, or an exclamation <What a deal!>. *Modern English Syntax* 1 (B.D.H. Miller ed., 1971). More recently still, a dictionary of grammar states that a sentence “usually” has a subject and a predicate. Sylvia Chalker & Edmund Weiner, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* 358 (1994). And Sidney Greenbaum commented, “The traditional definition of a sentence states that a sentence expresses a complete thought. The trouble with this notional definition is that it requires us to know what a complete thought is.” *The Oxford English Grammar* 308 (1996).

It appears possible, then, for a sentence to be “incomplete”—i.e., with a subject or verb that is at best implicit—without being “incorrect.” Jespersen called one type “amorphous sentences,” noting both that they are “more suitable for the emotional side of human nature” and that it would be impossible to say precisely what is “left out.” *Essentials* at 105, 106. Examples are Yes! / Goodbye! / Thanks! / Nonsense! / Of course! / Why all this fuss? / Hence his financial difficulties! Ibid. at 105–06.

More modern authorities agree—e.g.:

- “Experienced writers know how to use fragments deliberately and effectively—noun phrases and verb phrases that add a detail without a full sentence and invariably call attention to themselves.” Martha Kolln, *Rhetorical Grammar* 190 (3d ed. 1999).
- “Only the most tin-eared, fuddy-duddy excuses for copy editors routinely convert every single fragment they see into a complete sentence.” Bill Walsh, *Lapsing into a Comma* 201 (2000).

More than a dozen types of verbless sentences occur in modern prose. As the examples below illustrate, the important quality in each type is that the sentence be short enough that the reader will recognize it as purposely incomplete:

- **Transitional:** “It will be worth our while to consider the loans from a few languages, as they have great cultural importance. First the Dutch.” Otto Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language* 158 (9th ed. 1938).
incongruous (= not having corresponding or appropriate characteristics; of keeping) is often misspelled *incongruous*—e.g.:  

- “Last night, she turned in an achingly soulful, sorrow-filled rendition of 'Hellhound,' followed by a wonderfully incongruous [read incongruous], bright and funky take on the violent '32-20 Blues.'” Michael Norman, “Paying Homage to a Master,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 28 Sept. 1998, at D1.
- “Their tinkling calls, so incongruous [read incongruous] from such gigantic birds, carried across the water mingled rather than football widows, fans of 'L.A. Law' rather than 'NYPD Blue.' And though there are no longer any blank slates when it comes to O.J. Simpson ... it’s better that they get their news from 'MacNeil/Lehrer' or Newsweek than 'Geraldo!' or The Star. Among lawyers and jury consultants that is the consensus prescription for Mr. Simpson's ideal juror.” David Margolick, "Ideal Juror for O.J. Simpson: Football Fan Who Can Listen," N.Y. Times, 23 Sept. 1994, at A1.

Whatever the purpose, though, the incomplete or verbless sentence carries some degree of risk. You risk not being expert enough to carry it off adroitly. You risk your readers' being suspicious about whether you intended a rhetorical effect or simply failed to finish a complete sentence. You should therefore be wary: “Most writers ... use the incomplete sentence sparingly, except in reports of conversation. It is a special device, to be used for special effects. In the hands of anyone but an expert, it is usually unsuccessful because the basic patterns have not been established, and missing ideas cannot be supplied.” Robert M. Gorrell & Charlton Laird, Modern English Handbook 202 (2d ed. 1956).

Here, for example, is an ill-advised fragment: “While print people still have every right to be bemused by the rapid shift in conventional wisdom, they would be wise to avoid complacency. Because the industry stands at a very serious crossroads.” Rem Reider, “At the Crossroads,” Am. Journalism Rev., Mar. 2001, at 6. The writer might have (1) put a dash before because (for emphasis), (2) used a comma (see because (b)), or (3) omitted the because and started a separate sentence. As the sentence stands, though, readers are likely to think they’re reading a subordinate clause to be followed by a main clause. So the fragment results in a miscue. As a rule, any fragment starting with because is suspect for just these reasons.

Incomplete or verbless sentences of the acceptable type are not classified as "fragments," but technically they are precisely that. So it is possible, in good usage, to write fragments. Possible but difficult.

For examples of incomplete sentences beginning with Which, see which (c).

et al. eds., 1984). / "Although most Americans sense that they live within an extremely complicated system of social classes and suspect that much of what is thought and done here is prompted by consideration of status, the subject has remained murky. And always touchy," Paul Fussell, Class 1 (1983).

- **Emphatic:** “As a rough principle enjoining on the ordinary writer the necessity for a careful choice of words, this statement contains a modicum of truth. But only a modicum.” G.H. Vallins, The Best English 28 (1960; repr. 1973).

- **Signaling an emphatic appositive:** "Disorder, redundancy, omission, ambiguity in general. These are the four by-ways into which we stray from the highroad of good English." Janet Rankin Aiken, Commonsense Grammar 32 (1936). / "Young editors and also so-called mature adults are sometimes unable to make publishing judgments because of certain emotional or mental blocks. The question of values arises. Integrity. Morality. Taste. Aesthetics. Standards. These virtues are sometimes obstacles to an editor's business judgment.” William Targ, "What Is an Editor?" in Editors on Editing 4, 16–17 (Gerald Gross ed., rev. ed. 1985).

- **Negating:** "All a dying man could utter would be a pre-judgement. Which is absurd." Christopher Ricks, T.S. Eliot and Prejudice 91 (1988).

- **Explanatory:** "For the compromise theory the question of justice is a question of balance, and the balance is both impersonal and intuitive. Impersonal because individuals become the instruments of achieving aggregate quantities—of equality as much as of utility. Intuitive because the correct balance must be a matter of inarticulate 'feel.'” Ronald Dworkin, A Matter of Principle 272 (1985).

- **Elaborating:** "Or he may confess and avoid: for instance, by admitting that the sheriff had a capias to arrest the servant but asserting that he had used excessive violence. And so on, until an affirmative is negated." I.H. Baker, An Introduction to English Legal History 92 (3d ed. 1990).

- **Bolstering:** "One needs only to read Terence, Plautus, or Seneca to realize how little human nature has changed in two thousand years. (If it has changed at all, which I doubt.)" Frank Yerby, "How and Why I Write the Costume Novel," in Writing in America 125, 129 (John Fischer & Robert B. Silvers eds., 1960).


- **Undercutting:** "In poetry, [Herbert Read] says, 'there is no time interval between the words and the thought.' A very rash assertion indeed.” I.A. Richards, "Herbert Read's English Prose Style," in Complementarities: Uncollected Essays 178, 180 (John Paul Russo ed., 1976).


- **Incomplete or verbless sentences:** Because the basic patterns have not been established, and missing ideas cannot be supplied.” Robert M. Gorrell & Charlton Laird, Modern English Handbook 202 (2d ed. 1956).

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- “Their tinkling calls, so incongruous [read incongruous] from such gigantic birds, carried across the water mingled
with the cries of gulls and whons of geese.” Mike Drew, “Portraits of Elegance,” Calgary Sun, 3 Apr. 1999, at 33. The word is preferably accented on the second rather than the third syllable: /in-kong-groo-as/. For the distinction between congruous and congruent, see congruent.

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incongruous misspelled *incongrous: Stage 1

in connection with is almost always a vague, loose connective, often used in reporting wrongdoing. Occasionally—very occasionally—it is the only connective that will do. Use it as a last resort—e.g.: “The F.B.I. was searching for Mr. Bailey in connection with the stabbing of his friend, Demming F. Rocker 3d.” “Officer’s Killer Was Told F.B.I. Sought Him, Detectives Say,” N.Y. Times, 28 Nov. 1997, at B8. Here, Bailey may have been wanted for help in solving the crime rather than as a suspect.

But when criminal charges have officially been made, in connection with is almost always too fuzzy—e.g.:• “Bonds, 26, whose last address was 4 Linden St., Winthrop, is wanted on multiple warrants in connection with [read for] an April armed robbery at a Dorchester pizza restaurant.” Ann E. Donlan, “Cops Seeking Murder-Try Suspect,” Boston Herald, 28 Nov. 1997, at 16.
• “Bowers, King and Meggerson were arrested shortly afterward and charged in connection with [read with] another robbery that occurred that day before Wood was wounded.” Glenn E. Rice, “Trial Set for January for Three Men Accused in Shooting a Wyandotte County Deputy,” Kansas City Star, 1 Sept. 2015, News §.

Cf. in this connection.

inconsistency; *inconsistence. Writers on usage formerly tried to distinguish between the forms, reserving inconsistency for the sense “the general quality of being inconsistent” and making *inconsistence mean “an inconsistent act; an instance of being inconsistent.” Today, however, inconsistency has ousted -ce in all senses. Avoid *inconsistence as a needless variant. Cf. consistency.

Current ratio: 143:1

in contrast with; in contrast to. These are equally good. See contrast (A).

*incontrollable. See uncontrollable.

*increasingly more is increasingly—or rather, more and more—common as a redundancy. E.g.: “As the business becomes increasingly more [read increasingly or more] competitive, do publishers care which books they publish or what shape the manuscripts are in when they hit the press?” Roger Cohen, “When a Best Seller Is at Stake, Publishers Can Lose Control,” N.Y. Times, 12 May 1991, at E4.

The phrase *increasingly less is a jarring oxymoron that would be better rendered less and less or decreasing—e.g.: “[Alien pirates] were highly entertaining when we first saw them in the ‘Star Wars’ cantina 25 years ago; they’ve grown increasingly less [read less and less] so with every ripoff since.” Joe Miller, “Don’t Dig: ‘Treasure’ Isn’t There,” News & Observer (Raleigh), 27 Nov. 2002, at E1.

In fact, increasingly is a word that aspiring stylists might do well to jettison from their vocabulary—or at least use less and less.

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1. *increasingly more for more: Stage 1
2. *increasingly less for less and less: Stage 1

incredible; incredulous. Incredible (= unbelievable) has become aogue word to describe something that astounds, especially in a pleasing way—e.g.: “Moore combined this with meditations on the incredible [read rare? priceless?] paintings she found in a warehouse several months after Sargent’s death in 1978.” Susy Schultz, “Troubled Life Leads to Poetic Justice,” Chicago Sun-Times, 2 June 1996, at 16.

Incredulous has long meant “disbelieving, doubting, skeptical” <she was incredulous when listening to the story>. E.g.:• “It took Shoup about 10 minutes to convince George that he wasn’t joking. Then he had to convince [George’s] wife, who was equally incredulous.” Susan A. Cantowwine, “Money Will Not Change Lotto Winner,” Dayton Daily News, 23 July 1997, at Z41.

Although early writers, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, used incredulous as a synonym for incredible (= unbelievable), the differentiation between the words has long been settled. Today it must be regarded as a mistake to use incredulous interchangeably with incredible—e.g.:• “He said it is incredulous [read incredible] to accuse him of creating a deficit when he has cut spending by more than $70 million since he took office.” Diane C. Walsh, “Essex Prosecutor Lashes Back at County Executive,” Star-Ledger (Newark), 4 May 1999, at 41.
• “With every report from every scientific organization saying how much the Department of Energy has botched the science or, just as bad, not completed it before recommending the site to President Bush, . . . it seems incredulous [read incredible] that Bush would plow ahead.” Brian Greenspun, “Yucca Fight Won’t End,” Las Vegas Sun, 12 Feb. 2002, at A13.

This distinction was firm even in the early to mid-20th century, when Wodehouse wrote the following:“‘It contained an offer to swap the cow-creamer for another robbery that occurred that day before Wood was wounded.”


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
inconsistent forms seen in the following sentence:

succubuses
cate
certain values—e.g.: “Green schools can also
cate
to indoctrinate.

inculcate (into). A. And indoctrinate. Inculcate is sometimes misused for indoctrinate. Although these
are both transitve verbs (i.e., they take direct objects), the nature of the objects is different. One inculcates
values into people; and one indoctrinates people with
certain values—e.g.: “Green schools can also 

inculcate
green values in students at an impressionable
age.” Bryan Walsh, “Little Green Schoolhouse,” Time,
1 Oct. 2007, at 59. So one does not inculcate people,
but rather values or beliefs or ideas. The mistake is
common—e.g.:

• “A way must be found to inculcate these youth with values
[read inculcate values into these youth].” Sharon Pratt
Kelly, “Can We Win the Battle for America’s Streets?” USA
Today (Mag.), May 1994, at 22.

• “But [Chris] Burden said his obsession with such models
sprang from some serious thinking over many years
about the nature of toys. ‘They’re the tools we use to
inculcate children into how to be adults, how to live in the
world,’ he said.” Randy Kennedy, “An Artist’s Vision,” N.Y.
Times, 8 June 2008, at A37. (A possible revision: They’re
the tools we use to teach children how to be adults, how
to live in the world.)

• “Sexually loaded media is, unfortunately, a fact of life. The
solution then is to inculcate teens with the knowledge [read
inculcate teens the knowledge] they need to protect
themselves.” O. Ricardo Pimentel, “Sex, Sex and More Sex.
Got Your Attention?” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 10 Aug. 2008,
Crossroads §§, at J4. (On media is, see media.)

H.W. Fowler noted this aberration and called it “a
curious mistake” (FMEU1 at 266). No longer is it curi-
bous, but it is still a mistake. See object-shuffling.
For more on indoctrinate, see indoctrination.

B. And instill. Instill usually follows the syntactic
pattern of inculcate <a commander must instill
confidence in the troops>. The terms overlap to a
great degree, each one denoting compulsion by persistent
repetition. But there are subtleties in their connotations.
To inculate a value or belief is to pound it in
(a rare second sense of the word is “to trample”). To
instill it is to build up the value or belief bit by bit (a
rare second sense is to introduce a liquid drop by drop).
So instill carries more positive connotations
than inculcate, which is closer in nuance to indoctrin-
ate. See instill.

inculpable. See culpable & inculpable.

inculpable, not inculpable, is the correct form of
the word meaning “capable of being inculpated [i.e.,
incriminated].” (See -ATABLE.) Inculpable is, however,
a negative form that generally means “not culpable;
blameless; free from guilt.” Use of inculpable may
cause incriminating ambiguities. See culpable.

inculpatory; *inculpative. The standard form is
inculpatory (= tending to incriminate)—e.g.: “When
the room was finally checked, police found no inculp-
atory evidence.” Kristen Delguzzi, “Jurors See Scene of
Hotel Slaying,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 15 Nov. 1996, at
C1. *Inculpative is a needless variant. Cf. culpable
& exculpatory.

Current ratio: 108:1

*incumbrance. See encumbrance.
in danger. See danger (A).


• “O’Toole, for all his playfulness and his pub-crawling, is a serious student of the theater whose sense of its past—and his own indebtedness to that past—is powerful.” Jonathan Yardley, “Loitering with Intent,” Int’l Herald Trib., 15 Feb. 1997, at 5.


The term is often used where the simpler word debt would be preferable—e.g.: “Holders of certain unsecured indebtedness [read debts] of the company have deferred payments until Feb. 28.” “In Brief,” Ariz. Bus. Gaz., 16 Feb. 1995, at 26. In this sense, indebtedness is a needless variant of debt. But in some contexts one can hardly discern what is being referred to: the state of being indebted or the actual debt.

B. And *indebtement. A needless variant of indebtedness or debt, *indebtement was much more common up to the mid-20th century than it is today. Now it’s confined to a few legal texts—where it would be preferable—e.g.: “Holders of certain unsecured indebtedness [read debts] of the company have deferred payments until Feb. 28.” “In Brief,” Ariz. Bus. Gaz., 16 Feb. 1995, at 26. In this sense, indebtedness is a needless variant of debt. But in some contexts one can hardly discern what is being referred to: the state of being indebted or the actual debt.

INDEFINITE PRONOUNS. See pronouns (d).

independence; *independency. Interestingly, *independence was the standard term until shortly before the American colonies’ Declaration of Independence (1776). Since then, independence has been the standard form in all varieties of World English.

Current ratio: 196:1

independent contractor; employee. Unlike an employee, an independent contractor is left free to do the assigned work and to choose the method for accomplishing it. And unlike an employee, an independent contractor does not, upon committing a wrong while carrying out the work, create liability for an employer that did not authorize the wrongful acts. For example, a taxi driver is an independent contractor, while a private chauffeur is an employee. A freelance writer is an independent contractor; a staff writer is an employee.

incurance; *incurment. Sometimes writers need a noun corresponding to the verb incur. Incurrence is the standard term; *incurment is a needless variant. Incurrence is sometimes misspelled *incurrence.

Current ratio (incurrence vs. *incurment): 718:1
Although the term is noted as the singular form of *indicium* (= indication, sign, token), is usually treated as a mass noun forming the plurals *indicia* and *indicium*, the former being preferred: “The 1980s takeover cases identified several indicia of due care in a board’s deliberation.” Harvey L. Pitt, “Ten Commandments for Takeover in the 1990s,” Corporate Board, Jan. 1992, at 21. The singular indicium is, in this sense, obsolescent.

But *indicium* is a live singular in the sense “a graphical element on printed matter that indicates paid postage”—e.g.: “It uses a two-dimensional bar code; the indicium, or ‘stamp,’ includes both machine-readable and human-readable information.” Cheryl Currid, “Creating Stamps on Printer Is Another Hasle Made Easy,” *Houston Chron.*, 27 Aug. 1999, Tech. §, at 3. See index (b) & indicative.

indicial. See indicative.

*indicium*. See indici.

*indict; indite*. Both words are pronounced /in-dit/. The former means “to charge formally with a crime”; the latter, “to write, compose, dictate.” A literary term, *indite* is rarely used today. But it isn’t unknown—e.g.:

- “I would take it to one of my dupes who would *indite* a blackmail demand to the young man’s father.” Donald Thomas, “The Case of the Talking Corpse,” in *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice from the Crypt* 223, 318 (2002).
- “Max, who supposedly *indites* these confessions in the year 1930, . . . has survived a number of the young century’s crises.” John Updike, “Mind/Body Problem,” *New Yorker*, 26 Jan. 2004, at 90.

Cf. *extradite*.

**indictment** usually takes of, but against has also been fairly common since the 19th century. The prosecutors may have a case against a suspect, but the indictment can be either of or against the suspect. In journalism, against is quite common—e.g.:

- “The order is the prelude to possible detention and multiple *indictments against* or *indictments of* Milosevic.” Smita Nordwall, “After Years of Urging, China Ratifies Human Rights Treaty,” *USA Today*, 1 Mar. 2001, at A6.
- “In a motion Thursday to dismiss the *indictment against* or *indictment of* John Cumbee, Jed Stone argued that his client’s case should not be heard again in McHenry County.” Dave Barnes, “Cop Seeks Change of Venue for His Retrial,” *Chicago Trib.*, 2 Mar. 2001, at 1.

For more on *indictment*, see *arraignment*.

*indifference; *indif**erence*. The latter is an archaism and a needless variant. Current ratio: 336:1

*indifferent* takes to, preferably not as to—e.g.:

- “If we’re intelligent about how we design and deploy them, we’ll be *indifferent to* [read *indifferent to*] how consumers use them.” Rebecca Cantwell, “Business Person of the Year Tele-Visionary,” *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), 20 Dec. 1998, at G1.
• “Brokers will be indifferent as to [read indifferent to] whether the funds their customers buy are load funds or no-load funds.” Patrick McGeehan & David Franecki, “Monthly Mutual Funds Review,” Wall Street J., 2 Aug. 1999, at R1.

See as to.

indigence; indigency. Since 1700, indigence has been the predominant form in general English-language sources—by a significant margin. But in legal sources indigency predominates. Although there is no differentiation between the terms other than that contextual one, neither can be declared a needless variant.

Current ratio: 9:1

indigenous. In Canada and Australia, indigenous (= native to a place) is capitalized when it refers to the land’s original inhabitants <the indigenous tribes> but lowercase when it refers to other things <the indigenous flora>. This practice has not taken root in either the U.S. or the U.K.

indigenous American. See Native American.

indigent, n. See functional shift (c).

indigestion. For the pronunciation, see digestive.

INDIRECT QUESTIONS. See questions, direct and indirect.

indiscernible; *indiscernable. The former spelling is standard. See -able (a) & discernible.

Current ratio: 71:1

indiscreet; indiscrete. Indiscreet = lacking discretion in the sense of prudence, circumspection, and cautious reserve; indiscrete = not divided into distinct parts. Indiscreet is a common term, indiscrete a rare one. And, perhaps not surprisingly, some writers choose the wrong form—e.g.:

• “Mr. Pavelic concluded . . . that Mr. Shapiro may have been set up to look indiscrete [read indiscrets].” David Margolick, “Uneasy Quiet After Turmoil on the Team for Simpson,” N.Y. Times, 17 Jan. 1995, at A12.

• “The brouhaha that broke out over an NDP MLA’s somewhat indiscrete [read indiscrete] Facebook photos following the stunning crush of the governing Progressive Conservative party points to a gross trend in politics in the social media age.” Tyler Dawson, “Average Albertans Replacing Political Pros,” Edmonton J., 11 May 2015, at A15.

See discrete.

indisputable is pronounced either /in-di-spyoo-tә-bal/ or (formerly, and sometimes still in BrE) /in-dis-pyoot-ә-bal/.

indisputably (= unquestionably) is the usual word, not *indisputedly, which is an odd hybrid between indisputably and undisputedly (= without challenge). E.g.:

• “She is the mother of three sons, which indisputably [read indisputably] makes her the only justice to have experienced pregnancy.” “All Eyes on Justice O’Connor,” Newsweek, 1 May 1989, at 34.


indistinguishable; *undistinguishable. The former has been standard since about 1870 in AmE and 1880 in BrE; the latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 23:1

indite. See indict.

individual was formerly thought to be a newfangled barbarism as a noun substituting for man, woman, or person. Certainly, those more specific terms are generally to be preferred over individual, but this word has made a place for itself in contexts in which the writer intends to distinguish the single person from the group or crowd.

Some writers grossly overuse the term for no apparent reason—e.g.:

Several corollary points flow from this concept of style and its application to political biography. The first is that an individual’s [read a person’s] style may conflict with the requirements of his office; it is just such a condition that may lie at the base of political failure. The possibility of such “misfit” between style and role is greatest when an individual [read someone] comes to a new and demanding office . . . late in life . . . It is thus crucial to examine the fit between an individual’s [read the person’s] style and the requirements of his political roles, and whether those requirements change as the individual moves through his [read during the person’s] career.

Moreover, the use of the concept of style makes it imperative to examine that point in a subject’s early life at which his style was first formed and applied successfully . . . . It is at this point that we may find the key to an individual’s [read the person’s] later political behavior. This creation of a political style will often be part of an identity crisis in young adulthood; the individual’s [read persons] psychological equilibrium may therefore depend upon the creation and successful application of a particular style.

individualize; individuate. These words, which have basically the same sense (“to make individual in character, to give individuality to”), have undergone differentiation. Individualize is the ordinary term—e.g.: “While the strategies for just how to prepay your mortgage can be individualized to fit your own cash flow, there are some other general rules to follow.” Don Hunt, “Full Speed Ahead,” Chicago Trib., 8 Aug. 1997, at 1.

Individuate is often used in scientific contexts and in Jungian psychology in highly technical senses, and it should generally be confined to these uses. E.g.: “Not that the Bob Joneses and Jane Smiths of the world aren’t individuated, as the Jungians say,” Jim Kirksey, “Officer Wounds Alleged Attacker,” Denver Post, 27 Jan. 2003, at B6. (Overprepared, most stylists would agree.)

*indoe. See endoe.

indulge. When the target of the indulgence is a habit, custom, or form of gratification, this verb is usually intransitive: one *indulges* in a given habit. Here, the writer got the idiom wrong: “Employees in a New York City office building have to trek outside to *indulge* their habit [read indulge in their habit]!” Christopher John Farley, “The Butt Stops Here,” Time, 18 Apr. 1994, at 59.

But when the target of the indulgence is the person seeking that gratification, the verb is transitive and the person is the verb’s direct object—e.g.:  

- “While they *indulge* themselves in adult interaction, their little ones are in nearby rooms being tended to by professional preschool teachers.” Kathy Barberich, “Helping Moms, Helping Kids,” Fresno Bee, 26 Jan. 2003, at H1.

industrious; industrial. *Industrious* corresponds to *industry* in the general sense of a person’s work ethic. *Industrial* corresponds to *industry* in the narrow sense of manufacturing goods. *Industrious* typically refers to people <an industrious worker>; *industrial* typically refers to manufacturing activities or productive enterprises <an industrial town>. *Industrial* is pronounced in four distinct syllables: /in-dos-tree-al/—not /in-dos-tral/.

*INE. See -I.E.

ineffectual; ineffective; ineffectacious; inefficient. See effective.

INELEGANT VARIATION. H.W. Fowler devised the name “elegant variation” for the ludicrous practice of never using the same word twice in the same sentence or passage. When Fowler named this vice of language in the 1920s, *elegant* was almost a pejorative word, commonly associated with precious overrefinement. Today, however, the word has positive connotations. E.g.: “The book is exceedingly well edited, and several essays are *elegantly* written.”

Lest the reader think that the subject of this article is a virtue rather than a vice in writing, it has been renamed unambiguously: inegalant variation. The rule of thumb with regard to undue repetition is that one should not repeat a nearby word if it can be felicitously avoided; this is hardly an absolute proscription, however.

Variety for variety’s sake in word choice can confuse readers. If you call a car “the BMW” in one place and “the sporty import” in another, can your reader be certain that you’re referring to the same car? If you
write about a person's "candor" in one sentence and "honesty" in the next, is the reader to infer that you are distinguishing between two traits, or using different words to refer to the same one?

The more formal the writing, the worse fault this lack of clarity can be. It is a maxim in interpreting legal language that if different words are used, different meanings must have been intended. In less formal contexts, variety is more forgivable—but there are always limits.

Perhaps the most famous example is elongated yellow fruit as the second reference for banana. Hence Charles W. Morton named "the elongated-yellow-fruit school of writing," citing examples such as these:

- billiard balls = the numbered spheroids
- Bluebeard = the azure-whiskered wifeslayer
- Easter-egg hunt = hen-fruit safari
- milk = lacteal fluid
- oysters = succulent bivalves
- peanut = the succulent goober
- songbird = avian songster
- truck = rubber-tired mastodon of the highway

Morton, “The Elongated Yellow Fruit,” in A Slight Sense of Outrage 99, 99–102 (1955). As Morton explains, this sin "lies somewhere between the cliché and the 'fine writing' so dreaded by teachers of English Composition. . . . It does bespeak an author who wishes to seem witty, knowledgeable, and versatile . . . . It can also bespeak an author who is merely pompous." Ibid. at 100. Other commentators have been less charitable—e.g.: “They are attempting to ring the changes on a word is often positively vicious.” Paul M. Fulcher, “These But the Trappings . . . .” in Foundations of English Style 189, 204 (Paul M. Fulcher ed., 1927).

There is even a book full of these things, in which changes on a word is often positively vicious. “The attempt to ring the changes on a word is often positively vicious.” Paul M. Fulcher, “These But the Trappings . . . .” in Foundations of English Style 189, 204 (Paul M. Fulcher ed., 1927).

There is also limits.

Widely shunned.

Fully accepted.

Stage 4:

Ubiquitous but . . .

The point to be observed,” wrote H.W. Fowler, “is that, even if the words meant exactly the same, it would be better to keep the first selected on duty than to change guard” (FMEU1 at 132).

inept. See inapt.

inertia (= resistance to movement, change, or effort) is occasionally confused with a nearly opposite sense, resulting in a MALAPROPISM—e.g.: “Other business incubators evolve from local entrepreneurs, [James] Segedy said, and provide business support to help the businesses gain inertia [read momentum] needed to survive their first year.” Michael Wanbaugh, “Argos Residents Look to the Future,” South Bend Trib., 24 Jan. 2003, at A2. Perhaps the confusion is with impetus (= incentive; encouragement). See word-swapping.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
inertia misused for momentum: Stage 1
inexpert. See nonessential.
inestimable. See estimable.
inexhaustible; *inestimablity. The latter is a needless variant.
inestimable. See ADJECTIVES (b).
in excess of is verbose for more than, exceeding, or some other word—e.g.: “Within hours a storm with maximum wind velocities in excess of [read exceeding] a hundred miles an hour swept across southern England and Wales.” Thomas Levenson, “At the Speed Limit,” Atlantic Monthly, Mar. 1990, at 40.

*inexpense is a nonword that first appeared (wrathlike) in the late 19th century and has been spotted from time to time since. It’s not listed in any major unabridged dictionary, and it doesn’t really fill a need in the language—e.g.:

- “The relative inexpense [read affordability] with which a band can record and manufacture a disc has blown open the playing field to anyone with a credit card who has the yen to be a rock star; in turn, there’s a plethora of product from bands that aren’t, let’s say, quite ready for mass consumption.” Joan Anderman, “How Do Local CD’s Stack Up?” Boston Globe, 25 Dec. 1998, at C17.
- “Because of the ease and relative inexpense [read relatively low cost] of obtaining spices today, we forget how rare, costly and sought-after they were in earlier ages.” Andrew Jayasundera, “Spices of Influence,” Seattle Times, 24 Sept. 2000, at 10.

See back-formations & neologisms.

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*inexpense for affordability: Stage 1

inexpert, adj.; noneexpert, adj. An important distinction exists. Inexpert = unskilled <the novice’s inexpert shooting caused a real danger to observers>. Noneexpert = not of or by an expert, but not necessarily unskilled <even noneexpert drivers can handle this course>. Whereas inexpert has been in common use since the 18th century, noneexpert did not appear with any frequency till about 1900.
inexplicable (= unexplainable) is accented on the second syllable (/in-ek-spli-kә-bal/) or the third (/in-ek-splik-a-bal/). Cf. explicable.
inexpressible; *inexpressible. The former spelling is standard. See -ABLE (A).
inexpressive; *unexpressive. The first is standard; the second is a needless variant.
inexpedient

infanticide = (1) the killing of a baby; or (2) a parent who kills a baby, or someone who kills a baby esp. with a parent’s consent. Sense 2 invariably takes an article <a merciless infanticide>, whereas sense 1 only sometimes takes an article <the infanticide committed by a deranged father> <infanticide committed by a mother with postpartum depression>.

In law, strictly speaking, not every killer of a baby has committed infanticide. The killing of another person’s child is simple murder or manslaughter. Infanticide, by definition, must be by or on behalf of a parent. See Glanville Williams, The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law 13 (1957).

Despite the legal meaning of infant (= a person under the age of majority, usu. 18 years old), the word infanticide is restricted to baby-killing. A parent who kills a 17-year-old child would not be called an “infanticide” (sense 2). (In England, the Infanticide Act applies to the killing of a child up to one year old.) The slightly broader term child-slaying, however, might cover situations in which children who are old enough to walk—and up to the age of 18—are killed. By contrast, the most restrictive term is neonaticide, which refers to the killing of a newborn. Among the three terms—infanticide, child-slaying, and neonaticide—the first two are the most emotive terms because they are widely known, and the third is a clinical, abstract description that many would read or hear without understanding. See -CIDE.
in fault. See at fault.

infeasible; *unfeasible. Though once standard, the latter has become a needless variant.
infect. See infest (A).
infectious is sometimes erroneously rendered *infectuous—e.g.: “A note of caution: West End Christmas possesses a humor that’s infectuous [read infectious].” Lynne Cline, “West End Christmas,” Santa Fe New Mexican, 6 Dec. 1996, Pasatiempo §, at 6. See contagious.
infectuous misspelled *infectuous: Stage 1

infect. A. Meaning. Properly used, infer means “to deduce from evidence; to reason from premises to a conclusion”—e.g.:

- “FBI spokesmen have told us that we are not to infer that Richard is guilty of anything merely because he is a suspect, among others.” Larry Maddry, “FBI Should Charge Jewell or Cut Him Some Slack,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 26 Aug. 1996, at E1.
- “Research shows that a daily glass or two of wine is associated with greater longevity than drinking either more or less alcohol. So it’s irresistible to infer that modest amounts of alcohol cause a person to live longer.” “The Art of Being Smart,” Daily Telegraph, 15 Aug. 2015, at 1.
B. And imply. Writers frequently misuse infer when imply (= to hint at; suggest) would be the correct word—e.g.:  
- “Pulis said yesterday he would decide whether to select the 22-year-old once he had spoken to him in training. But he inferred [read implied] Berahino is still too distracted to perform to his best.” “Midweek Knocks Hammer Brunst and McManaman,” Birmingham Mail (U.K.), 29 Aug. 2015, at 34.

Remember: a speaker or writer implies something without putting it expressly. A listener or reader infers beyond what has been literally expressed. Or, as Theodore Bernstein put it, “The implied is the pitcher; the inferrer is the catcher.” The Careful Writer 227 (1965).

Don’t be swayed by apologetic notes in some dictionaries that sanction the use of infer as a substitute for imply. Stylists agree that the important distinction between these words deserves to be maintained.

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infer misused for imply: Stage 3

*inferable; *inferrible; *inferrible. The preferred form inferable, pronounced /in-ә-bәl/, was standard by the mid-19th century. *Inferrable is a variant spelling. Through the mid-1950s, some commentators considered *inferrible the best spelling because of the rule that a consonant should be doubled after a stressed syllable. Inferable, which has now ousted the other forms, is anomalous in its spelling. Cf. deferable & transferable.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 20:3:1

**inference.** Traditionally, one draws, not makes, inferences. If one says “to make an inference” (like “to make a deduction”), many listeners will confuse inference with implication. The verb draw is therefore clearer. Concededly, however, since the early 1960s the collocation make inferences has appeared in print somewhat more frequently than draw inferences. Hence the widespread confusion about the precise meaning of inference—properly a conclusion arrived at through reasoning, not suggestion. See infer.

**inferentially.** This fancy word often displaces a more common substitute, such as seemingly or we can infer that. The OED states that inferentially means “in an inferential manner,” but allows that it is used “sometimes qualifying the whole clause or statement [and meaning] as an inference, as may be inferred.” This use is common especially in writing about technical and legal subjects—e.g.: “In 1926, the Supreme Court inferentially [read, perhaps, seemingly] decided, in Myers v. U.S., that President Johnson was right in principle on this issue.” Martin D. Tullai, “A Senator Saved the Presidency,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 29 Mar. 1994, at B7. See sentence adverbs. Cf. hopefully & thankfully.

In AmE, inferentially was once almost exclusively a lawyers’ word, but it’s passing into general use—e.g.: “Clinton, on CBS, inferentially conceded that Congress might not approve either element.” “Oh Noooos!” Time, 14 Mar. 1994, at 35.

inferior takes to, not than (which requires a grammatical comparative, not a notional one)—e.g.: “Neither Drew nor Ryan offered the same offensive potential as Refsnyder, whose glove is considered to be far inferior to [read inferior to] his counterparts [read those of his counterparts or his counterparts’ gloves].” Alex Schiffer, “Beltran Gets Right Back to Work with Bat,” Star-Ledger (Newark), 21 July 2015, at 28.

Current ratio: 355:1

*inferrible, *inferrible. See inferable.

**infest. A. And infect. Infest (= to inhabit either as a parasite or in menacingly large numbers) is sometimes confounded with infect (= of a germ or virus) to introduce a disease into an organism. In general, living things are infected; places are infested. And while an infestation may result in disease, the cause of the disease will be infection. Some writers miss that distinction, typically with infest displacing infect—e.g.:  
- “I’m thinking, is our opposition to the archbishop’s point of view a classic case of Seattle overhang? That’s the disease that rapidly infests [read infects] editorial offices and gives us in these towers the eyesight to see things only from under Seattle’s roof.” James Vesely, “Classic Seattle Overhang and the Cross We Carry,” Seattle Times, 19 Mar. 2001, at B4.  
- “Once the germs infest [read infect] wildlife populations, the wild animals can just as easily spread it to other domestic herds through the same mechanisms.” Editorial, Denver Post, 1 May 2001, at B8.  

The opposite error, in which infect ousted the proper word infest, is rare but not entirely exterminated—e.g.: “There were no demons in his past, but night after night demons would infect [read infest] his dreams to the point that he was beginning to question his sanity.” A.S. Mott, “In His Head,” in Fireside Ghost Stories 9, 9 (2003).
B. And invest. Infest is sometimes, in a gross MALAPROPISM, confused with invest—e.g.:


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invest misused for infest: Stage 1

infinite (= unimaginably large in degree or amount) doesn’t work well with qualifiers in phrases such as *almost infinite or *nearly infinite, which are examples of ILLOGIC—e.g.:

- “There have been an almost infinite number of [read countless] studies.” Earl W. Buxton, Looking at Language (M.H. Scargill & P.G. Penner eds., 1969).
- “Picassó also has quite an extensive pizza menu, featuring pies that can be topped in almost infinite [read many] combinations.” Angela Shah, "Grill Makes a Palette of Italian Favorites," Dallas Morning News, 23 Jan. 2003, Garland §, at S9.

The word is also often a sign of hyperbole, as those examples show. See ADJECTIVES (b).

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*almost infinite for countless: Stage 1

infinitely. A. And eminently. Infinitely (= endlessly, limitlessly) for eminently (= to a high degree) is either gross OVERSTATEMENT or a MALAPROPISM. It’s a surprising error even in our hyperbole-ridden culture—e.g.:

- “The voice is quite pleasant, really. Low, well-modulated and infinitely [read eminently] reasonable, it is the voice of a good person.” Karla Peterson, "Sandra Bernhard: Shocking Ms. B. Has Her Warm and Comfy Side,” San Diego Union-Trib., 23 June 1994, Entertainment §, at 11.
- “Riggins used to train bird dogs in his spare time. Some observers might suggest that experience makes him infinitely [read eminently] qualified to instruct the Cardinals’ 1994 staff.” Dan O’Neill, " Credentials of Riggins Rate Triple A All the Way,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 26 Oct. 1994, at D5.


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infinitely misused for eminently: Stage 1
Current ratio (eminently successful vs. *infinitely successful): 488:1

B. And Comparatives. When infinitely modifies a comparative adjective or adverb, the result is almost always either illogical or at least hyperbole—e.g.:

- “Barron, a game-fowl breeder who has about 200 roosters, said the average gamecock lives a lot longer than the average broiler chicken and agrees with Rubio that their game birds are infinitely [read far] better cared for.” Stella Davis, “Fighting Fowl,” Santa Fe New Mexican, 30 Nov. 2002, at B1.
- “Self-acceptance is infinitely [read far or so much] sexier and more appealing than the relentless racing after eternal youth.” Joy Rothke, “50 May Not Be So Fabulous, but at Least She’s Still Here,” Chicago Trib., 4 Dec. 2002, Woman News §, at 6.

See ADJECTIVES (b).

Occasionally, though, the usage is justified when the thing designated could truly be infinite—e.g.:

“[Ornette] Coleman opened the door to improvisation based on melodic and rhythmic lines. It was a door that opened infinitely more doors.” Dean Kuipers, “Break the Music Mold,” L.A. Times, 5 Dec. 2002, Calendar Weekend §, pt. 5, at 2. Here, the number of variations in an improvisational performance really is infinite.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index
infinitely used with a comparative: Stage 1

infinite. See be-verbs & split infinitives.

infinite; *ininfinitude. The latter term, though dating from the 17th century, remains little more than what H.W. Fowler labeled it in 1926: a NEEDLESS VARIANT of infinity. It occurs where infinity would surely be the better word—e.g.: “Electron microscopes have revealed the nearly incomprehensible complexity and infinitude [read infinity] of the subvisible world.” Charles Siebert, “Quantum Leaps,” N.Y. Times, 29 Sept. 1996, § 6, at 137. The word appears often in theological contexts, perhaps seeming to lend some concreteness to the idea being discussed—e.g.: “In prayer we find that the trustworthy place wherein to feel at home is the infinitude of God, divine Love.” “A Home of Your Own,” Christian Science Monitor, 28 June 1996, at 17.

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*infinitude for infinity: Stage 2
Current ratio (infinity of vs. *infinitude of): 5:1

inflame; *enflame. The first is standard; the second is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 18:1

inflammable. See flammable & inflammatory.
inflammatory; inflammable. Surprisingly, inflammable (= combustible) is occasionally misused for inflammatory (= provocative of an angry or violent reaction). While both words are synonymous with incendiary, inflammable is always literal <the arsonist used an inflammable liquid to spread the fire>, inflammatory always figurative <the inflammatory rhetoric almost caused a riot>. It's a well-known distinction, but writers occasionally take a wrong turn halfway through spelling inflammatory—e.g.:


• “Why is it so hard to understand that the social fabric of our society can be tragically destroyed by the inflammable [read inflammatory] words of the dividers and haters among us?” Letter of Charles L. Deremer, Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 1 May 1995, at A8.

• “Her opponents this time were the inflammable [read inflammatory] words of her father, who accused a player and the tennis world of racism, and a persistent pack of reporters.” Shaun Powell, “U.S. Open: All Eyes Focused on Venus,” Newsday (N.Y.), 8 Sept. 1997, at A54.

This confusion provides yet one more reason why flammable is to be encouraged over inflammatory, which should be ignited and consumed. See flammable.

Language-Change Index inflammable misused for inflammatory: Stage 1

*inflatus. See aflatus.

infect; afflict. Infect takes on; afflict takes with. Non-living objects, especially scourges or punishments, are afflicted on people; living things, especially humans, are afflicted with diseases.

But misusing infect for afflict is increasingly common—e.g.:

• “While other urban superintendents were trying to hide the depths of the problems infecting [read afflicted] their school systems, Alice Pinderhughes, who passed away last Thursday at age 74, was at least honest.” “Alice Pinderhughes,” Baltimore Sun, 20 Nov. 1995, at A10.

• “This lack of freedom of speech is what people in Russia and many other countries have dealt with in the past, and are afflicted [read afflicted] with now.” Susan DeBow, “Society Stifles Freedom of Speech,” Cincinnati Post, 3 July 2000, at A19.

• “The speakers ... dismissed concerns ... that some oak trees are afflicted [read afflicted] with Sudden Oak Death disease.” Maria Brosnan Liebel, “Quick Action Ordered on Lafferty,” Press Democrat (Santa Rosa), 14 Nov. 2000, at B1.

See object-shuffling.

The reverse error is also surprisingly frequent—e.g.:

• “The whole reason for reaching this settlement was to make Big Tobacco financially accountable for the health costs its addictive product has afflicted [read inflicted] on the nation.” Editorial, “Tobacco Plan Worth the Wait,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 22 June 2001, at A14.

• “Although the nation has ... been spared from another Sept. 11, a repeat of the kind of horror afflicted [read inflicted] on New York City, the Pentagon and airliners on that day is not out of the question.” Editorial, “AddressingAftermath of an Attack,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 16 Feb. 2002, News §, at 10.


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1. infect misused for afflict: Stage 1

Current ratio (afflicted with vs. *inflicted with): 15:1

2. afflict misused for infect: Stage 1

Current ratio (inflicted on vs. *afflicted on): 177:1

influence. The first syllable receives the primary accent (/in-floo-ənts/), not the second (/in-floo-ənts/). That's so whether it's used as a noun or as a verb. See pronunciation (b).

influence-peddlers. This term should refer to the politicians who sell their influence, not to the people who try to buy it. Yet many politicians get it backwards—e.g.: “He [Patrick J. Buchanan] even updated his stump graphics with a giant mock check at his side made out for hundreds of millions of dollars to the major parties and signed Influence Peddlers [read, perhaps, Special Interests].” Francis X. Clines, “Buchanan Wraps Himself in McCain's Flag of Reform,” N.Y. Times, 17 Mar. 2000, at A17.

The distinction is hardly a fine line, though. Officeholders and government officials often avail themselves of the “revolving door” option to make more money as private-sector lobbyists. But they still retain some influence through friendships and political connections and could be seen as peddling that advantage.

*inforce. See enforce (A).

informant; informer. Both terms are used in reference to those who confidentially supply police with information about crimes. Informant is now more than four times as common in AmE and BrE alike. The Evanses wrote that informant is neutral, whereas informer, which acquired strong connotations of detestation in the 17th and 18th centuries, remains a connotatively charged term (DCAU at 245). Although that statement doesn't hold true for legal writing, it does in most other contexts. See inelegant variation.

informative; informatory. The latter is a needless variant, except in bridge (the card game).

Current ratio: 378:1

informer. See informant.
ingenuous

ingenuous. See ingenious.

ingraft. See engraft.

ingratiate (= to bring [oneself] into favor [with]) should always be reflexive in modern usage <they ingratiated themselves to the company>. Nonreflexive uses are unidiomatic—e.g.:

- “And even if you present a memo listing every inaccu-rate event she’s related, she may be so ingratiated with [read close to] the boss that a report will have little effect.” Lindsey Novak, “Bad Sign: Boss’ Editing Changes Put Employee in a Bind,” Chicago Trib., 26 Jan. 1997, at C1.

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ingratiate used nonreflexively: Stage 1

ingenious

ingenious. See ingenuous.

ingenious; ingenuous. These words are virtual an-
tonyms, yet ingenuous (= clever, skillful, inventive) is sometimes displaced by ingenious (= artless, simple, innocent)—e.g.:

- “They’re no different from Kenneth Lay or Jeffrey Skill-
ing at Enron, who either claimed ignorance of the crimes that were going on around them or found ingenious [read ingenuous] ways to cover them up.” Sheryl McCarthy, “Church Needs to Do Some Serious Spring Cleaning,” Newsday (N.Y.), 15 Apr. 2002, at A26.

Ingenuous is also misused for its other opposite, disingenuous (= tricky; feigning ignorance in order to deceive)—e.g.:

- “With all due respect, isn’t it a bit ingenious [read disingenuous] to say that we haven’t made the decision whether or not to go to war yet, because absent our going in there and kicking him out to get the regime change, we don’t expect him to step aside.” Charlie Gibson, interviewing Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on ABC’s Good Morning America, 9 Sept. 2002.
- “Obfuscating and ingenious [read disingenuous] comments are often made by guests of all political and social persuasions, including Islamic spokespersons appearing on his show. He is indeed a ‘no-spin doctor’ when he forthrightly cuts through the sand-in-your-eyes kind of bull appearing in Omar’s opinion piece.” Kenneth Yerington, “Hate Isn’t, Not As Rampant as Writer Claims It Is,” Iowa City Press-Citizen, 3 Nov. 2002, at A9.

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1. ingenuous misused for ingenious: Stage 1
2. ingenuous misused for disingenuous: Stage 1

**ingenuity** once corresponded to **ingenious**, and *ingeniositis* (last used with any validity in 1608) to ingenious. Through a curious historical reversal of the role of ingenuity, it came to mean “ingeniousness.” Ingeniousness was the only term left to do the work of the noun corresponding to the adjective ingenious. So although ingenuity appears to be the correlative of ingenious, it no longer is.

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ingenuity as the noun corresponding to ingenious: Stage 5

inheritable. See heritable.

inhibitory; *inhibitive. The latter is a needless variant.

in hospitable (≡ [1] (of a place) difficult to live or stay in because of adverse conditions, or [2] (of a person) not welcoming visitors in a friendly way) is traditionally pronounced /in-hosp-i-ta-bal/—though today /in-hah-spit-a-bal/ is probably more frequent throughout the English-speaking world. Cf. hospitable.

inimical (i-nim-i-kal/) means “hostile, injurious, adverse.” It often appears where adverse otherwise might <a position inimical to the best interests of the university>.

inimicable (a nonword) for inimical is a fairly common error. The OED records *inimicable as a “rare” adjective, but it should be extinct—e.g.:

- “These issues have taken on totemic significance in the mainstream in the crossfire against both multiculturalism in general and non-European immigration in particular as though they were inimicable with [read inimical to] the principles of social equality.” Gary Young, “Comment: Gay Equality Can’t Yet Be Claimed a Western Value, But It Is a Human Right,” Guardian, 7 June 2010, at 27.

Cf. unequivocable (discussed under unequivocal).

in like Flynn. This phrase, meaning “assured of success,” first became widespread during World War II as an allusion to the actor Errol Flynn’s legendary prowess in seducing women. (In 1942, Flynn was prosecuted for statutory rape of two teenage girls—and was acquitted.) Today the phrase has generally lost any sexual connotation—e.g.:


The phrase has been the subject of wordplay and consequent confusion. In 1966 appeared Our Man Flint, a film starring James Coburn and spoofing the James Bond series; the following year, its sequel, In Like Flint, was released. The popularity of these films—especially the latter with its pun on in like Flynn—sparked lingering confusion about what the proper phrase should be. So, for example, during
Although *in like Flint occasionally appears in tongue-in-cheek references to Flint, Michigan, and as flint as stone, it shouldn’t appear in sentences such as those just quoted. Errol Flynn is reported to have resented the phrase, but it will always be linked etymologically to him. See James Ross Moore, “Errol Flynn,” 8 Am. Nat’l Biography 155, 156 (1999).

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*in like Flint for in like Flynn: Stage 2*  
Current ratio (in like Flynn vs. *in like Flint): 9:1

in line, stand. See stand in line.

inmate. Strictly speaking, anyone who shares a dwelling with others, whether involuntarily or not, is an *inmate* of that dwelling. The usual reference is to a prisoner or to a patient in an asylum, other uses of the term having become archaic. Even when used in contexts not involving institutionalization, the word still usually carries unpleasant connotations—e.g.: “The houses are large, drafty places where fires are slow to draw, meals are protracted, and the inmates often feel physically uncomfortable.” Lesley Chamberlain, “Torments of Pretense,” L.A. Times, 10 Nov. 1999, at L55.

in memoriam is sometimes misspelled *in memoria*—e.g.: “Alfred Lord Tennyson reputedly staged the first reading of ‘In Memorium [read Memoriam]’ to a group of Irish nuns in the Asgard room.” George Kimball, “Golfers Are Discovering the ‘Garden of Ireland’,” Boston Herald, 17 Mar. 1996, Travel §, at 7-1. Unfortunately, one unsure about the spelling may have difficulty looking it up in a dictionary. That’s because *memoriam* exists in English only in this phrase, which is alphabetized under *I* rather than *M.*

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**  
in memoriam misspelled *in memoria: Stage 1*  
Current ratio: 40:1

inmost. See innermost.

innately is sometimes misused for *inherently.* What is *inart* is inborn—the term should be confined to living things. But *inherent* (= essential, intrinsic) applies best (but not exclusively) to nonliving things such as objects or ideas. The error of misusing *innate* for *inherent* is becoming widespread—e.g.:

- “Natural disasters are not *innately funny* [read funny in themselves], but they can produce humor.” Mike Harden, “What Makes Good Comedy?” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 28 July 1994, at E4.
- “Why the idea of Belgium should be so *innately* [read inherently] funny is a bit of a mystery.” A.A. Gill, “Descending into Bad Habits,” Sunday Times (London), 18 June 1995, Style §, at 29.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**  
innately misused for inherently: Stage 1

innavigable. See unnavigable.

innermost; *inmost.* Both mean “farthest inward” or “most intimate.” If any substantive difference exists, it’s that *innermost* is more emphatic about being deep inside <innermost thoughts>. In any event, *innermost* is far more common than *inmost,* which has become a purely literary word.

innervate. See enervate.

innocence; *innocency.* The latter is an obsolete variant.

innate. See not guilty (A).

innovate. So spelled. See spelling (A).

innovative; *innovational.* The latter is a needless variant.

innuendo. Pl. innuendoes—not *innuendos.* See plurals (D).

innumerable. See enumerable.

innutrate. See inundate.

inoculation. So spelled. This word is often misspelled *inoculation* or *inoculation.* See spelling (A).

in order to; in order for; in order that. The phrase in order to is often wordy for the simple infinitive—e.g.: “In order to [read To] control class sizes, the district will also place seven portable classrooms at the four schools.” David Woolsey, “Meridian Board Caps 4 Schools’ Enrollment,” Idaho Statesman, 28 Feb. 1995, at B1. The primary exception occurs when another infinitive is nearby in the sentence—e.g.: “The controversy illustrates how the forces of political correctness...

In order for, which is followed by a clause, is often wordy for for—e.g.: “In order for [read For] the RCE scheme to be reliable, both detectors must get exactly the same amount of illumination.” Gail Robinson, Electronic Eng’s Times, 10 Mar. 1997, at 37.

Finally, in order that, which often needs no reduction, begins a subordinate clause expressing purpose. It is usually followed by may or might—e.g.:

• “They are glad that the big guy closed down the shop for three days this week in order that the lads might grab some holiday cheer.” Steve Buckley, “Tuna Talk Drills in Fun,” Boston Herald, 28 Dec. 1996, Sports §, at 43. (Here, so would be an improvement over in order.)

• “In order that the child reader may emulate the generous whale, the first three books in the series . . . all come with a peep-off sticker on the back cover.” Valerie Cruice, “Heartening Lessons of Winslow Whale,” N.Y. Times, 16 Feb. 1997, Conn. §, at 10.

• “Sacrificing jobs in order that some might enjoy higher pay may soon start to feel much less clever a policy.” Allister Heath, “Fasten Your Seatbelts—There’s a Little Economic Turbulence Ahead,” Daily Telegraph, 13 Aug. 2015, at 16.

*inorganic food. See organic.

in other words. The following readerly sentiment is fairly commonplace: “In other words’ is likely to prompt the question, ‘Why not have used the right words the first time?’ To be sure, a subtle or complicated thought may need to be clarified by a careful restatement. But too often, repetition is merely a habit—almost a reflex—inviting inattention or boredom from the reader or hearer.” Ellsworth Barnard, English for Everybody 107 (1979). In other words, writers should take heed.

in part. See in whole.

*inplane. See airlinese.

in point of fact. See fact (d).

in prison. This idiom does not ordinarily take an indefinite article: he is in prison, not he is in a prison. But if an adjective modifies prison and the term therefore becomes more concrete, the article should be inserted—e.g.: “Mr. Bararella, now in [read in a] high-security prison, wears [his wife’s] wedding band [on a chain] around his neck, traditionally a sign of mourning.” Celestine Bohlen, “As Omerta Crumbles, the Mafia Changes the Rules,” N.Y. Times, 11 Oct. 1995, at A3.

input, n. & v.t. This jargonmonger’s word—dating from the 18th century as a noun and from the mid-1940s as a verb—is one that careful writers tend to avoid.

Although the word can almost always be improved on, it can fairly be described as ubiquitous—e.g.:


• “After last week’s loss to the Flyers, though, Campbell has wondered aloud if, even with the great effort and input [read contributions] of his stars, the Rangers have enough talent to enjoy more than spasmodic success.” Stu Hackel, “Campbell’s Soup: Can Anyone Coach the Rangers?” Village Voice, 11 Mar. 1997, at 125. (On the use of spasmodic in that sentence, see spasmodic.)


For the verb input, as with the irregular verb put, the usual past-tense form is input—e.g.: “Some people had middle initials inputted [read input] and others didn’t, and some names were misspelled.” Peter Beinart, “Doing the Inaugural Hustle,” New Republic, 3 Feb. 1997, at 22. See computerese. But the verb use is less well accepted than the noun use.

Language-Change Index
1. input as a noun in nontechnical senses: Stage 5
3. *inputted as a past tense: Stage 2
Current ratio (been input vs. *been inputted): 7:1

inquiry; *enquiry. In AmE and BrE alike, in- is the preferred spelling. At least one sophisticated newspaper, however, uses the archaic en- spelling in its name (The Cincinnati Enquirer). See en- & inquiry.

inquirer; inquisitor. Inquirer is the more general of the two terms, meaning “someone who asks questions or investigates.” Inquisitor, not to be used where inquirer is called for, means “someone who examines others to obtain information,” and carries with it historical connotations of the Spanish Inquisition.

inquiry. A. Pronunciation. Inquiry may be pronounced either /in-ˈkwir-i/ or /in-ˈkwәr-i/. The former has long been the dominant AmE pronunciation. It is the only standard pronunciation in BrE.

B. And enquiry. In AmE, inquiry is the standard spelling in all senses. In BrE, enquiry is equivalent to question, whereas inquiry means “an official investigation.” See en-.

C. And query. While query refers to a single question, inquiry may refer also to a series of questions or a sustained investigation. Occasionally writers misuse query for inquiry—e.g.:

• “You’ve really got a couple of things that are problematic, notwithstanding the idea that a married woman could be counted as unmarried because she kept her maiden name,” said Richard Steffen, a Speier staffer who launched a query
inquisitive; inquisitorial; *inquisitional. Inquisitive = given to inquiry or questioning <a highly inquisitive mind>. Inquisitorial has quite different connotations: “of the character of an inquisitor; offensively or impertinently inquiring, prying” (OED). (To contrast inquisitorial with accusatory, see accusatory.)

*Inquisitional is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of inquisitorial.

Current ratio (inquisitorial vs. *inquisitional): 12:1

inquisitor. See inquirer.

in re; re. Known to nonlawyers as a legalistic term, in re (= regarding, in the matter of) was once commonly used at the outset of legal documents and is now often used before case names (particularly in uncontested proceedings) ≤In re Wolfsion’s Estate≥.

In business correspondence, in re is usually shortened to re as a signal or introductory title announcing the subject of the letter. But re is often criticized as unnecessary JARGON: “Even if the caption must be used, as it seldom has to be, the Re: is totally unnecessary, as the mere giving of prominence to the item tells the reader it is going to be the subject of the letter. Notice how some of the normality of the term is lost by the omission of this little ‘throwback’ to early letter-writing days.

UTURE. Business Writer’s Handbook 540 (3d ed. 1987). This trend has been hurt, though, and may have been doomed by the ubiquitous use of Re: in e-mails, for two reasons. First, the short form fits right in with the hurried style of the medium (tho YMMV :o). More important, e-mail software routinely changes the subject line on a reply message by adding Re followed by a colon.

*In receipt of. This phrase, to be avoided as officialese and commercialese, is invariably inferior to have received or has received. Instead of *We are in receipt of your letter, say We have received your letter.

in regard to. See regard (A).

in respect of. See respect.

insanitary. See unsanitary.

insidious; invidious. Although these words look and sound similar and convey negative ideas, their meanings are nothing alike. Insidious = (of people and things) lying in wait or seeking to entrap or ensnare; operating subtly or secretly so as not to excite suspicion—e.g.: “Many Indians still fear that economic liberalization will bring with it cultural imperialism of a particularly insidious kind—that ‘Baywatch’ and burgers will supplant Bharatanatyam dances and bhelpuri.” Shashi Tharoor, “India Poised to Become an Economic Superpower,” Wash. Post, 10 Aug. 1997, at C1.

Invidious = offensive; repulsive; arousing ill will or resentment. This term is often applied to discrimination, as it has been for more than two centuries—e.g.: “The example familiar to us is segregation. In 1896, the justices said there was nothing invidious about separating black people unless they chose to see it that way. That pretense . . . could hardly be maintained in 1954.” Anthony Lewis, “Justice Spoke to Our Better Angels,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 4 Aug. 1997, at B5.

The two words generally ought not to be used in the same sentence because sound might appear to triumph over sense—e.g.: ‘At a time when ‘difference’ and ‘identity’ are the potent and inevitable terms in a new comparatism grounded in ‘culture,’ it may be important to remind ourselves how insidious comparison can be, how invidious and odious.” W.J.T. Mitchell, “Why Comparisons Are Odious,” World Literature Today, 1 Mar. 1996, at 321.

insightful. See inciseful.

insignia; *insigne. Today insignia (technically plural) is regarded as the singular, insignias as its plural. E.g.: “Roses bearing this insignia have undergone two years of comparison with other new varieties.” Diane Relf, “Rose Blooms, Rose Facts,” Roanoke Times, 20 June 1996, at 9. Cf. indica.

The Latin singular *insigne is rarely used. When it does appear, it would be better as insignia—e.g.: “Mr. Robb . . . later learned that a red-white-and-blue tie he wore Sept. 5 when he was endorsed by Bobby Scott—the state’s only black congressman—was adorned with the insignie [read insignia] of the Confederacy.” Laurie Kellman, “Robb Urged to Fight Harder to Keep Seat,” Wash. Times, 7 Oct. 1994, at A1.

insipient. See incipient.

insist takes the preposition on, not in—e.g.: “In a society that persists and insists on [read persists in and insists on], if the rhyming is really necessary] permitting its citizens to own and possess weapons, it

inside (of). The word inside shouldn’t typically be followed by of <the ball was inside the 40-yard line>. See of (b).

Current ratio (inside the vs. *inside of the): 9:1
becomes necessary to determine who may and who may not acquire them."

**Insistence; *insistment.** The latter is a *NEEDLESS VARIANT. Insistence* is often misspelled *insistance.*

Current ratio (insistence vs. *insistment*): 42,536:1

**Insofar as (= in such degree as) is spelled thus in AmE and *in so far as* in BrE. (See *insasmuch as.** But perhaps, as H.W. Fowler suggested, it shouldn’t be spelled at all. “He must have a long spoon that sups with the devil; and the safest way of dealing with *in so far is to keep clear of it. The dangers range from mere feebleness or wordiness, through pleonasm or confusion of forms, and inaccuracy of meaning, to false grammar” (FMEU1 at 276). As the following examples illustrate, modern writers are often chargeable with each of the offenses just mentioned.

- **Wordy:** “[Bill Cosby] knows this is a hurt that will never go away, but *insasfar as* [read if] humanly possible, he wants people to move back to the time where they saw him as someone who brings laughter into their lives,” Lawrie Mifflin, “Cosby Asks to Grieve with Dignity,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 31 Jan. 1997, at F1.

- **Pleonastic:** “This is particularly true *insasfar as* [read because] Mr. Dellums’ ascendancy comes at a very sensitive moment.” Frank Gaffney Jr., “Furrowed Brows on the Defense Front,” Wash. Times, 28 Dec. 1992, at E1.

- **Ungrammatical:** “His name has surfaced in connection with Commerce Department lobbying *insasfar as* [read because of] his success in winning Cellular Communications Inc.” Jeffrey Silva, “Nextwave Ownership Edict Begs Question,” Radio Comm. Rep., 13 Jan. 1997, at 1. (*Insasfar as* isn’t a preposition and therefore can’t govern success; a preposition such as *because of* is needed.)

Sometimes *insasfar as* leads to a false economy. The two words *in* and *so* could be simplified to *as, so* that you end up with *as far as* instead of *insasfar as.* The choice is then between three words (and three syllables) and two words (but four syllables). To some, this seems a trivial worry, but to the writer cultivating a lean style it is serious business. And part of the problem with *insasfar as* is that it “feels” wordy—e.g.: “Boyer . . . seems to be viewed as a bit more of a dark horse by Republicans interviewed last week—at least *insasfar as* [read as far as] the top job goes.” Michael Silence & Tom Humphrey, “Pope Campaign Trying to Cover All of 1st District,” Knoxville News-Sentinel, 16 June 1996, at B1.

But sometimes a sentence containing *insasfar as* isn’t easily simplifiable. And where (not *insasfar as*) that is so, the phrase can hardly be faulted—e.g.: “His suggestion that government . . . has no business regulating private behavior amounts to a claim that representative democracy is illegitimate, at least *insasfar as* it does not comport with his morality.” J. Stewart Brams, “Outlawing Drug Use Does Not Violate Privacy,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 5 Aug. 1996, at A10. To replace *insasfar as* with to *the extent that* would make the sentence wordier. To clip it down to *as* would be too elliptical.

On this term’s spelling, see *insasmuch.*

**Insoluble; unsolvable; *insolvable.** *Insoluble* is used in reference both to substances that will not dissolve in one or more liquids and to problems that cannot be solved. E.g.:

- “The problem, you see, is delicate. I sometimes fear that it is insoluble.” Daniel Horch, *The Angel with One Hundred Wings* 135 (2002).

*Insoluble* is used only in reference to problems that cannot be solved. Most stylists prefer it to *insoluble*—e.g.: “In both Iraq and North Korea the drive to contain proliferation has made George Bush the point man in an *unsolvable* problem.” Stefan Halper, “Negotiating the Korean Rift,” Wash. Times, 20 Jan. 2003, at A17.

*Insolvable* should be avoided as a **NEEDLESS VARIANT.**

**in some circumstances. See circumstances (c).**

**Insasmuch**—always one word—is usually best replaced by a less stilted phrasing, such as *in (that), so (as),* or *so (that).* As the following examples illustrate, both *insasmuch as* and *insasmuth that* are sometimes used, but they are both easily replaceable—e.g.:

- “*Insasmuch as* [read *Since*] Towey was held to a standard few officials could live up to, yes, killing the confirmation was unfair. And *insasmuch as* [read *since*] the Republicans, despite their surface politeness, handled it with all the grace of a demolition derby.” Louis Lavelle, “Caesar’s Ghost,” *Tampa Trib.,* 21 May 1995, Commentary §, at 1.
- “The ‘93 season, Wilhelm’s last, was memorable *insasmuch that* [read because or in *that*] the Tigers needed to win two of three at FSU to finish 11–11 in the league.” Frank Dascenzo, “Wilhelm Can’t Stay Away from Game,” Herald-Sun (Durham, N.C.), 16 May 1996, at B6.
- “*Insasmuch as* [read *As far as*] the immediate postmatch stats can be trusted, he was credited with being Ireland’s leading tackler (with 13).” Gerry Thornley, “Fearless Ireland Cut New Dash in Dramatic Race for Prize,” *Irish Times,* 23 Mar. 2015, Sport §, at 3.

Cf. *insasmuch as.*

**Insouciant (= cheerfully unconcerned; unworried) may be pronounced either /in-soo-see-int/ or /in-soo-shant/, the latter being a more anglicized version.**

**In spite of. See despite.**

**Inst.; ult.; prox.** F.T. Wood writes that *inst.* (short for **instant**) was “once a quite respectable legal term, now a piece of commercial jargon for ‘the present month’” (e.g., ‘We beg to recognise the receipt of your letter of the 25th inst.’). Use the name of the month instead.”
installment is the standard AmE spelling. Instalment is the BrE spelling.

instance; instancy. Instance “in the sense of urgent solicitation or insistence [always in the phrase at the instance of] is a useful word; in any other sense it is useless.” Percy Marks, The Craft of Writing 53 (1932). Another legitimate meaning of the word is “an illustrative example,” as in for instance.

But in the phrase in a majority of instances (= usually), the word is indeed useless—e.g.: “In the vast majority of instances, the company about to be acquired hires an outside firm to vet the proposed purchase price by reviewing details of the transaction and then comparing them with similar deals.” Rick Brooks, “Some Investment Banks Assess Their Own Acquisitions,” Wall Street J., 9 Jan. 1998, at B2. (Read: The company about to be acquired usually [or almost always] hires an outside firm . . . . )

Instancy, a rare term, means “urgency; pressing nature; imminence” <the instancy of the danger was apparent to all>.

instant; instantaneously. Instantly = at once, directly and immediately. Instantaneously = (1) (of two events that occur) so nearly simultaneously that any difference is imperceptible; or (2) done in an instant.

instigation (= the act of inciting or fomenting) is sometimes misused for initiation or installation—e.g.: “The cover celebrates the 650th anniversary of the instigation [read initiation] of the Order of the Garter, the UK’s highest civil and military honour.” David McManus, “The British Philatelic Bureau,” Precision Marketing, 1 June 1998, at 25. (The writer also errs in describing his subject: the Order is a chivalric honor, neither civil nor military.)

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instigation misused for initiation: Stage 1

institute is a formal word for begin or start. Cf. commence.

in-store (= being or occurring within a shop or store) is a phrasal adjective so hyphenated—preferably solidified into *instore. The term became popular in AmE in the 1940s and in BrE in the 1960s <in-store promotions> <in-store displays>.

insubstantial; *unsubstantial. Although H.W. Fowler preferred *unsubstantial and it predominated till about 1950, it is rarely seen now and should be classed a NEEDLESS VARIANT. Insubstantial, the standard term, is much more common than *unsubstantial in modern print sources.

Current ratio: 3:1

*insue is an archaic spelling of ensue. See ensue.

insult, in medical and scientific jargon, often means “something that disturbs normal functions; a trauma”—e.g.:

• “American experience . . . could be useful in reminding [Russians] that government still has a vital role in repairing the cruel injuries inflicted by chemical and nuclear insults to the environment.” “Russia’s Ravaged Environment,” Boston Globe, 5 Aug. 1995, at 8.

• “What auxologists call ‘environmental insults’ can slow or stop this growth. Obvious ‘insults’ are poor nutrition, illness, lack of hygiene, polluted surroundings and overcrowded housing.” Rod Usher, “A Tall Story for Our Time,” Time, 1 Oct. 1996, at 64.

• “The evidence of increased danger from teenage smoking is also important, the researchers said, because it’s consistent with the idea ‘that environmental insults are most deleterious during breast development.’” Robert Cooke, “Study Links Smoking, Breast Cancer,” Newsday (N.Y.), 13 Nov. 1996, at A4.

See trauma.

insupportable. See unsupported.

insurable. So spelled.

insurance. A. And assurance. Insurance answers to both insure and ensure (the spelling *ensurance now being obsolete). (See assure.) Usually, insurance refers to indemnification against loss (from the verb insure). In this legal sense, insurance is of two kinds. One is insurance against accidents: buildings burning, ships sinking, cars colliding, bodies being injured, and the like. The other—in BrE frequently called assurance—is provision for designated people on the occurrence of death: life insurance (AmE) or life assurance (BrE).

In AmE, assurance (which answers to assure) chiefly means “pledge” or “guarantee”—e.g.: “But the assurances China provided to the Clinton Administration have not been made public.” James Przystup & Robert

B. Pronunciation. This word is preferably pronounced with the primary accent on the second syllable: /in-shur-ants/—not /in-sar-ants/ (a dialectal pronunciation). See pronunciation (b) & dialect.

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**insurance** mispronounced /in-sar-ants/: Stage 2

**insure.** See assure.

**insured,** n., like *deceased* and *accused,* forms an awkward plural <several insureds> and possessive <the insured’s liability>. This infelicity can be avoided in one of two ways: (1) by using *insured* as an adjective <both insured representatives> or (2) by using an equivalent term <both insurers> <the policyholder’s claim>. If you are using *insured* as a noun, though, use an *of*-phrase for the possessive <the liability of the insured>. See possessives (†).

**insurer; ✳insuror.** The latter is a needless variant.

**insurgence; insurgency.** These words have undergone differentiation, but the distinction is a fine one. *Insurgence* = an act or the action of rising against authority; a revolt <the military quelled an insurrection in Bangkok this morning>. *Insurgency* = the state or condition of being in revolt <no deaths occurred during the three-week insurgency>.

✳**insurrectionary.** See insure.

**insurrectional; ✳insurrectionary.** The latter is a needless variant.

**in sync.** See sync.

**integer** is pronounced /in-ta-jar/, with a soft -g-.

**integrable.** This is the standard adjective corresponding to *integrate*—not ✳integratable. See -atable.

Current ratio: 29:1

**integral; integrant.** The second is a needless variant of the first as an adjective, but it exists legitimately as a fancy equivalent of *component*—e.g.: “Hauy defines the mineral species to be: ‘a collection of matter whose integrant molecules are all alike, and composed of the same elements united in the same proportion.’” Robert Jameson, “A Brief History of Systematic Mineralogies,” Mineralogical Record, 1 July 1995, at 49. It is pronounced /in-ta-grant/.

**Integral** (/in-ta-gral/) is often misspelled ✳integrable—e.g.: “Before long the slender, shy immigrant became an *integrant* [read *integral*] part of the New York art scene.” Amy Sutherland, “When Yasuo Kuniyoshi Was Still Plain Folk,” Portland Press Herald, 26 Jan. 1997, at E1. Avoid also the mispronunciation /in-teg-ral/.

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**integral** mispronounced ✳integrable: Stage 1

✳**integratable.** See integrable.

**integration.** See desegregation.

**intelligent. A. And intelligible.** Intelligent means “(of people) having mental power or grasp.” Intelligible means “(of statements) understandable.

**B. And intellectual, adj.** Someone who is intelligent has an innate ability to learn quickly and to solve problems easily <an intelligent young child>. Someone who is intellectual enjoys using his or her intelligence for scholarly or philosophical pursuits <a quiet, intellectual woman who spends most of her time in bookstores>.

**intelligentsia** is the standard spelling. ✳Intelligentsia is a variant.

In the early 20th century, some purists pronounced the Russian loanword with a hard -g-, as in *get.* But the pronunciation quickly conformed to a soft -g- on the analogy of the cognates *intelligent* and *intelligence.* Only /in-tel-i-jent—see -s/ is now considered the standard pronunciation.

Current ratio: 341:1

**intense; intensive.** The conventional advice—to shun *intensive* wherever *intense* will fit the context—is sound. *Intensive* is really a philosophical and scientific term best left to philosophers and scientists. Other writers can work well enough with *intense*—e.g.: “Anti-tobacco lawyers complain that the intensive [read *intense*] scrutiny serves another purpose too—intimidating some clients into giving up their claims to keep embarrassing personal information from becoming public.” Myron Levin, “Private Eyes’ Probing Armed Big Tobacco for Court Battles,” Houston Chron., 3 Aug. 1997, at 12.

But *intensive* is now customary in jargonistic phrasal adjectives such as *capital-intensive, labor-intensive, time-intensive,* and the like.

**Intensive** is sometimes wrongly made ✳intensiﬁve. This is commented on, along with ✳preventive, in an old book: Austin Phelps & Henry Allyn Frink, Rhetoric: Its Theory and Practice 24 (1895). Cf. *preventive*.

Back to the present: *intense* has also become a low casualism for “very interesting” <*>He showed up at the party half naked.” “Really? That’s intense!”>.

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**intensive** misused for *intense*: Stage 4

*Language-Change Index* (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i–II.)

**Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but . . . **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but . . . **Stage 5:** Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
**INTENSIVE PRONOUNS.** See pronouns (e).

*intensive purposes, for all.* For this error, see for all intents and purposes.

intently (= with rapt concentration or attention, eagerly) is sometimes misused for *intensely* (= to a very great degree, forcefully)—e.g.: “Ah, the Roseanne people love. Or love to hate. Or maybe just dislike intently [read intensely].” Dusty Saunders, “‘Saturday Night Special’ Loaded for Targets of Roseanne’s Shtick,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 10 Apr. 1996, at D12.

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intently misused for intensely: Stage 1

intents and purposes. See for all intents and purposes.

**INTER-, INTRA-.** These prefixes have quite different meanings. Inter- means “between, among.” Intr-means “within, in.” So interstate means “between states” and intrastate means “within a state.” American bureaucrats and businesspeople have recently created any number of neologisms with these prefixes, primarily with inter- (e.g., interagency, interbranch, intercorporate, intermunicipal) but also with intra- (e.g., intranet, intrapreneur).

**interact with one another.** This is a glaring redundancy that should almost always be trimmed to interact—e.g.: “It’s the best thing to do in the long run, especially as patients interact with one another [read interact] and form bonds.” Ronell Smith, “Families Find Adult Day Care a Comfort,” Augusta Chron., 27 Jan. 2003, at B3. The same is true of interact with each other. See each other.

**inter alia; inter alios.** The best course, undoubtedly, is to use among others, a phrase that can refer to people or things. The Latin is not so simple. Whereas inter alia (= among other things) refers to anything that is not human, inter alios (= among other people) refers to human beings. (The Latin form inter alias means “among other female persons.”)

**interceptor; *interceptor.** The two forms vied for predominance till about 1930, when interceptor became the standard term and *interceptor a needless variant.

Current ratio: 111:1

**interesting** is pronounced /in-trә-sting/—not /in-a-rә-sting/. See pronunciation (b).

interestingly. See sentence adverbs.

**interface, v.i.** Outside computerese, this verb is jargonmongers’ talk. E.g.:

- “Team members were delegated a project-related job that required minimal interfacing [read interaction] with others.” Deborah S. Kezsbom & Katherine A. Edward, New Dynamic Project Management 252 (2001).
- “Making contact and interfacing [read dealing] with others from another culture can be stressful and lead to culture shock.” Wallace V. Schmidt, Communicating Globally 84 (2007).

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interface to denote interaction between people <the editor must interface with the writer>: Stage 2

**interfusable.** So spelled—not *inter fus able. See -able (A).**

**INTERJECTIONS.** See functional shift (h). interline. See airlinese.

**interment; internment.** Interment = burial <inter ment will take place just after the funeral service>. Internment = detention, especially of aliens in wartime <the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II>.

**Internment** is sometimes, especially in obituaries, confounded with internment—e.g.:


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internment misused for internment: Stage 1

**intermezzo** is pronounced /in-tәr-mez-oh/ or /in-tәr-mәd-zoh/, but not /in-mez-oh/. Pl. intermezzi or (pretentiously) intermezzis. See plurals (b). Current ratio (intermezzi vs. intermezzis): 4:1

**intermittent; intermitting.** Both words mean “occurring at intervals.” The distinction is that intermittent connotes random intervals, whereas intermitting connotes cyclic repetition. The first word is far more common; in fact, intermitting is almost never seen in general writing. But in technical writing, and especially medical writing, intermitting conveys a useful distinction—e.g.:

- “By the 17th century, synochus had been distinguished from synocha, a term Galen did not use. The former continued to be a continuous fever, whereas the latter could be intermitting, and was sometimes linked with the periodicities we associate with malaria.” Bill Bynum, “Synochus,” Lancet, 21 Sept. 2002, at 956.
- “This method uses an intermitting technique, along with a free traveling plunger in the tubing string that acts as an interface between the liquid phase and the gas phase.” “A Pump for All Reasons,” Oil & Gas J., 24 June 2006, at 4.

**in terms of** is often indescribably verbose. Whenever you can replace it with a simple preposition, do so—e.g.

• “Many arts groups have indeed been too exclusive in terms of [read in] their offerings, he said, and they have been guilty of the sin of elitism.” Elsa Brenner, “Arts Centers Open Doors for Hire to Survive,” N.Y. Times, 30 Nov. 1997, Westchester §, at 1.

• “In terms of [read In] the overall expenditure on the Trident replacement, this is a tiny amount.” “He’s the Chancer of the Exchequer,” Daily Record (Glasgow), 1 Sept. 2015, News §, at 8.

But in the sense “expressed by means of,” the phrase is quite defensible—e.g.: “At the same time, he describes Sibelius’s symphonies in terms of visual, personal drama, evoking not only smashings and submergences, but also dreamlike journeys through forests and snow.” Leslie Kandell, “Tribute to a Long-Lived Voice from the North,” N.Y. Times, 30 Nov. 1997, N.J. §, at 20.

Internecine. As originally used in English, and as recorded by Samuel Johnson in 1755, internecine means “mutually deadly; destructive of both parties.” In best usage it still bears the sense of devastation—e.g.: “As Zaman portrays himself, he is the civil warlord. He was the one to avoid the internecine bloodshed that continues to plague Afghanistan.” Michael A. Lev, “In Power Shift, Afghan Warlord Now Out of Loop,” Chicago Trib., 7 May 2002, News §, at 6.

The word is now routinely used in extended senses, with the suggestion that internecine warfare has a winner. Often, in fact, it is used to mean nothing more than “internal”—e.g.: “But whoever emerges victorious from the internecine [delete internecine] Internet wars, the one sure winner is guaranteed to be the business and residential consumer.” Paul Spillenger, “Internet Access Wars Heat Up,” Ark. Bus., 1 July 1996, at 1.


• “It is in the nature of bureaucrats to fight for turf and for money. The goal of winning these fights becomes more important than the formal goals of an agency; because winning the internecine [read interagency] battles for money and turf is seen as a matter of survival.” Andrew Greetley, “Merger Making Homeland Insecure,” Times-Union (Albany), 30 Nov. 2002, at A11.

Today, these uses are so common that they can no longer be called solecisms. But careful writers will respect the word’s traditional roots in belligerency and find other words to describe petty squabbles.

The word is pronounced in several ways, the best perhaps being /ɪn-tər-ˈnɛis/-. But other pronunciations are acceptable: /ɪn-tər-ˈnɛs-/,. /ɪn-tər-ˈnɛs-/, /ɪn-tər-ˈnɛ-sən/, and /ɪn-tər-ˈniː-s/.

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Internecine misused for internal: Stage 3

Internet. Capitalized thus—not *internet. E.g.: “Mercifully, Lasch did not live to see the internet [read Internet] or the full digital revolution that the personal computer spawned.” Stewart Weaver, Introduction to Christopher Lasch, Plain Style 39 (Stewart Weaver ed., 2002). The word is legitimately viewed as a proper noun. See World Wide Web.

Internment. See internment.

Interoffice. One word.

Interpellate. See interpolate.

Interpersonal. “What this [word] adds to ‘personal’ except five letters and a superficial impression of scientific exactness, I do not see—except, perhaps, in a particular context where ‘intergroup’ relations might also be involved.” Ellsworth Barnard, English for Everybody 34 n.12 (1979). Point well taken.

Interpolate; Interpellate. The first /ɪn-ˈtɔrp-ə-ˈlɛt/ means “to insert into a text or writing”; the second /ɪn-ˈtɔr-ˈpel-ət/, used in legislative reports, means “to question formally; to seek information.”

Interpret; *Interpretate. The latter is an obsolete back-formation and a needless variant of interpret—e.g.: “The essence of ice dancing is the inventiveness of the performance, how the music is interpreted [read interpreted] and how the dance steps are choreographed.” Lee Shappell, “International Flair,” Ariz. Republic, 20 Jan. 1993, at D1.

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*Interpret for interpret: Stage 1

Current ratio (interpreting vs. *interpretating): 1,494:1

Interpretive; Interpretative; *Interpretational. Generally, one forms the adjective on the model of the noun form of a word. Hence prevention yields preventative, not *preventative; determination yields determinative, not *determinative; administration yields administrative, not *administerive. And with interpretation, the traditionally correct adjective is interpretative (= having the character or function of interpreting; explanatory). E.g.:”

• “You will misuse it . . . if you substitute the dictionary for your own interpretive judgment in reading.” Mortimer Adler, “How to Read a Dictionary” (1941), in Words, Words, Words About Dictionaries 53, 59 (Jack C. Gray ed., 1963).


But interpretive has gained ground since the mid-20th century—so much so that it’s about twice as
common in print as interpretative. The shorter form surpassed the longer in frequency of use in print sources in the early 1960s. Today it is standard—e.g.: • “Morrison, also a founding member of Bolsa Chica Conservancy, said her first goal will be to train more volunteer hosts for the conservancy’s interpretive center.” Kimberly Brower, “Bolsa Chica Group Fills Education Post,” L.A. Times, 30 July 1997, at B2.

• “Signs along the interpretive walkway urge visitors not to eat the fruit, but the temptation to savor an exotic fruit plucked fresh from a tree is almost irresistible.” Pat Stein, “Quail’s Subtropical Garden an ‘Opportunity for Discovery,’” San Diego Union-Trib., 10 Aug. 1997, at H21.


Refight an old fight, if you like, and stick to interpretative. But interpretive has already taken hold. *Interpretational is a needless variant—e.g.: “Therein lies the interpretational [read interpretive] logjam, the slippery definitions of ‘tradition’ and ‘honour’ that wreak the most havoc on open dialogue.” Lynell George, “When Mascots Unite,” L.A. Times, 8 June 1997, at E3.

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1. interpretive for the traditional interpretative: Stage 5 Current ratio (interpretive vs. interpretative): 2:1

2. *interpretational for interpretive: Stage 1

**interregnum.** Pl. interregnums or interregna—AmE writers being inclined to the former and BrE to the latter. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (interregnums vs. interregna): 1:1:1

**interrogate** is a formal word for question; it suggests formal or rigorous questioning.

**interrogate; *interrogee.** W3 lists *interrogee (= someone interrogated), not *interrogee, but the OED lists interrogate, not *interrogee. Since the agent noun is interrogator, it makes more sense to prefer the corresponding passive form, interrogate. This longer form is more than twice as common in modern print sources.

Current ratio: 2:1

**interrogative; *interrogatory, adj.; *interrogational. Interpretative (= of, relating to, or resembling a question) is the standard term. E.g.: “Wimsey smiled at Harriet, an odd, interrogative smile.” Dorothy L. Sayers, Gaudy Night 364 (1936; repr. 1995). The others are needless variants. In legal contexts, interrogatory is a noun meaning “a written question (usu. in a set of questions) submitted to an opposing party in a lawsuit as part of discovery” (Black’s Law Dictionary 947 [10th ed. 2014]).

Current ratio (interrogative vs. *interrogatory vs. *interrogational): 52:5:1

*interrogee. See interrogatee.

**interrupter; *interruptor.** The first spelling has long predominated in print sources and is considered standard. See -ER (a).

Current ratio: 20:1

**interstate; intrastate.** These adjectives should not be used adverbially, as here: “Organized crime operates interstate [read in interstate commerce or across state lines or throughout the states].” See inter-

**interstitial (= situated within gaps) is the standard spelling. It’s pronounced /in-tәr-stish-al/. *Intersticial is a variant spelling.

Current ratio: 1,162:1

**intervener.** Preferably so spelled—intervenor being an exclusively legal spelling.

Current ratio: 2:1

**intervene. See intervention.

**intervent, a misbegotten back-formation from intervention, is incorrect for intervenor—e.g.: • “Chilean banking officials will close at least four of the eight banks and finance companies in which the Government intervened [read intervened] last November.” Mary Helen Spooner, “Chile to Close ‘At Least 4 Financial Institutions,'” Fin. Times, 26 Mar. 1982, § I, at 4.


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*intervent for intervene: Stage 1 Current ratio (intervened vs. *intervented): 19,299:1

**intervention; *intervenience.** The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 65,794:1

**in the affirmative. See affirmative.

**in the amount of. See check (b).

**in the ascendant. See ascendant.

**in the circumstances. See circumstances (A).

**in the context of. See context of.

**in the course of is often wordy for during or while—e.g.: “Billingsley got to know the widow Doss pretty well in the course of [read during] the investigation.” Bill Thomas, “He Can Name Tune but Can’t Find Lyrics,” Jupiter Courier (Fla.), 26 Nov. 1997, at A9.

**in the event. See event.

**in the final analysis; in the last analysis. Both clichés are likely to detract from your prose. Try to state the proposition without this tepid lead-in.
in the light of; in light of. Both are clichés. In the light of is the more traditional phrasing dating back to the 16th century. Increasingly, in figurative contexts other than the set phrase in the light of day, the shorter form has come to be the standard form (in light of how much our bags weigh, it's understandable that we'd have to pay extra). See in lieu of (b).

in the midst of. See amid (b).

in the negative. See affirmative.

in the offing. See offing.

in the process of. See process (b).

in the throes of. See throes of.

in this connection. All in all, one can understand a mid-20th-century editor's denunciation of the phrase: "Of all the superfluous baggage carried by the journalistic or literary pilgrim, this seems to me the supreme specimen of uselessness. Study this combination of words through a hundred of its innumerable intrusions into printed text, and then say if it is not a monster of futility. It is not merely unnecessary verbiage, it is an actual clogging and cluttering of the channels of clear, concise utterance. To me, as an editor, it seems to suggest desire to consume rather than to conserve paper and typewriter ribbons." Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work 276 (1940). Cf. in connection with.

*intimad*ible. See intimutable.

intriguate, v.i., has traditionally meant "to carry on a plot or secret love affair." But today the word most commonly functions as a mere equivalent of interest or fascinate. Many editors object to the word when used in this newer sense—e.g.: "Seeing the heads of all four networks gathered in the same room last week is extraordinary enough. Even more intriguing
intrigue in the sense "to interest" <this idea intrigues policy-makers>: Stage 4

introduction should never be used in the phrase be introductory of (something); one should instead write introduce. E.g.: “This first section is introductory of [read introduces] some of the tenets that constitute part of that framework.” See be-verbs (b).

As a noun, introductory sometimes serves as a chapter title, but it is inferior to introduction.

introvert (= one whose interests are inwardly directed for the most part, often tending toward solitude) is the standard spelling. *Introvert is a variant. See extrovert.

Current ratio: 971:1

intrusive; obtrusive. As with the verbs bring and take, come and go, and immigrate and emigrate, some writers have trouble with the ins and outs of these adjectives. Intrusive means "butting in" or "prone to impose upon others against their wishes"—e.g.: "It's naggy and intrusive. Windows Vista is always popping up warnings and messages, making you wish you could just be left alone." David Pogue, "Hate Vista? You May Like the Fix," N.Y. Times, 22 Jan. 2009, at B1. Obtrusive means "jutting out"—e.g.: "But I like many of today's thinner TV stands because they are less obtrusive and come in a variety of styles." Mary Carol Garrity, "Flat-Screen TVs Offer Decorating Options," Detroit News, 17 Jan. 2009, at H10. But just as bring and take depend on the point of view, so do intrusive and obtrusive, to the point that the words do overlap. If you're being intrusive, thrusting yourself upon me against my wishes, I may find your obtrusive behavior rude. So are you being intrusive or obtrusive? Both, really. Or consider this example: "Part of the appeal of using a viral technique lies in the less obtrusive nature in which a user is confronted by it . . . ." James L. Johnston et al., "Widgets in Online Marketing Campaigns—A Balancing Act," Metropolitan Corporate Counsel, Jan. 2009, at 16. Either adjective might work there, though a good argument could be made that the more familiar intrusive fits better in this type of figurative context.

*intrust. See entrust.

intuit, a mid-19th-century back-formation from the noun intuition, is often useful—e.g.:

- "Perhaps Scott McNealy—the avowed anti-intellectual who once told an interviewer that his favorite book of all time was How to Putt Like the Pros—simply intuited that the day would come when Sun and Microsoft would directly face off against one another." Randall E. Stross, "Sun's Secret Weapon," U.S. News & World Rep., 26 Feb. 2001, at 49.

inumerable. See enumerable.


inure; *enure. The first is the standard spelling. Inure = (1) to take effect, come into use <the trust money inures to the symphony's benefit>; or (2) to make accustomed to something unpleasant; habituate <she became inured to the nuisance of her neighbors' shouting and, after a time, stopped complaining>. The noun is inurement.

For the misuse of inhere for inure, see inhere (b).

Current ratio (inured vs. *enured): 40:1

invaluable. See valuable.

invent. See discover.

inventable; *inventible. Despite the early-19th-century predominance of *inventible, the spelling inventable is now standard—as it has been since about 1850. See -able (a).

Current ratio: 2:1

inverse, n. See converse.

Inversion. Awkward are most, though not all, grammatical inversions (like the one that begins this sentence). They seem to be on the rise in journalism—e.g.: "Said the silver-haired Rotblat, a professor emeritus of physics at the University of London: 'I hope the recognition will help other scientists to recognize their social responsibility.'" William D. Montalbano, "Anti-Nuclear Scientists Win Nobel Peace Prize," L.A. Times, 15 Oct. 1995, at A1.

The inversions especially to be avoided are the ones that suggest amateurish literary striving. The problem with these is that, "like the atmospheric inversion that is blamed for smog, the inversion of sentences creates a kind of linguistic smog that puts the reader to work sorting out the disarranged elements, causes his eyes to smart, and perhaps makes him wish he were reading something else. . . . Straining for variety in sentence structure is usually the cause. Tired of starting
with the subject and adding the predicate, some writers make a mighty effort and jump out of the frying pan into the smog.” Roy H. Copperud, American Usage and Style 210 (1980).

Inversions are probably intended to signal emphasis, but in fact they often convey preciosity—e.g.:

- “This it is which leads us into false comparisons and gloomy thoughts.” Jacques Barzun, “English as She’s Not Taught” (1953), in A Language Reader for Writers 189, 191 (James R. Gaskin & Jack Suberman eds., 1966).
- “In such desperately sad circumstances one is tempted to let grammatical faults pass. But a fault it is nevertheless.” Robert W. Burchfield, Points of View 112 (1992).
- “Unaffected would be the marriage benefit of the current law, which gives a married couple a lower effective tax rate than an unmarried couple if one spouse has much less income than the other.” Kathy M. Kristoff, “Tax Cuts: How They Might Affect You,” L.A. Times, 7 Apr. 1995, at 3. (A possible revision: The marriage benefit of the current law would be unaffected. It gives a married couple . . . .)

Some inverters mar their grammar as well as their style. They have problems with singulars and plurals, being unable to distinguish the inverted predicate from the subject—e.g.:

- “Our oldest son is now driving, and with privilege comes [read come] new challenges and more gray hair for me.” George Olson, “Why Did We Have Four Children?” Orlando Sentinel, 21 Sept. 1996, at A17. (A his before privilege would help the reader through that sentence.)

For an archaic verb that appears only in inverted constructions, see quoth.

invest. For the blunder of using infest for invest, see infest.

investigable. So spelled—not *investigatable. See -able (d) & -atable.

investigative; investigatory. W3 calls investigatory “chiefly British,” but it occurs almost as commonly as investigative in American law-enforcement contexts. There is no need for the two variants to coexist. We might be well advised to throw out investigatory and stick with investigative, or to develop some differentiation.

Current ratio: 10:1

invidious. This term is sometimes mistakenly, through metathesis, written *indivial—e.g.: “Indivial [read Invidious] discrimination is not pervasive anymore.” Luis Wilmot, “Affirmative Action,” San Antonio Express-News, 25 June 1995. For more on this word, see insidious.

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invidious misspelled *indivial: Stage 1

in view of. See in lieu of (b).

in view of the fact that is a weak equivalent of because.

inviolate; inviolable. Although the words are often used interchangeably in practice, careful writers distinguish between them. Inviolate suggests that something has not been violated; inviolable suggests that it is incapable of being violated. The more common term has always been inviolable.

*in virtue of. See virtue of.

invite. Use it in the traditional way—as a verb. Avoid it as a noun displacing invitation—e.g.:

- “Apple Inc. will hold an invite-only [read invitation-only] event Sept. 9 at the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium in San Francisco, where it is expected to reveal the iPhone 6s.” Andrea Chang, “Apple Plans Product Event at Larger Venue,” L.A. Times, 28 Aug. 2015, Bus. §, at 2.

In conversational writing, the casual use is more at home—e.g. “An invite to the porch is not an invite to the house.” Garrison Keillor, Lake Wobegon Days 131 (1985).

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invite as a noun: Stage 4

inviter; *invitor. The first spelling is standard. See -er (A).

Current ratio: 7:1

invocable (= [1] that can be appealed to, or [2] that can be put into effect or operation) has been the standard term since the early 19th century. *Invokable is a variant spelling. Both are pronounced /in-voe-bal/.

Current ratio: 2:1
in vogue is sometimes mistakenly rendered *en vogue, doubtless as an affectation—e.g. “Only the most optimistic or oblivious would buy a personal computer for a 13-year-old this Christmas and assume that [the] same machine would still be en vogue [read in vogue or, better, up to date] come college.” Shaun Schafer, “Hardware Hunting,” Tulsa World, 7 Dec. 1996, at E6.

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*en vogue for in vogue: Stage 1
Current ratio (in vogue vs. *en vogue): 36:1

invoke. See evoke.

in whole; in part. Wilson Follett wrote that in whole is unidiomatic for as a whole, the former phrase having been created as a needed parallel of in part (MAU at 246). He was wrong, unless we want to count as idiomatic only pre-16th-century language and to ignore steady uses up till the present time. Both in whole and as a whole (or on the whole) are acceptable idioms; indeed, they are not even used in quite the same way. Both refer to a complete thing, but while as a whole is the general phrase <as a whole, the chorus performed wonderfully>, in whole is always a correlative of in part <letters may be reprinted in whole or in part>.

-IOWAN. See ZOMBIE NOUNS.

Iowan; *Iowegian. The first is standard; the second is a rare variant. See DENIZEN LABELS.

I personally, a phrase that grew enormously in popularity during the 20th century, is usually prolix for a simple I. Occasionally, though, it legitimately contrasts one’s personal opinion with a contrary stance or action <I personally don’t care if you smoke, but the city ordinance says you can’t do it here, and I can get fined if I let you>. See FIRST PERSON. For I myself, see myself & PRONOUNS (e).

ipse dixit (lit., “he himself said it”) = something said but not proved; a dogmatic statement. E.g.:
• “[Justice Brennan’s] real doctrine always showed through. It was the doctrine of ipse dixit: He has said it, so it must be so.” “Death with Dignity,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 30 Apr. 1996, at A8.
• “As with the whole article, this is just so much ipse dixit, without a shred of proof.” Clive Stafford Smith, “All Talk and No Trousers,” Guardian, 9 Aug. 2009, Comment §.

ipsissima verba. See verbatim.

ipse facto (= by the fact or act itself; by its very nature) is sometimes replaceable by a more direct wording, such as necessarily or in itself—e.g.:
• “Tales of oppression are innately [read inherently] dramatic. That doesn’t mean—ipse facto—[read necessarily mean] they make good plays.” Laurie Winer, “‘To Take Arms’ Struggles to Find Real-Life Drama,” L.A. Times, 14 Feb. 1997, at F8. (On the misuse of innately in that sentence, see innately.)
• “What interests me is Dixon’s notion that talking about polygamy and same-sex unions in the same breath is, ipso facto [read in itself], offensive.” David Reinhard, “Polygamy and Gay Marriage,” Oregonian (Portland), 22 June 2008, Editorial §, at 5.

But the LATINISM is sometimes undeniably useful—e.g.: “H.L. Mencken, who began his career as a police reporter in Baltimore, wrote that he quickly encountered what he called the ‘police mentality’: Every person accused or suspected of a crime is ipso facto guilty of that offense.” Jack Wardlaw, “Reacting to a Harmful TV Story,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 12 Jan. 1997, at B7. The phrase need not be italicized.

Iran. In educated speech, the country’s name is pronounced either /i-rah/ (preferred) or /i-ran/ (more anglicized). Avoid the xenophobic yokel’s pronunciation /i-ran/ or /i-ran/.

The corresponding adjective and denizen label is Iranian, pronounced /i-rahn-ee-ahn/ (preferred) or /i-ray-nee-ahn/. Avoid /i-rahn-ee-ahn/ and especially /i-ray-nee-ahn/ or /i-ray-nee-ahn/. See NAMES (c).

Iraq. In educated speech, the country’s name is pronounced either /i-rahk/ (preferred) or /i-rak/ (more anglicized). Avoid /i-rak/ and /i-rak/, which smack of ignorance and perhaps enmity.

The corresponding adjective and denizen label is Iraqi, pronounced /i-rahk-ee/ (preferred) or /i-rahk-ee/. Avoid /i-rahk-ee/ and /i-rak-ee/. See NAMES (c).


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iridescent misspelled *iridescent: Stage 1
Current ratio: 77:1

ironic; ironical. *Ironic is standard. *Ironical is a NEEDLESS VARIANT that used to be the preferred form; it is still occasionally seen in BrE.

Ironic denotes (1) feigned ignorance used against an adversary to elicit information or to point up fallacy in the adversary’s position; (2) a feigned attitude used to produce an effect opposite of what that attitude would seem to convey, such as faint praise used to express contempt, or apparent scorn used to express enthusiasm; or (3) a situation or event that has the opposite outcome of what might have been expected; a twist of fate. Senses 1 and 2 are classic, even classical. Sense 3 is modern, now predominant, and apt to raise the hackles of classicists.

Sense 1, often called Socratic irony, is typified by Plato’s chronicling of his teacher’s conversation, in which Socrates assumed a philosophical position similar to that of his Sophist counterpart, leading to situations where faulty reasoning behind those positions
Irregular Verbs

Irregular Verbs. A. The Forms. There are two types of verbs—regular (or "weak") and irregular (or "strong"). Irregular verbs form the past tense or past participle in unpredictable ways, usually by changing the vowel of the present-tense form, without the addition of an ending (e.g., begin, began; rise, rose; wring, wrung). Regular verbs, by contrast, form the past tense by adding -ed, -d, or -t to the present tense.

Irregular verbs are sometimes called "strong" verbs because they seem to form the past tense from their own resources, without calling an ending to their assistance. The regular verbs are sometimes called "weak" verbs because they cannot form the past tense without the aid of the ending (most often -ed).

All told, English now has fewer than 270 live irregular verbs. The trend is against the irregular forms: "For many centuries there has been a steady loss in favor of the weak class." George O. Curme, English Grammar § 42.B.2, at 73 (1947). Here are the most common irregular forms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present Tense</th>
<th>Past Tense</th>
<th>Past Participle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abide</td>
<td>abode</td>
<td>arisen</td>
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Perhaps the most surprising instance of this barbarism occurs in a linguistics text, four times on a single page (what follows is a representative instance): "Compounds that were presented without a space received shorter gaze durations (irregardless [read regardless] of how they were supposed to be spaced)." Barbara J. Juhasz, Albrecht W. Inhoff & Keith Rayner, "The Role of Interword Spaces in the Processing of English Compound Words," in Current Issues in Morphological Processing 291, 305 (Pam Frost et al. eds., 2005).

Although this widely scorned nonword seems unlikely to spread much more than it already has, careful users of language must continually swat it when they encounter it.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*irregardless for regardless or irrespective: Stage 2 Current ratio (regardless vs. *irregardless): 572:1

Irregular Verbs. A. The Forms. There are two types of verbs—regular (or "weak") and irregular (or "strong"). Irregular verbs form the past tense or past participle in unpredictable ways, usually by changing the vowel of the present-tense form, without the addition of an ending (e.g., begin, began; rise, rose; wring, wrung). Regular verbs, by contrast, form the past tense by adding -ed, -d, or -t to the present tense.

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Irregular Verbs

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forsake forsook forsaken
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freeze froze frozen
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get got gotten (BrE)
got (BrE)
give gave given
go went gone
grind ground ground
grow grew grown
hang (a picture) hung hung
have had had
hear heard heard
hide hid hidden
hit hit hit
hold held held
hurt hurt hurt
keep kept kept
kneel knelt knelt
know knew known
lay (= to place) laid laid
lead led led
leave leapt leapt
lend lent lent
let let let
lie (= to rest) lay lain
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B. Past-Participial Adjectives No Longer Used as Verb Forms. Many past participles no longer exist as verbs in good usage, but continue as adjectives. For examples discussed in entries throughout this book, see \textit{behold} (the adjective being \textit{behelden}), \textit{cleave} (\textit{cloven}), \textit{luden}, \textit{melt} (\textit{molten}), \textit{mow} (\textit{mown}), \textit{proved} (\textit{proven}), \textit{shape} (\textit{misshapen}, \textit{well-shapen}), \textit{shave} (\textit{shaven}), \textit{stricken} & \textit{swell} (\textit{swollen}). Some adjectives of this type persist only as archaisms; see \textit{engrave} (\textit{engraven}) & \textit{gnow} (\textit{gnawn}).

C. AmE vs. BrE. Sometimes the choice between two past-tense or more (commonly) past-participial forms depends on which major strain of English one is working in. AmE prefers \textit{gotten}, BrE \textit{got}. See \textit{get} (\textit{a}).

D. Dialectal Forms. One characteristic of dialect \textit{is} the use of past participles in place of past-tense verbs — e.g., \textit{it begun a moment ago}, \textit{he swum}, \textit{the shirt shrunk}, \textit{the grass sprung up}, \textit{she sung loudly}. For examples discussed in various entries, see \textit{drink} (*I drank it all), \textit{sink} (*he sunk) & \textit{swim} (*she swum).

Another dialectal trait is the use of past-tense verbs for past participles — e.g., \textit{*she had begun piano lessons}, \textit{has been bit by a snake}. See \textit{begin} (\textit{c} (*had began), \textit{bite} (*had bit), \textit{drink} (*had drank) & \textit{shake} (*was shook).

Still another characteristic of dialect is the use of regular past forms for irregular verbs — e.g., \textit{the shirt shrunk}, \textit{*the bee stinged me}, \textit{*he sweared he'd never let it happen}, \textit{*he swunged at the ball}. For examples discussed in various entries, see \textit{bet} (*betted), \textit{cast} (*casted), \textit{deal} (*dealed), \textit{drive} (*droved), \textit{shrink} (*shrunkled) & \textit{strew} (*strewed).

Finally, dialects have many irregular past forms differing from those of Standard English. See \textit{bring} (\textit{A} (*brung), \textit{buy} (\textit{A} (*boughten), \textit{chide} (*chid, *chidden), \textit{climb} (\textit{A} (*climb and *clumb), \textit{drag} (\textit{drug}), \textit{drown} (\textit{A} (*drowned), \textit{overflow} (*overflown), \textit{pleaded} (*pled), \textit{ride} (\textit{rid}), \textit{slung} (\textit{slang}), \textit{*snuck} & \textit{swell} (*swoll, *swole). Over time an irregular form might become standard; for example, see \textit{fit}.

For the related issue of phrases such as \textit{*might should have}, see \textit{double modals}.

E. Derived Nouns Used as Verbs. Often, when an irregular verb forms a noun (especially a compound noun) and that noun is then used as a verb, the inflection is regular rather than irregular. For example, in baseball, a ball that is hit into the air is a \textit{fly ball}, often shortened to a \textit{fly}. When a batter hits one, we say that he \textit{flied} (not \textit{flew}) out to left field. (See \textit{fly}.) When the ball makes a beeline to an outfielder without touching the ground, we say that the batter \textit{line-driven} (not \textit{line-drove}) it. (See \textit{drive}.) When someone gets the cold-shoulder treatment from associates, we may even say, colloquially, that the person has been \textit{deep-freezed}, though in this particular instance most fastidious editors would prefer \textit{deep-froze}. (See \textit{deep-freeze}.) Essentially the root verb is removed from its native grammatical form when it is made into a noun (\textit{fly}, \textit{line-drive}, \textit{deep-freeze}), and when the noun is then used as a verb it demands regular inflections in order to maintain a close association with the derived noun. Otherwise, the reader is distracted by a miscue, such as seeing the batter actually flying or driving.

F. Choice Between -\textit{ed} and -\textit{-d}. See -\textit{ed}.

irrelevant; irrelevancy. The differentiation is as follows: \textit{irrelevance} states a quality \textit{<the irrelevance of the documents>>, while \textit{irrelevancy} cites an instance \textit{<one irrelevancy after another>>}. The only plural form, therefore, is \textit{irrelevancies}. See \textit{relevancy}.

irrelevant is sometimes, through metathesis, made \textit{*irrelevant}. And this spurious form appears in otherwise literate publications — e.g.:

The two words are also confused in speech, by mispronunciation, much like \textit{calary} and \textit{cavalry}. See \textit{calvary}.

\textbf{Language-Change Index}

\textit{irrelevant} for \textit{irrelevant}: Stage 1
Current ratio (irrelevant vs. *irrelevant): 2,140:1

\textbf{irreligious}; \textbf{unreligious}; \textbf{nonreligious}. All three words essentially mean “not religious.” But the \textit{ir-}\-prefix usually marks a dichotomy (e.g., \textit{rational} vs. \textit{irrational}).

\begin{tabular}{l}
\textbf{Stage 1:} Rejected. \\
\textbf{Stage 2:} Widely shunned. \\
\textbf{Stage 3:} Widespread but . . . \\
\textbf{Stage 4:} Ubiquitous but . . . \\
\textbf{Stage 5:} Fully accepted.
\end{tabular}

Irrevocably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
irreparable

irreparable is pronounced /ɪr-ɪ-pər-ə-bal/—not /ɪr-ə-pair-ə-bal/. Cf. reparable.

irrepressible. So spelled—not *irrepressible. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 2,242:1

irresistible. So spelled—preferably not *irresistible. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 158:1

irrespective of = regardless of. E.g.: “Irrespective of the bomb’s part in the outcome of World War II, we all owe President Truman our gratitude for another reason.” “Bomb’s Lessons,” Phoenix Gaz., 13 Feb. 1995, at B12. Confusion of the words irrespective and regardless has given rise to the semilitate *irregardless. See *irregardless.

*irresponsive. See unresponsive.

irrevocable; *unrevocable; *irrevokable. The first—the preferred form—is pronounced /ɪr-ə-voh-ka-bal/, not /ɪr-ə-voh-ka-bal/. (See pronunciation (b).) *Unrevocable is a NEEDLESS VARIANT. *Irrevokable is simply a misspelling.

On irrecoverable as a noncomparable adjective, see adjectives (b).

Language-Change Index

Irrevocable mispronounced /ɪr-ə-voh-ka-bal/: Stage 4

irruption.

ise. See -ize.

is is. As early as the 1980s, a doubled is (called a reduplicative copula) became common in American speech <what I mean is that . . .>. This is not the type of double that is sometimes grammatically required <what it is is a major ripoff>. (See what it is.) Rather, the second is is grammatically superfluous <the thing that concerns me is that I’m late>. Rarely is this form found in writing, even when speech containing it is transcribed. In any event, it isn’t an expression for careful speakers.

For a detailed linguistic explanation of this sloppy phrasing—or, as the authors of the study chastely put it, its “teleological raison d’être”—see Michael Shapiro & Michael C. Haley, “The Reduplicative Copula Is Is,” 77 Am. Speech 305–12 (2002). Although the authors trace this construction back only to the 1990s, it certainly existed in 1984: the minister who performed my wedding service in May of that year used it habitually (I thought anomalously).

Language-Change Index

Is is for is: Stage 2

isolable, not *isolatable, is the standard form—e.g.: “They are more genetically isolatable [read isolable] right now than any ethnic group or gay people.” David Berrey, “Up with People,” New Republic, 29 Apr. 1996, at 14. See -ABLE (D) & -ATABLE.

Language-Change Index

*isolatable for isolable: Stage 4

Current ratio (isolable vs. *isolatable): 2:1

isosceles. So spelled. See spelling (A).

Israel (the country) is pronounced /ɪz-ree-əl/ or /ɪz-ray-əl/—not /ɪz-ral/. In some hymns and other ecclesiastical vocal works, the name is given special pronunciations, such as /ɪz-ri-el/ and /ɪs-ri-el/. These have no place in ordinary speech. See names (C).

issue. A. At issue; in issue. At issue = (1) (of people) in controversy; taking opposite sides of a case or contrary views of a matter; at variance <his views are at issue with mine>; or (2) (of matters or questions) in dispute; under discussion; in question <the allegations at issue> (OED). The OED notes that in issue shares sense 2 of at issue, but calls it rare. Having originated in mid-19th-century legal contexts, in issue is common in law but rare elsewhere. At issue is the ordinary idiomatic phrase.

B. Issue as to whether; issue of whether. These phrases are prolix for issue whether. Cf. question whether. See as to (a) & whether (b).

C. In the Sense of “offspring” or “descendants.” In the drafting of wills and trusts, the word issue invites litigation. English courts—as well as courts in New York and New Jersey—have held that it means all descendants, however remote. Other courts have held that the word refers only to children and not to more remote descendants. And whether it covers adopted children is a question that courts will answer differently. In sum, the word is best avoided altogether.

But anyone who uses it should use it grammatically, and that is not difficult. The question sometimes arises whether the word should be treated as a singular or as a plural noun. The answer is either—e.g.: “Any issue who is a minor [or issue who are minors] will be assigned a guardian.”

D. Have issues with. Although the colloquial use of issue to mean problem is becoming common, many people find it grating. It especially stands out in the trendy construction have issues with—e.g.:

• “Both kids have issues with [read are troubled by] their parents’ sexuality.” Roger Ebert, Roger Ebert’s Movie Yearbook 2007 655 (2006).

• “This is the third time he’s had his left knee repaired, and I’m hard-pressed to name another golfer—a top-flight one—who’s had the knee issues [read problems] he’s had.” Dan Daly, “Wood’s Forbidden Apple Pays Off,” Wash. Times, 18 June 2008, at C1.

Outside the have issues with construction, issue and problem are often close to synonymous—e.g.: “Cleveland’s version of Phalen Boulevard—a proposed 2¾-mile stretch of road from Interstate 490 to University Circle—has been bottled up by money issues.” Jim Nichols, “Proposal for Corridor Faces Major Obstacles,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 13 July 2008, at A10. In
this example, *issues* denotes matters of public interest, but those issues probably involve money problems.

**E. And edition.** In the newspaper business, the two terms are distinguished. At *The New York Times*, “[a]n *issue* means all the copies printed on a given day. There may be several *editions* of one *issue*.” *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* 117 (1999).

**Istanbulite; Istanbulbullu.** A citizen of Istanbul, Turkey, is known predominantly in English as an *Istanbulite*. The Turkish *Istanbulita* is a variant term sometimes encountered. See denizen labels.

**Isthmus** is pronounced */ɪs-məs/ or */ɪsth-məs/. The latter is almost unpronounceable, and there's no good reason to try. Pl. *isthmuses*. The word derives from the Greek *isthmos*, and it is an error to make the plural— as some do—*isthmi*. See hypercorrection (A).

Current ratio (isthmuses vs. *isthmi*): 2:1

**is to do with. See has to do with.**

**it.** This expletive and pronoun often appears too many times in one sentence. Careful writers restrict it (*it*, that is) to one meaning in a given sentence—no more. The problems with using more than one in a sentence are threefold. First, ambiguity may arise if each of two pronominal *its* refers to a different antecedent from the other. Second, the sentence may well contain a miscue if readers can’t immediately distinguish the pronoun it from an expletive it. And third, having one it followed closely by another often impairs euphony.

The most common sloppiness is to use the expletive it and the personal pronoun it in the same passage—e.g.:

- “For anyone who really watches the program, it is obvious that it is not a ‘political attack’ on Catholicism.” Andrew M. Greeley, “TV Series No Threat to Catholics,” *Salt Lake Trib.*, 1 Nov. 1997, at B3. (A possible revision: *Anyone who will watch the program will see that it is not a “political attack” on Catholicism.*)
- “Despite the sharp rise in inequality, it does not look as if inequality will be an issue in the year 2000 elections. Maybe America will just learn to live with much higher levels of inequality. India does—and it is, after all, a democracy. But then again, maybe it won’t.” Lester C. Thurow, “Inequalities in Wealth a Political, Not Economic Problem,” *USA Today*, 23 Nov. 1999, at A19. (The problem there is that it refers, in the next-to-last sentence, to *India*. But in the final sentence, it refers to *America*, which occurs two sentences before. One solution would be to put the next-to-last sentence in parentheses. [It's a parenthetical thought, after all.] Another solution would be to write *But then again, maybe America won’t learn to tolerate this type of inequality.*) If the next-to-last sentence is moved in parentheses, as suggested, the sentence then reads: “Despite the sharp rise in inequality, it does not look as if inequality will be an issue in the year 2000 elections. Maybe America will just learn to live with much higher levels of inequality. India does—and it is, after all, a democracy. But then again, maybe it won’t.” Lester C. Thurow, “Inequalities in Wealth a Political, Not Economic Problem,” *USA Today*, 23 Nov. 1999, at A19. (The problem there is that it refers, in the next-to-last sentence, to *India*. But in the final sentence, it refers to *America*, which occurs two sentences before. One solution would be to put the next-to-last sentence in parentheses. [It's a parenthetical thought, after all.] Another solution would be to write *But then again, maybe America won’t learn to tolerate this type of inequality.*)

- “More people work in retail than any other business sector in Canada, but few it seems view it as a real career.” Hollie Shaw, “Changing the Perception of Retail as Career,” Nat’l Post (Can.), 1 Sept. 2015, at 4. (A possible revision: *Though the retail sector employs more Canadians than any other, it seems that few in the industry view their jobs as real careers.*

Also, avoid the double expletive—two filler words in a single phrase. One filler it will do—e.g.:

- “It is evident that it will become necessary to hike taxes from year to year as federal and state dollars dwindle.”
- “Unfair Tax Proposal,” *Miami Times*, 8 May 1997, at A4. (A possible revision: *The city will surely have to hike taxes each year as federal and state dollars dwindle.*)
- “Now, coach Dave Wannstedt says, it is apparent that it will take more time for Hughes to acclimate himself to the backfield.” Melissa Isaacson, “Nasty Weather Creates Nasty Situations,” *Chicago Trib.*, 17 Aug. 1997, at 9. (A possible revision: *Now, coach Dave Wannstedt says, Hughes will need more time to acclimate himself to the backfield.*)

When used after a passive-voice verb, it often gives the misimpression that it’s a pronoun with an antecedent. E.g.:

- “The burial was to take place at Highgate, and it was intended to take the body by train from Winooski to Cambridge Junction over the defendant’s road and thence over the connecting road to Highgate.” (The full passive is *it was intended (by someone) to take the body*; yet, on first reading, it appears to refer to burial.)

- “Despite her prediction that the economic recovery will be slow, it is expected that the company will flourish during the next few quarters.” (It seems at first to refer to *economic recovery* when in fact it is merely an expletive.)

See miscues.

In short, delete it when you can; and if you need it, keep it to one meaning within a sentence.

**ITALICS. A. Generally.** H.W. Fowler cautioned that many people, though competent in their own special subjects, don’t have enough writing experience to realize that they shouldn’t try to achieve emphasis by italicizing something in every tenth sentence (*FMEU1* at 304). With experience comes the competence to frame sentences so that emphatic words fall in emphatic places. (See sentence ends.) Also, the writer learns the techniques of subtle repetition—the type that reinforces an idea without cloying.

Ralph Waldo Emerson overstated the case: “‘Tis a good rule of rhetoric [that] Schlegel gives—‘In good prose, every word is underscored,’ which, I suppose, means, Never italicize.” "Lectures and Biographical Sketches," in 10 Complete Works of Emerson 169 (1904). By the same reasoning, of course, one might say that we should abolish question marks, exclamation points, and even commas. The point is to italicize only when one must.

**B. Foreign Phrases.** If an imported term hasn’t been fully naturalized, it should appear in italics—e.g.: *au mieux* *(Fr. “on the best terms”); cogito, ergo sum* *(L. “I think, therefore I am”); dolce far niente* *(Ital. “sweet idleness”); Weltschmerz* *(Ger. “depression or pessimism caused by comparing the world’s actual circumstances with ideal ones”).* But because English is such a diverse language—having drawn from the resources of dozens of other languages—it
is quite hospitable to foreign-looking words. That is, they become naturalized easily. And when that happens, the terms are written in ordinary roman type. (See Garner’s Law.) The words in the following list are italicized here only because they’re being referred to as words—e.g.: caveat emptor (L.), découlèttag (Fr.), gestalt (Ger.), glasnost (Russ.). A good dictionary usually provides guidance on which words should be italicized.

For more on foreignisms, see Gallicisms & Latinisms.

Italy (the country) is pronounced /it-ə-lee/, the corresponding adjective being Italian /i-tal-yən/—never /i-tal-yən/ (characteristic of uneducated speech). See Names (c).

Itemization is often unnecessary for list.


Language-change index
iterate misused for underscore or ensure: Stage 1

goes without saying. See goes without saying.

it is I; it is me. Generally, of course, the nominative pronoun (here I) is the complement of a linking verb <this is she> <it was he>. But it is me and it’s me are fully acceptable, especially in informal contexts: ‘both forms, ‘it is I’ and ‘it is me’, are correct—one by virtue of grammatical rule, the other by virtue of common educated usage.” Norman Lewis, Better English 186–87 (rev. ed. 1961).

The phrasing has elicited a great deal of comment over the years, mostly in its defense—e.g.: • “It is me’ is not frequent till the first half of the eighteenth century. Before that, ‘it is I’ was general.” W. Murison, “Changes in the Language Since Shakespeare’s Time,” 14 Cambridge History of English Literature 434, 446 (1932).

• “Such a change [as] from It is I to It’s me is probably a benefit to the English language. It involves no ambiguity, simplifies grammar, and is intrinsically as euphonious as the alternative form.” Janet Rankin Aiken, Common sense Grammar 26 (1936).

• “The facts surrounding the case of ‘It is me’ are: 1. This expression is in accepted use in informal situations. 2. It is preferable to ‘It is I’ whenever the speaker wishes to emphasize his own personal identity. It is so used and has been so used by dozens of reputable writers from Shakespeare to the present, including such men as Emerson, Meredith, and Stevenson. 3. So far as anyone knows, it has been in good colloquial use for three or four centuries, though for most of that time, the grammarians have been grumbling about it. 4. Many careful, sensitive speakers and writers employ both ‘It is me’ and ‘It is I’, depending on the desired shade of meaning.” Walter Barnes, “Step-children of the Mother Tongue,” 95 Review of Reviews, Mar. 1937, at 59–60.

• “By the rules of grammar and the dictates of the pedant, it’s heinous. But if everybody who says it were to be hanged, the trees would be full of strange fruit, and soon there would be nobody left to string the culprits up. The second pronoun is in apposition with the first, and should agree with it in number, gender and case. But ‘It’s I’ is awfully straitlaced.” Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work 298–99 (1940).

Of course, those with even a smattering of French know that It’s me answers nicely to C’est moi. Good writers have long found the English equivalent serviceable—e.g.: • “It is not me you are in love with.” Richard Steele, The Spectator, No. 290, 1 Feb. 1712.

• “But Silver . . . called out to know if that were me.” Robert Louis Stevenson, Treasure Island 72 (1883; repr. 1985).

• “Not more than four people know that it is me.” Raymond Paton, Autobiography of a Blackguard 42 (1924).

• “It’s only me.” Ian Anderson, “Aqualung” (1971) (song lyric).

• “Begin talking out your thoughts on paper as if you were explaining a concept to a friend. Imagine that it’s me.” John R. Trimble, Writing with Style 22 (2d ed. 2000).

E.B. White told an amusing story about the fear that so many writers have of making a mistake: “One time a newspaper sent us to a morgue to get a story on a woman whose body was being held for identification. A man believed to be her husband was brought in. Somebody pulled the sheet back; the man took one agonizing look, and cried, ‘My God, it’s her!’ When we reported this grim incident, the editor diligently changed it to ‘My God, it’s she!’” E.B. White, “English Usage,” in The Second Tree from the Corner 150, 150–51 (1954).

Similar problems arise in the third person, as in it is him. When the contraction appears, Newsweek makes the phrase it’s him—e.g.: “Rostenkowski simply signed an expense-account voucher for stamps that Smith converted into cash. The first time he says he witnessed the alleged scheme, in 1989, ‘I was no doubt his place in American music. ’” Zachary Walker, “Randall Needs Jail Space,” Canyon News (Tex.), 13 Jan. 1994, at 1.

• “For all it’s [read its] faults . . . this is a pretty interesting film.” Craig Kopf, “Fox Film Mixes Wit, Horror,” Cincinnati Post, 19 July 1996, at B1.

• “The best moment . . . brings out some energy and droll humor, but its [read it’s] not enough to keep this unfocused...
piece from meandering off to nowhere." Mike Steele, "Avant-Garde Roots, Performing Charisma Unite."

Confusion is just as much a problem in BrE as it is in AmE—e.g.:

- "With insurgents providing country including some of the most clearly defined American rock since grunge, it was new going to be long before the movement found it's [read its] very own Nirvana." Tom Cox, "This Week's Pop CD Releases," Guardian, 16 Jan. 1998, at T16.


See spelling (a).

Also, the possessive its should never be used—as it sometimes is—as a personal pronoun in place of his, her, or his or her.

**Language-Change Index**

1. it's misused for its: Stage 2
   Current ratio (its own vs. its own): 494:1
2. its misused for it's: Stage 2
   Current ratio (it's not vs. its not): 41:1

**jaguar** (= a large South American wildcat) is pronounced /jag-wahr/ in AmE and /jag-yoo-ә/ in BrE—preferably not /jag-yoo-ahr/ or /jag-wetr/.

**jail; gaol.** The first is the AmE spelling; the second, a BrE variant. Note, however, that since about 1935 the spelling jail has predominated in the print sources of BrE. Both words, of course, are pronounced /jayl/.

Current ratio: 16:1

**jam** (= [1] a fruit jelly; or [2] a congested or otherwise difficult situation) is sometimes misused for jamb (= the vertical sidepost of a doorway, window frame, or other framed opening)—e.g.:


- "The deputy found a .380 semiautomatic pistol on the floorboard and a marijuana cigar on the driver's door jam [read doorjamb]." Paul Purpura, "Mental Exam Ordered After Carjack," Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 12 Feb. 2015, at A10.

**Language-Change Index**

*doorjamb for doorjamb: Stage 1

**James's; James'**: See possessives (a).

**janissary** (= a loyal, subservient follower) has been the standard spelling since the 18th century. It is capitalized only when used to mean "a Turkish infantry soldier in the sultan's guard." *Janissary* and *janizary* are variant forms.

Current ratio (janissary vs. *janisary vs. *janizary): 273:31:1

**jarful.** Pl. jarfuls, not *jarsful.** See plurals (g).

Current ratio: 6:1

**Jargon**

refers to the special, usually technical idiom of any social, occupational, or professional group. It arises from the need to streamline communication, to save time and space—and occasionally to conceal meaning from the uninitiated. The subject has a magnified importance today because we live "in an age when vague rhetoric and incomprehensible jargon predominate." Oliver Letwin, "Good Servant, Bad Master," Times (London), 25 May 1995, Books §, at 37.

Jargon covers a broad span of vocabulary. For the commonplace medical phrase heart bypass surgery, a range of jargon is available. There's the much more technical (and more verbose) coronary artery bypass graft. From that phrase comes the acronym CABG, pronounced the same as cabbage <we're going to have to give him a CABG>. Some heart surgeons, who would have nothing to do with such slang, prefer the pompously arcane myocardial revascularization. But whatever the name, it's all bypass surgery.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l-li.)

**Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but . . . **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but . . . **Stage 5:** Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
Other examples of medical jargon abound:

black eye = bilateral periorbital ecchymosis
boil = furuncule (/fyuur-ang-kal/)
bruise = contusion, ecchymosis
chicken pox = varicella (/var-ee-sa/)
chillblain = pernio (/par-nee-oh/)
clubfoot = talipes (/tal-i-pee/) cut = laceration
drink = suffering from a hypergestion of ethanol
headache = cephalgia (/sef-әl-jee-ә/) heartburn = pyrosis (/pi- roh-sis/)
kidney stone = renal calculus
measles = morbilli (/mohr-bil-lu/) mumps = infectious parotitis (/par-a-ti-tis/)
removal of a lung = pneumonectomy

Doctors will say things such as Patients rarely present with [i.e., have symptoms of] pleurisy in quite this way, or This is an unusual presentation for pleurisy. Maybe it's understandable that some physicians would use emesis as a euphemism for vomiting when speaking among themselves in front of a patient. But surely no one is comforted by being called the SOB patient. (Some within the medical profession have started changing SOB to SOA [= short of air] for this very reason.)

Doctors have several ways of saying that a patient is on a respirator (or ventilator). Some, of course, say that a patient is on the respirator or on the ventilator. Others, being fond of slang, say that the patient is on the blower. But then there are the stuffed-shirt doctors who say precisely the same thing in the most pretentious possible way: the patient is being given positive-pressure ventilatory support.

Few took note when James C. Leary wrote these wise words in 1957: "Some medical writers tend to overload their pieces with unnecessary technical terms—words like 'ipsilateral' for 'on the same side,' for instance. Few medical [readers] remember enough Latin or Greek to puzzle out the meanings of unnecessarily difficult words and, if they come too frequently, the writer has lost his reader's interest and usually his reader. A good rule for medical writers to follow would be to use simple English words unless there is none exact enough to express the idea sought." Leary, "Medical Writing as Seen by a Layman," in A Group of Papers on Medical Writing 16, 16–17 (1957).

Of course, jargon is hardly the exclusive province of such fields as medicine and law. (See LEGALESE.) It can be found in virtually any other specialized field, such as social work (equality-proofing, food-insecure); healthcare (retroactive disenrollment); statistics (disaggregated data); engineering (tunnel-jacking, soil-freezing); investments (portfolio optimization, derivative leveraging, allocated income streams); business and management (suboptimized multifunctionality, integrator global-value proposition, redundant 24/7 b2b solution); and computing (kernel panic, embedded protocol).

And don't forget linguistics, here represented in a straight-faced passage: "Rules of construal associate antecedents and anaphors, let us say, by the device of coinexing." Noam Chomsky, "On Opacity," in Studies in English Linguistics 1, 1 (Sidney Greenbaum et al. eds., 1979). "On Opacity" indeed! In that sentence, which looks at first like a fragment, the verb is associate.

The linguist Dwight Bolinger disapprovingly quotes an example of jargon from an article on linguistics: "In traditional linguistics it has been assumed that the analysis of sentences can be performed upon examples isolated from the process of interaction within which they naturally emerge." He then deflates the jargon to this: "Traditional linguists thought that sentences could be analyzed out of context." See Dwight Bolinger, Language: The Loaded Weapon 129 (1980).

One of the more prominent types of jargon—one to which most travelers are exposed—is airlines. In the late 1990s, a captain announced, in midflight: "We're about to traverse an area of instability, so I've illuminated the fasten-seatbelts sign." When a flight attendant was asked how she would say the same thing, she said: "We're going to encounter some light chop, so I've turned on the fasten-seatbelts sign." Another said, "We're about to go through some choppy air, so please fasten your seatbelts." Those quotations progress from the most to the least jargonistic—or, to put it judgmentally from the passenger's perspective, from the least to the most admirable.

True, jargon is sometimes useful shorthand for presenting ideas that would ordinarily need explaining in other, more roundabout ways for those outside the specialty. Jargon thus has a strong in-group property, which is acceptable when one specialist talks with another.

But at other times, jargon is no time-saver at all. It can be obtuse and actually inhibit communications. In his book On the Art of Writing (2d ed. 1943), Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch set out the two primary vices of jargon: "The first is that it uses circumlocution rather than short straight speech. It says: 'In the case of John Jenkins deceased, the coffin' when it means 'John Jenkins's coffin'; and its yea is not yea, neither is its nay nay; but its answer is in the affirmative or in the negative, as the foolish and superfluous case may be. The second vice is that it habitually chooses vague woolly abstract nouns rather than concrete ones" (ibid. at 105). "To write jargon is to be perpetually shuffling around in a fog and cotton-wool of abstract terms" (ibid. at 117). See ABSTRACTITIS, DOUBLESPEAK & ABBREVIATIONS (c).
as a specialist than ordinary listeners or readers do. The intended audience, then, is the primary consideration in deciding which words will be most immediately intelligible. See Obscurity & Plain Language.


jargonistic; *jargonish; *jargonic. The first has been standard in AmE since the early 1940s and in BrE since the early 1950s. The second and third, both much rarer than the first, are Needless Variants.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 15:1.2:1

*jarsful. See Jarrful.

jealousy; envy. The careful writer distinguishes between these terms. Jealousy is properly restricted to contexts involving emotional rivalry, especially regarding the sex instinct; envy is used more broadly of resentful contemplation of a more fortunate person.

But of course there's more to it than just that. For a fascinating study of the nuances (not for the prudish), see T. M. Ankles, A Study of Jealousy as Differentiated from Envy (1939).

Language-Change Index

jealousy for envy (of things, not love interests): Stage 2

Jehosophat, the name of a king of Judah mentioned in the Old Testament, is often misspelled Jehosophat—e.g.: "The two children hurry to see Baba-Ali, the sword swallower, and watch the daring Jehosophat [read Jehoshaphat] walk on red-hot coals." Barnhardt Myl, "To Market, To Market," News & Record (Greensboro), 7 Apr. 1996, at F5.

The name is properly pronounced /jɛ-həsh-ə-fət/. The mispronunciation /jɛ-həsh-ə-so-fət/, popularized in the habitual interjection (Jumpin' Jehosophat!) of Yosemite Sam in the Bugs Bunny cartoons, is based on an erroneous reading of the word (ignoring the -sh-), coupled perhaps with the influence of Jehovah (/jɛ-həv-ə/). (Yosemite Sam seems never to hit the books.) But the phrase became so ubiquitous that the interjection would call undue attention to itself if pronounced in any way other than Yosemite’s. Not many people today use the phrase.

Language-Change Index

Jehosophat misspelled *Jehosophat: Stage 1

Current ratio: 12:1

jejune /ja-joon/ = (1) shallow, insubstantial, dull, insipid; (2) (of nourishment or agricultural lands) scanty, meager, barren; or (3) puerile, childish. The late Jacques Barzun, among others, disapproved of sense 3: "The great usagist [Jacques Barzun] took issue with a political comment . . . about the President’s jejune jitters. "The meaning “youthful, childish” for jejune," Barzun noted, ‘has got into the dictionaries only as a concession to the misusers.’ The original meaning of jejune—‘empty of food, meager’—led to its modern sense of ‘dull, insipid.’ Probably because the word sounded like juvenile, it picked up a meaning of ‘puerile, childish,’ which is the way it is most commonly used today. . . . I say jejune means puerile now. And, besides, it goes with jitters." William Safire, "On Language," N.Y. Times, 16 Oct. 1994, § 6, at 18, 20.

Sense 1 now predominates in BrE—e.g.: "Major's toffy cabinet ministers in their pinched Saville Row suits, lisping languidly in accents Oxonian, remind many Brits just how rotten and irrelevant the old aristocracy has become. These jejune relics belong to the 19th century, not the 21st." Eric Margolis, "Major Deserves His Fate," Toronto Sun, 27 Mar. 1997, at 12. And it still sometimes appears in AmE—e.g.: "Michael Kinsley wrote that Jewish Americans envied Israelis for living out history in a way that made the comfort and security of life in New York seem jejune." Geoffrey Wheatcroft, "The Big Kibbutz," N.Y. Times, 2 Mar. 1997, § 7, at 6.

Despite disapproval, sense 3 predominates in AmE—e.g.:


• “My wife had given me carte blanche and other credit cards for the evening and I felt positively jejune again . . . . I stood at the corner of Dow and Jones, wondering where to begin.” Herb Caen, “7 Decades of Baghdad by the Bay,” S.F. Chron., 3 Feb. 1997, at H2.


The unfortunate thing about this double meaning is that it’s sometimes hard to tell what the writer means. Jejune is a put-down, but is the writer calling something “dull” or “adolescent”? In the following sentence, you can't really tell: "This poor translation of a hastily withdrawn French comedy . . . bumps along in a way that makes one yearn for the jejune raunchiness of ‘Private Parts.’" Malcolm Johnson, “Machete Needed to Wade Through ‘Jungle,’” Hartford Courant, 8 Mar. 1997, at E1. Maybe, in fact, the word has a tinge of both, as the meanings merge: “The self-indulgent

Language-change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-i.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
Jekyll and Hyde

See LITERARY ALLUSION.

jimmy. See jimmy.

jepardize; *jeopard; *enjeopard. H.W. Horwill wrote that in AmE “jeopard is preferred to jeopardize, the common term in England.” Modern American Usage 178 (2d ed. 1944). This wasn’t true in 1944, and it isn’t true today—e.g.:• “Mr. Connelly said no federal funds were jeopardized by the ordinance.” Joyce Price, “Allentown Feels HUD’s Wrath over ‘English-Only’ Law,” Wash. Times, 5 Apr. 1995, at A1.

*jeopard and *enjeopard are needless variants that, though extremely rare, still sometimes appear—e.g.: “He quit, jeopardizing [read jeopardizing] more than 20 years of integrity in one day.” Kelley Steve, “James Abandons His Sinking Ship,” Des Moines Register, 24 Aug. 1993, Sports §, at 1.

jerry-build. See jury-rig.

*jerry-rig. See jury-rig.

jetsam (= goods abandoned at sea and submerged indefinitely) is so spelled—not *jetsom. E.g.: “A box contains the flotsam and jetsom [read jetsam] she collects to make impressions in the sand.” Larry Maddray, “Artist Finds a Home for Her Creative Spirit via the Sand of Virginia,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 25 Oct. 1995, at E1. It is pronounced /jɛt-sæm/.

jewelry; jewellery. The first is the AmE spelling; the second is BrE. In cultivated AmE and BrE speech, the word is pronounced /ˈj尤l-ər-i/—not (through metathesis) /ˈj尤l-ə-rə/. And jewel is /ˈj尤l-əl/, in two audible syllables—not /ˈj尤l-əl/ or /ˈj尤l-əl/.

jibe. See gibe.

jimmy; jemmy. A burglar’s crowbar is spelled jimmy in AmE, jemmy in BrE. The same is true for the verbs as well.

jingoism. See chauvinism (b) & jingoist.


Maybe, then, the best definition today—in AmE, at least—is “insipidly adolescent” or “intellectually insubstantial as a result of juvenility.”

Jargon. See literary allusion.

jingoist; jingo. The former has come to displace the latter as the agent noun corresponding to jingoism. A jingoist is a belligerent patriot and nationalist who favors an aggressive foreign policy. The word almost always carries pejorative connotations—e.g.:

• “The Duma’s jingoists seem to care little that the obligations of START-2 are finely balanced.” Russian’s Surly Answer to NATO,” Economist (U.S. ed.), 1 Feb. 1997, at 47.
• “One customary explanation is that the people who ran covert operations at the C.I.A. from 1947 to 1967 were not right-wing jingoists.” Louis Menand, “A Friend of the Devil,” New Yorker, 23 Mar. 2015, at 84.

Jingo has pretty much been driven out, unless a pun is needed—e.g.: “Jingo bells, jingo bells, jingoism all the way on MTV this season.” “The Best of Cable & Satellite,” Independent, 21 Dec. 1996, at 57. Otherwise, it appears mostly in the phrase by jingo, a mild oath expressing affirmation or surprise <I’ll do it, by jingo!>.

jinni. See genie.

*jijutsu. See jujitsu.

jive. See gibe.

jobsite. One word. Cf. worksite.

jocular; jocose; jocund. Jocular (/ˈj尤k-ə-lər/) has been the most common since the mid-19th century. But the other two aren’t quite needless variants. Jocular and jocose (/ˈj尤k-ə-səs/) both mean “given to joking” or “intended jokingly; humorous.” But jocular suggests a playful disposition <her jocular manner endeared her to others> or deliberate facetiousness <jocular remarks during the business meeting>, while jocose often connotes mischievous (sometimes feeble) attempts at humor <his jocose wisecracks wore thin>. Jocund (/ˈj尤k-ənd/) is an eponym for the city of Jodhpur, India. The word (almost invariably used in the plural) refers to a type of flared-at-the-thigh pants used in English horse-riding. Through a kind of visual
METATHESIS, the word is often mispronounced /jod-far/. And believe it or not, this error became pervasive in the horse-riding industry in the mid-20th century. The mispronunciation sometimes results in the obvious misspelling—e.g.: "Wealthy suburbanites clad in fancy jodphurs [read jodhpurs] and riding boots will replace overall-clad cowboys like Mizer." Meghan Meyer, "Old Feed Store Fading into the Sunset," Palm Beach Post, 14 July 2002, at B1.

By inevitable extension, the misspelling also goes back to the source of the word—e.g.: "His name is Ali Akbar Khan, above, whose family traces its musical roots to the 16th century, when an ancestor was court musician to the Emperor Akbar, as Ali Akbar Khan was to the Maharaja of Jodhpur [read Jodhpur] in his 20's." Lawrence Van Gelder, "Footlights," N.Y. Times, 7 Nov 2002, at E1.

How did Jodhpur, a town in central India, come to be famously associated with riding pants? It seems that Rao Raja Hanut Singh, who represented Jodhpur at Queen Victoria's 60th jubilee in 1897, had designed some comfortable riding trousers that ballooned at the thigh and narrowed at the knee so that they could be tucked into boots. While in London, he had the pants copied by a London tailor, who then began making and selling them. By 1899, the pants were well on their way to international popularity.

Language-Change Index

| jodhpur misspelled and mispronounced *jodhpur: Stage 2 |
| Current ratio (jodhpurs vs. *jodhpurs): 57:1 |

Johnny-come-lately. Pl. Johnny-come-latelyes—not *Johnny-come-latelys or *Johnnyes-come-lately. See plurals (e) & (g).

Current ratio (plural forms in order): 4:1:3:1

Joint cooperation is a redundancy.

Join together is a redundancy that should be allowed to survive only in the traditional marriage service, and there only because it is a bona fide remnant of Elizabethan English.

Jollily. See Adverbs (b).

Joneses. See plurals (e).

Jones’s. See possessives (a).

Jostle (= to bump roughly) has been the standard spelling since the 18th century. *Justle is a variant.

Current ratio (jostled vs. *justled): 208:1

Joust. The traditional view is that this word should be pronounced either /jast/ or /joost/. See NBC Handbook of Pronunciation 189 (3d ed. 1964) (listing only /joost/); William H.P. Phyre, 20,000 Words Often Mispronounced 421 (1937) (listing only /jast/ and /joost/). But almost all Americans say /jowst/; this pronunciation must be considered not just acceptable, but—because of its overwhelming prevalence, coupled with no good reason for opposing it—preferable. Let the orthoepic jousting cease.

Jr.; Sr. See Names (b).

Jubilant (= rapturously happy because of a success) is pronounced /joo-bi-lant/—never /joob-ya-lant/. The corresponding noun is jubilation /joo-bi-lay-shen/—not /joob-ya-lay-shan/. The mispronunciations were a rather constant habit of former NBC News anchor Brian Williams.

Judaism (the Jewish religion based on the Hebrew Scriptures) is preferably pronounced in four syllables: /joo-dee-iz-om/, /joo-day-iz-om/, or /joo-da-iz-om/—not /joo-dee-iz-om/. The cognate terms are pronounced as follows:

Judea (or Judeac): /joo-dee-ah/ or /joo-dey-day-
Judean (or Judeacan): /joo-dee-eh-n/ or /joo-day-an/
Judaeic: /joo-dee-ik-
Judaeic: /joo-day-i-ka/
Judeo: /joo-dech-oh/ or /joo-day-uh/—not /joo-dee-oh/ or /joo-day-uh/

Judge; justice. In AmE, as a general rule, judges sitting on the highest appellate level of a jurisdiction are known as justices. Trial judges and appellate judges on intermediate levels are generally called judges, not justices.

New York, California, and Texas depart from these rules of thumb. In New York, justices sit on the trial court of general jurisdiction (the Supreme Court, oddly), whereas judges sit on the state’s highest court, the Court of Appeals. The anomaly of calling trial judges justices is a matter of tradition, the "Supreme Courts of Judicature" having been established in 1691. In California, justices sit on the intermediate appellate courts (the Courts of Appeal) as well as on the Supreme Court. In Texas, justices sit on the courts of appeals (between the trial court and the Supreme Court—the latter being the highest civil court, which is also composed of justices); judges sit on trial courts and on the Court of Criminal Appeals, the highest criminal court.

H.W. Horwill wrote that "judge carries with it in America by no means such dignified associations as it possesses in Eng. It may mean [in AmE] no more than a magistrate of a police court." Modern American Usage 180 (2d ed. 1944). Justice may also denote, in AmE and BrE alike, a low-ranking judge or inferior magistrate, as in the phrases justice of the peace and police justice. Cf. Chief Justice of the United States.

Judgeable. So spelled.

Judgment. See judgment (a).

Judging. For judging as an acceptable dangling modifier, see Danglers (e).
judging from; judging by. Meaning “if we are to judge by,” each of these phrases is an acceptable dangler or disguised conjunction <judging from your smile, the interview must have gone well>. (See DANGLERS (s.).) The phrases became especially common in print sources beginning about 1800. Since that time, judging from has been the more common of the two in AmE; since the 1930s, judging by has been somewhat more common in BrE.

Current ratio (judging from vs. judging by in World English): 1.1:1

*judgmental. See judgmental.

Judgment. A. Spelling. Judgment is the preferred form in AmE and in British legal texts, even as far back as the 18th century. Judgement is prevalent in British nonlegal texts and was thought by H.W. Fowler to be the better form (FMEU1 at 310). Cf. abridgment & acknowledgment. See MUTE E.

B. AmE and BrE Legal Senses. In AmE, a judgment is the final decisive act of a court in defining the rights of the parties <the judgment constituted the final decree>. In BrE, judgment is commonly used in the sense in which judicial opinion is used in AmE.

C. Court judgment. This phrase is a redundancy, though an understandable one when the likely readers are nonlawyers. For example, the following book’s title might have misled general readers if the word court had been removed: Gini G. Scott et al., Collect Your Court Judgment (1991).

Judgmental; *judgmentic. Judgmental = (1) judging when uncalled for; or (2) of, relating to, or involving judgment. Although the newer sense 1 is now more common <a judgmental critic>, sense 2 still appears—e.g.: “In October 1985, police Chief Sid Klein took away Welch’s summons book and said he couldn’t write any more tickets, citing Welch’s ‘lack of judgmental ability,’ “ “Officer Saw Discipline as Harassment,” St. Petersburg Times, 2 Apr. 1996, at A4.

*judgmentic, which H.W. Fowler called a “facetious formation” because of its irregular formation on the analogy of dogmatic, is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of judicious. See judicial.

*judicative. See adjudicative.

Judicial; judicious. Judicial = (1) of, relating to, by, or involving the court <judicial officers>; (2) in court <judicial admissions>; (3) legal <the Attorney General took no judicial action>; or (4) of, relating to, or involving a judgment <judicial interest at the rate of 4% annually>. Sense 4, which is confined to legal contexts, is suspect because it hasn’t yet gained admission to most dictionaries.

Judicious is a much simpler word, meaning “well considered, discreet, wisely circumspect.” E.g.:

- “The duo put on a lively show that was highlighted by the judicious use of video and an inflatable cow skull.” Claudia Perry, “Brooks, Dunn Turn Dome into Honky-Tonk Heaven,” Houston Post, 28 Feb. 1995, at A6.
- “He spoke [about] … the need to be judicious in helping emerging democracies develop institutions to thrive in this changed geopolitical landscape” Stuart Ings, “Law Students with Laptops Link Bosnia to the Internet,” Christian Science Monitor, 28 Feb. 1997, at 19.

See judgmental.

Judiciary is pronounced either /joo-dish-ee-er-ee/ or /joo-dish-ə-reel/. Cf. beneficiary.

Judicious. See judicial.

Jujitsu; *jujutsu; *jiu-jutsu. Although the Japanese term is jū-jutsu, the phonetic spelling jujitsu became the established form in both AmE and BrE during the mid-20th century. The others are variant forms in English.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 23:8:1

Juncture. The phrase at this juncture should be used in reference to a crisis or a critically important time—e.g.: “At this critical juncture in history, the people of China need and deserve our support and friendship.” Samuel D. Ling, “China’s Challenge,” Chicago Trib., 27 Feb. 1997, at 22. Such phrases as critical juncture (a cliché) and pivotal juncture are redundant, since juncture alone will typically suffice in place of those phrases.

But the phrase at this juncture isn’t equivalent merely to “at this time” or “now.” When used with these meanings—as by the first President George Bush and popularized by his impersonator, Dana Carvey— it’s a pomposity. E.g.:

- “While the city has not initiated the program with much grace or deftness, that is no reason to make things even messier at this late juncture [read date].” “Stick to Your Sticker Guns,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 26 Feb. 1997, at A10.
- “At this juncture [read This time] last season, with the same total of two points, the Toon Army had declared war on manager Alan Pardew and owner Mike Ashley.” Craig Hope, “Grim Up North,” Daily Mail, 1 Sept. 2015, at 79.

Sometimes junction gets mistakenly substituted, especially in speech—e.g.: “It would be advisable for the Virginia legislature to reconsider this at this junction [read juncture] … ,” she said, “‘Va. Schools Forge Ahead with National Motto: In God We Trust,” Wash. Post, 28 July 2002, at B1. The error occurs in writing as well, but much less often—e.g.: “The new contract pointed toward his release at this juncture [read juncture] before a roster bonus came due.” Don Hammack, “Saints Roster Taking Shape with Moves,” Sun Herald (Biloxi, Miss.), 21 Mar. 2002, at B1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. at this juncture meaning “now”: Stage 3
2. at this junction for at this juncture: Stage 1
junior. On whether to include a comma with the abbreviation Jr., see names (b).

junkie (= [1] a drug addict, or [2] an avid aficionado) is the standard spelling. *Junky is a variant.

Current ratio: 5:1

junta; junto. Of Spanish origin, junto (= a political or military group in power, esp. after a coup d'état) is pronounced either /hooŋ-ta/ or /jan-ta/. It is much more common in AmE than its altered form, junto /juur-toh/, which has undergone slight differentiation to mean “a self-appointed committee having political aims.” Ernest Gowers wrote that junto “is an erroneous form” (FMEU2 at 319), but it appears frequently in BrE where an American would write junta—e.g.: “Even so, a compliant civilian government may not be easy for the deeply unpopular junto to achieve.” “Myanmar: Deja Vu,” Economist (Am. ed.), 16 Jan. 1993, at 34.

jurisprudent, n.; jurisprude. Jurisprudent, though appearing to be an adjective, is a noun meaning “a jurist” or “a learned lawyer.” Jurisprude, not recorded in the OED, is listed in W3 as a back-formation from jurisprudence with the meaning “a person who makes ostentatious show of learning in jurisprudence and the philosophy of law or who regards legal doctrine with undue solemnity or veneration.” The word deserves wider currency, preferably with recognition of its pejorative connotations (with the pun on prude). Yet today most scholars in the field of jurisprudence call themselves jurisprudes without any hint of self-deprecation.

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jurisprude as a nonpejorative equivalent of jurisprudent, n.: Stage 3

Current ratio (jurisprudents vs. jurisprudes): 6:1

jurist. A. Generally. In BrE, this word is reserved for someone who has made outstanding contributions to legal thought and legal literature. In AmE, it is loosely applied to every judge of whatever level, and sometimes even to nonscholarly practitioners who are well regarded.

B. For juror. This is a surprising error. On the front page of the Oakland Tribune, a deck line states: “Group may recommend better pay for jurists.” The meaning of that statement isn’t clear until you read the body of the story: “The panel also is expected to recommend jurors—who are increasingly reluctant to serve on trials—be paid more money.” “Jury Changes Would Drop Requirement for Unanimity,” Oakland Trib., 30 Apr. 1996, at A1. Nowhere does the story mention judges’ pay. See juror.

juror ought to be distinguished from potential juror or veniremember—e.g.: “When the court was cleared of unchosen jurors [read veniremembers], the spectators waiting in the corridor were allowed inside.” John Bryson, Evil Angels 346 (1985). The difference is that a potential juror or veniremember hasn’t yet been selected to sit on the jury, but is merely in the pool of people who might be selected; a juror is someone who has been empaneled on a jury. For a surprising misuse, see jurist (n).

Juror is preferably pronounced /juur-a/, though it is frequently overpronounced in AmE /juur-oh/ to distinguish the syllables—especially by lawyers and judges. In BrE, it is simply /juur-a/.

jury. In AmE, this is a collective noun, and it therefore takes a singular verb <the jury has spoken>. To emphasize the individual members of the jury, we have the word jurors <the jurors have spoken>. In BrE, however, it is common to see a plural verb with jury <the jury have spoken>, just as with other collective nouns.

jury-rig; jury-rig; *jerry-rig; *gerry-rig. The first is an authentic nautical phrase, dating from the early 17th century. Derived from jury-mast (= a temporary replacement for a ship’s broken mast), the jury part here has nothing to do with 12 peers deciding someone’s fate. Instead, according to Barnhart’s Dictionary of Etymology, it probably derives from the Old French word ajurie (= help). The second is something of a portmanteau word combining jury-rig with a 19th-century BrE CASUALISM, JERRY-BUILT (= shoddy; poorly made to last a short time).

Jerrry-build is sometimes used transitively to refer to something assembled from bits and pieces of other things. E.g.: • “These passages faithfully capture the flavor of Jacobs’s interminable book: corny, juvenile, smug, tired. Jacobs—a poor man’s Dave Barry; no, a bag person’s Dave Barry—has a modus operandi: to drift through the encyclopaedia he supposedly read, yank out an entry, tear open his Industrial-Strength Comedy Handbook and jury-build a lame wisecrack.” Joe Queenan, “A Little Learning Is a Dangerous Thing,” N.Y. Times, 3 Oct. 2004, § 7, at 13. • “If history repeats itself, this budget, like the last six, will continue to limit what the universities can charge while the NDP jury-builds something it hopes will keep the province’s three degree-granting institutions from collapsing completely under financial strain.” “Scrap Cap on Tuition,” Winnipeg Free Press, 20 Feb. 2006, at A10. • “Two-time Oscar winner Leo McCarey had to borrow [Robert] Walker footage from Alfred Hitchcock’s Strangers on a Train, filmed a year earlier, to jerry-build his finale.” Mike Clark, “Film Star’s Death Can Be a Boost or a Hurdle,” USA Today, 8 Feb. 2008, at E10.

*Gerry-rig is a fairly recent American needlessly variant of the mistaken *jerry-rig—e.g.: “A 150-ton specialized tank landing craft was jerry rigged [read jury-rigged] to her deck. She weighed anchor and riding low in the water sailed for England.” Sgt. Paul
just, like only, must be carefully placed—e.g.: “Texas’ Danny Peoples . . . had a two-run double and just hit foul a ball that could have been a two-run, game-tying homer.” Kirk Bohls, “Dallas Baptist Assaults Texas Pitching 10–5,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 26 Apr. 1994, at E1, E6. Just probably modifies foul—it might arguably modify could—but it certainly doesn’t modify the word that it precedes, hit, which might indicate that he had hit the foul immediately before. Perhaps the writer was so eager to indicate how the ball was barely foul that he put the just in too early.


just as soon. This idiom is occasionally mangled into the unintelligible malapropism *just assume—e.g.: • “[O]ffice courtships have become as much a fixture in the workplace as fax machines and desktops. And it’s one area most executives would just assume [read just as soon] not govern, a new survey shows.” Teresa M. McAleavy, “Unwritten Rules Govern Office Wooing,” Record (Bergen Co., N.J.), 17 Feb. 2002, Bus. §, at B6.


• “I’m not a social butterfly and just assume [read would just as soon] spend my free time studying the teachings of Aradia.” Nicholas Hanna, Coven of Rats 3 (2007).

K

*kabala; *kabbala; *kabbalah. See cabala.

*kabob. See kebab.

carlate. So spelled. See SPELLING (A).

carat. See carat.

karate (the Japanese martial art), a loanword adopted into English in the 1950s, has the settled English pronunciation /ká-rá-te/ or (esp. in BrE) /ká-rá-tay/ and /ká-rát-ee/.

*kasher. See kosher.
kempt. See unkempt.

kennel, vb. (= to put or keep in a kennel—that is, a place where dogs are cared for), makes kenneled and kenneling in AmE, kennelled and kennelling in BrE. The divergences in spelling date back to about 1800.

kerb. See curb.

kerchief. Pl. kerchiefs—not *kerchieves. See plurals (c). Current ratio: 508:1

kerosene is the standard spelling. *Kerosine is a variant. Current ratio: 114:1

ketchup; catsup; catchup. The first spelling greatly predominates in modern usage and has done so since about 1850 in BrE and about 1985 in AmE. It has the advantages of phonetically approximating and of most closely resembling the word’s probable source, either the Cantonese kē hap or the Malay kē hap, both referring to a kind of fish sauce. The pronunciation is either /kē hap/ or /kahk- api/; /kat-sap/ is pretentious.

kettledrum. One word. See timpani (A).

khaki (= a brownish-yellow fabric of twilled cotton or wool) is frequently misspelled *kahki—e.g.: “Tuesday is D-day. But don’t look for Audie Murphy or a whole lot of kahki [read khaki],” Lawrence van Gelder, “The Glory and Glamour of Dietrich,” N.Y. Times, 31 Mar. 1996, § 12, at 51.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
khaki misspelled *kahki: Stage 1

Khrushchev. Spelled, with three h’s, though often misspelled with two (*Khruschev) or even one (*Kruschev).

kibitz (/ki-buutz/ (= a farm in Israel where many people live and work together) forms the Hebrew plural kibbutzim in all varieties of World English—not *kibbutzes. A member of a kibbutz is known as a kibbutznik.

Current ratio (kibbutzim vs. *kibbutzes): 39:1

kibitz (= [1] to comment unhelpfully and annoyingly when someone is doing something, or [2] to speak tediously about obvious things) is a Yiddishism introduced into English in the 1920s. The word is accented on the first syllable: /ki-bitz/. The agent noun is kibitzer /ki-b-it-zar/. The variant spellings *kibitz (vb.) and *kibitzer (n.) have not become predominant in any variety of World English.

Current ratio (kibitz vs. *kibitz): 4:1

Current ratio (kibitzer vs. *kibitzer): 10:1

kibosh (= the stopping of a plan or idea from developing or progressing; veto), a word of unknown origin dating in English from the early 19th century, refers to an action or decision that halts further progress on a plan, idea, or activity. It usually appears in the phrase to put the kibosh on (something). It was widely adopted in BrE in the 1830s and in AmE in the 1870s. The word is normally pronounced /ki-bosh/ in both AmE and BrE, but /ki-bosh/ is also an acceptable AmE pronunciation.

kidnapping. A. Spelling. Spell-check programs notwithstanding, the spelling with -pp- is preferred, by convention. But the inferior spelling *kidnaping occasionally appears.

That spelling has its defenders—e.g.: “The form with a single ‘p’ is to be preferred because it is a general rule of spelling that the accent determines whether or not to double the letter when the suffix is to be added to a word ending in a single consonant preceded by a single vowel . . . . [T]he final consonant is not doubled if the word has more than one syllable and the accent is not on the last.” Rollin M. Perkins, Criminal Law 134 n.1 (1957) (citing the examples of develop, offer, and suffer).

Perkins’s final statement, explaining the general rule, is sound. But it overlooks the exceptional nature of kidnapping. First, the word is formed on the model of the shorter verb: nap, napping. Second, up to the 19th century, kidnap was generally accented on the second syllable. Third, kidnapping is much more common than *kidnaping in modern print sources. See spelling (B).

Current ratio: 32:1

B. Sense. Kidnapping = the act or an instance of taking or carrying away a person without his or her consent, by force or fraud, and without lawful excuse. Does kidnapping refer only to the nabbing of kids? No. At common law, it was defined as the forcible abduction or stealing away of a man, woman, or child from his or her own country and taking him or her into another. Originally, the “kids” who were napped were not children at all, but laborers who were taken by force or by guile for service on early American plantations.
The law therefore distinguishes between adult-kidnapping, which includes the element of force or fraud, and child-kidnapping, which often does not, because, for example, there might be no force or fraud involved in making off with a baby-stroller.

**kill . . . dead** is a redundancy popularly promoted (alas) in television commercials touting insecticides that, it is said, will “kill bugs dead.” It’s certainly an emphatic, attention-getting phrase.

*kiln* is pronounced either /kil/ or /kiln/. According to one authority, “the pronunciation [kil] appears to be used only by those concerned with the working of kilns.” Daniel Jones, *Everyman’s English Pronouncing Dictionary* 283 (14th ed. 1967). Another says: “If you want to show that you know something more about this word than how to spell it, say KIL. If you think saying KIL will make you sound pedantic or weird, or both, pronounce the n.” Charles Harrington Elster, *Everyman’s English Pronouncing Dictionary*, 279.

**kilometer; kilometre.** Denoting a distance of 10,000 meters, the word is spelled *kilometer* in AmE, *kilometre* in BrE. In AmE, the second syllable tends to be stressed: /-om-i-tar/. In BrE, the first syllable tends to be stressed: /-a-meet-ar/.

**kiltie** (= [1] someone who wears a kilt—esp. the thick tartan skirt-like garment traditionally worn by Scotsmen, or [2] a decorative tuft of leather or leatherlike material with serrated ends, traditionally worn atop golf shoes) is predominantly so spelled. In sense 1, *kilty* is a variant spelling that appears almost as frequently as *kiltie*.

**kimono** (= a long, loose Japanese robe) is frequently misspelled *kimona*—e.g.: “Over her fireplace in Kindergarten [read *kindergarten*] from the year she lived in Japan.” Patricia Meislo, “Migration Pattern,” *Baltimore Sun*, 28 Oct. 1997, at E1. The proper pronunciation is /ki-moh-noh/; the common but inferior pronunciation /ki-moh-na/ probably accounts for the misspelling.

**kind**. See *class & type of.*

**kindergarten.** This German loanword for “children’s garden” has been in use in English since at least the mid-18th century with its foreign spelling intact. It is sometimes misspelled as if it were anglicized—e.g.: “Lexington is the largest school in the state for the profoundly deaf and hard-of-hearing, and educates students from pre-*kindergarten* [read *kindergarten*] to age 21.” Nicole Bode, “Deaf Get into the Act,” *Daily News* (N.Y.), 6 June 2002, Suburban §, at 1. The word may be pronounced /ki-dar-gahrtn/ or /-gahrdn/.

**kindergartner** has been the standard spelling since the 19th century. *Kindergartner* is a variant.

**kindly,** adv. This word is now frequently misplaced in sentences. Traditionally, it has meant something close to *please*, as in *Kindly take your seats* (= please take your seats). This usage has long been more common in BrE than in AmE. Perhaps that is why Americans have begun to misplace *kindly*, by having it refer not to the person who is requested to do something but to the person doing the requesting—e.g.: “We kindly ask you to take your seats.” This linguistic misstep has become fairly common in airlinese.

**kingdom of the Netherlands.** See *Netherlands.*

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**King-size,** adj., is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *King-sized* is a variant.

**kismet** (= fate; the foreordained events of one’s life) is a variant.

**kitchenette** is the standard spelling. *Kitchenet* is a variant.
kitty-cornered. See catty-cornered.

kiwi fruit. One word in AmE, generally two in BrE.

kleptomania has been the standard spelling since the 19th century. *Cleptomania is a variant.

Current ratio: 122:1

knackwurst. See knockwurst.

knapsack (= a lightweight frameless backpack) is frequently misspelled *napsack—e.g.:

• “Safe to say, although Schmidt contends he is still merely exploring, he has all the right equipment in his napsack [read knapsack].” Kurt Erickson, “The Gauntlet Is Thrown,” Pantagraph (Bloomington, Ill.), 16 Feb. 1997, at A4.
• “Of the 53 players a certain notorious owner jammed into his napsack [read knapsack] and hustled off to Baltimore, only 18 are still with the Ravens as they prepare to meet the Cincinnati Bengals today.” Bob Hunter, “Ravens Haven’t Taken Off in Baltimore Yet,” Columbus Dispatch, 7 Sept. 1997, at E1.

knave ( = a rogue) is sometimes confused with nave (= the main body of a church)—e.g.:

• “As he spoke, the audience sat quietly near the red and turquoise knave [read nave] of the church, eating cookies and cheese curls.” Nathaniel Sheppard Jr., “At Rally in Chicago, a Load of Facts, 16 Listeners and One Determined Cause,” N.Y. Times, 12 Oct. 1980, § 1, at 34.
• “She told me to enter the knave [read nave] of the church, then step into a small room where there was a wooden partition in the wall.” Jacqueline Higuera McMah, “Sweet Tamales Are Holiday Tradition,” S.F. Chron., 15 Dec. 1993, Food §, at 10.
• “Many institutions chipped in with money and advice—including English Heritage, the diocese, and the Churches Conservation Trust, a charity funded by the state and the Church Commissioners that looks after churches put to other uses (one has a swimming pool in the knave [read nave]).” “Saving Churches for Their History—Not Religion,” Guardian, 3 July 2010, at 29.

knockknack is so spelled, with a -kk- in the middle. Some writers mistakenly omit one of them—e.g.:


knickers. See nickers.

knight-errant. Pl. knights-errant. See plurals (g).

Knight Templar. The traditional plural is Knights Templars (pluralizing both the noun knight and the postpositive adjective templar). This has been so since the 1600s.

The historic Knights Templars were members of a military and monastic Augustinian order founded in 12th-century Jerusalem during the First Crusade. Members were called the Knights of the Temple or Knights Templars because their quarters were in a palace next to the building called Solomon’s Temple. The order was suppressed in the 14th century for religious and political reasons.

Although a modern international organization called the Knights Templar (no -s) exists, its connection to the monastic order is apocryphal. So although many writers err, the differing plural spellings for the ancient order and the modern organization should be carefully observed.

knight > knitted > knitted. The usual past tense is knitted, except in the phrase close-knit family. E.g.:

• “Australia’s fairy penguins are all set for winter and any oil spills after 1,000 tiny woolly sweaters were specially knitted and sent from as far away as Japan to the Australian island state of Tasmania.” Daily News (N.Y.), 27 May 2001, at 44.

The usual phrase is knitted brow, not *knit brow—e.g.:

• “Akeara, Freeman’s 7-year-old daughter, is sprawled on the floor, her hair standing on end, her brow knitted as she draws a picture.” Daniel A. Grech, “‘Home Doesn’t Have to Be Perfect,‘” Wash. Post, 19 Sept. 1999, Prince William Extra §, at 1.

• “He claimed that it reigned supreme in eating quality, but (and here his brows knitted) only in its area of origin, north of Sacramento.”” L.A. Times, 23 May 2001, at H1.

• “I just want to get back to playing basketball,” Swoopes says, gripping and shaking an imaginary ball, her brow...
know out


Cf. *fit.*

Current ratio: 3:1

**knock out, knock up.** See phrasal verbs.

**knockwurst** (= a thick, spicy sausage common in German cuisine) is the standard spelling today. Although *knackwurst* is the traditional German spelling, the form *knockwurst,* an accurately phonetic respelling, has predominated in AmE since the 1950s and in BrE since the 1970s.

Current ratio: 4:1

**Knopf.** The well-known publishing house is pronounced /kə-nahp/-—with /k/ distinctly sounded.

**knot.** A knot is a unit of speed equal to one nautical mile per hour. The term originated over 200 years ago when a ship's speed was measured with a log line, a length of twine or rope marked at intervals by colored knots and attached to a circular log weighted with lead. This float stayed relatively stationary in the water and pulled the log line over the ship's side. After 28 seconds (if using markers set 47.33 feet apart) or 30 seconds (if using markers set 50.75 feet apart), the line was hauled back. The number of knots that had passed over the side was the measure of the ship's speed. In the 19th century, the nautical mile (and the knot) was standardized as 6,076 feet, compared with 5,280 feet to a mile on land. Today, both watercraft and aircraft measure speed in *knots.*

Since a *knot* is a measure of speed and not distance, a redundancy results if you append a time element such as per hour—e.g.:  
• "An effective speed is 1.5 to 1.6 knots per hour [read knots], or just fast enough to keep the herring rolling slowly," Fenton Roskelley, "Hunting & Fishing," Spokesman-Rev. (Spokane), 19 Nov. 1999, at C4.  
• "They usually work best at slow trolling speeds, no more than 2.5 knots per hour [read knots]." J. Michael Kelly, "Slammin’ Salmon," Post-Standard (Syracuse), 24 Aug. 2000, at D9.  
• "Ships must negotiate 12 sharp turns in waters that flow anywhere from 3 to 7 knots per hour [read knots]." Louis Meixler, "Oil Tankers Pose Risk on Bosporus," L.A. Times, 1 July 2001, at A8.

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**knots per hour for knots:** Stage 2

**know, through careless error, is sometimes written now—e.g.: "Gempler said he didn't now [read know] why the union produced the report." Hannelore Sudermann, "Teamsters Attack Apple Industry over Core Issues," Spokesman-Rev. (Spokane), 23 July 1997, at A10.

**knowledgeable.** So spelled—not *knowledgeable.*

Current ratio: 139:1

**known /nohn/ is often mispronounced /noh-әn/, as if it had two syllables.**

**knockout.** See unknown quantity.

**Koran; Qur'an; Quran.** These English translations of the Arabic name for Islam's holy book are phonetic. Although *Koran* long predominated in AmE and BrE, *Qur'an* and *Quran* are now predominant in World English print sources. The second syllable is stressed: /ka-ran/ or /ka-ran/.

**kosher** is the standard spelling. *Kasher* is an archaic variant.

Current ratio: 117:1

**kowtow** (= to behave subserviently) has been the standard spelling in AmE since about 1930 and in BrE since about 1960. *Kotow* is a variant. See spelling (A).

Current ratio: 16:1

**kudos** (best pronounced /kyoo-dahs/ or /kyoo-dohs/, with no -z sound at the end) derives from the Greek word kydos "glory." A singular noun meaning "praise, glory," it is sometimes erroneously thought to be a plural—e.g.:

• "Dresser . . . has received several kudos [read much kudos or several rave reviews] for 'Better Days' since it premiered in 1986." Mark Chalon Smith, " Better Days' Makes Best of Hard Times," L.A. Times, 27 Nov. 1992, at F1.  

As a result of that mistake, *kudoes* (a mistaken plural) and *kudo* (a false singular) have come to plague many texts—e.g.:

• "This is a great-looking show, too: Kudos [read Kudos] to the costumer (Ambra Wakefield) and choreographer (Lee Martino). " Eric Marchese, "Curtain Call," Orange County Register, 29 July 1996, at F3.  
• "Whether you nail me when you think I'm wrong or toss me a kudo [read kudos] when you agree, I rely on you for ideas and criticism." Dan Gillmor, "Looking Back on the Year's Miscues and Boo-Boos," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 29 Dec. 1997, at 13.  
• "[Army] Archerd is the first [journalist] to receive the humanitarian kudo [read kudos], which will be presented Jan. 28 at the BevWiltshire." Archerd to Receive Scopus, Daily Variety, 16 Sept. 2002, at 2.

The mistaken plural use, as well as the back-formed singular *kudo,* came into vogue in World War II. See Atcheson L. Hench, "Singular 'Kudos' and Plural 'Kudos'," 38 Am. Speech 303–04 (1963). But the print evidence of the plural use dates back to the 1920s.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *kudos* as a false plural <many kudos>; Stage 4

Current ratio (kudos is vs. *kudos are*) (sadly): 1:1.1

2. *kudo* as a false singular: Stage 2

Current ratio (a kudos vs. *a kudo*): 10:1

3. *kudoes* as a false plural: Stage 1
Ku Klux Klan. So spelled. The more thoroughly alliterative misspelling *Klu Klux Klan is fairly common—e.g.: “Two grandsons . . . said that they had never heard him refer to the bombing or to his membership in the Klu Klux Klan [read Ku Klux Klan].” David Lamb, “Jury Begins Deliberating ’63 Church Bombing Case,” L.A. Times, 22 May 2002, at A14.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
Ku Klux Klan misspelled *Klu Klux Klan: Stage 1 Current ratio: 53:1

*cummerbund. See cummerbund.

kumquat (= a small citrus fruit resembling a tiny orange) has been the standard spelling since about 1900 (a little later in BrE). *Cumquat is a variant.

Current ratio: 10:1

Kuwait is accented on the second syllable: /kuw-ayt/, /koow-ayt/, or /kә-wayt/. Avoid /kyuu/ and /-wit/.

L

label, vb., makes labeled and labeling in AmE, labelled and labelling in BrE. See SPELLING (b).

labor, v.t. See belabor.

laboratory (= a special building or room in which scientific tests are made or substances prepared) is preferably pronounced /la-bә-rә-tәr-әe/ in AmE and /la-bәr-ә-tәr-әe/ in BrE. The shortened form lab, once considered a CASUALISM, is thoroughly established as standard.

Labour Party; Labor Party. In Great Britain, the spelling is Labour Party; in Australia, the spelling is Labor Party. How should Americans spell the name of the British party? Most newspapers Americanize the spelling, making it Labor, but the better practice is to spell this proper name, like any other, the way the nameholder spells it—e.g.:


• “When warned by a colleague focused to some extent on winning elections that a particular policy would alienate the voters, a British Labor [read Labour] Party leader high-mindedly declared that ‘there must be no compromise with the electorate’.” Barney Frank, “They Won’t ‘Compromise’ with Voters,” Portland Press Herald, 16 Aug. 2015, at 4.

See -or.

labyrinthine; *labyrinthian. The first, the usual form, is much more common than the second, a NEEDLESS VARIANT. The word is pronounced /labә-rәn-thәn/. Current ratio: 33:1

-laced. Although straitlaced is formed from an adjective (strait), the modern combining form -laced (meaning “filled with”) should follow a noun: arsenic-laced meal, metaphor-laced speech, etc. It shouldn’t be combined with an adjective—e.g.: “After the game, Isaiah Rider, who scored 16 points, questioned his teammates’ will to win with a profane-laced [read profanity-laced] diatribe.” “Shaq’s Monster Night Lifts L.A.,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 30 Dec. 1999, at D4.

lachrymose; *lacrimose. This word, meaning “tearful,” is generally spelled lachrymose, which is about 52 times as common as *lacrimose in modern print sources. Both forms have ancient origins: the classical Latin term is lacrima (= teardrop), but the -chry- spelling crept into medieval Latin (lachrymalis). That newer spelling has been standard since the 18th century. E.g.:


lackadaisical is often mistakenly written and misspoken *lacksadaical, probably under the influence of lax—e.g.:

• “There’s a sitcomlike airiness to her lackadaisical [read lackadaical] attitude toward family life.” Chloe Veltman, “Mom’s the Word,” S.F. Weekly, 2 May 2007 at N.

• “After a lackadaisical [read lackadaical] freshman year, Gordon was academically ineligible for his sophomore campaign.” Rob Shore, “Making the Most of a Second Chance,” Charlotte Sun (Port Charlotte, Fla.), 2 Oct. 2013, at 6.

In fact, the influence of lax is made clear in the misspelling *laxadaical (a much less common error), the scourge of those who write letters to newspaper editors. Here a columnist lets loose on sports
commentators: “I have been able to get away with a slightly lackadaisical (or ‘laxadaisical’ if you listen to the football pundits on BBC Radio 5 Live) approach to pop.” David Whetstone, “Ever Get the Feeling Everyone Else Is Going in the Opposite Direction?” The Journal (Newcastle, England), 28 May 2014, at 45. In 2002, a Grand Rapids folk-rock band named the Four Lincolns released an album called Laxadaisical. Perhaps the band knew they were making a portmanteau pun (see portmanteau words), but many of their fans surely didn’t. Folk-rock laxity.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. *lacksadaisical for lackadaisical: Stage 2
   Current ratio (lackadaisical vs. *lacksadaisical): 1,204:1
2. *laxadaisical for lackadaisical: Stage 1

lackey (= a bootlicker, toady) has been the standard spelling since the mid-19th century. *Lacquey is a variant.

Current ratio: 13:1

*lacrимose. See lachrymose.

lacuna is a formal word for gap—e.g.:
- “These sorts of responses are an entirely understandable response to a social media environment that broadcasts failures of or lacunas in our legal and moral systems and encourages us to feel a jolt of fury with each and every outrage.” Alyssa Rosenberg, “Justice for Lions,” Nat’l Post (Can.), 31 July 2015, at A11.

The word has two plurals, lacunae and lacunas. Although lacunas might be thought preferable as the native-English plural, lacunae appears to be well established as a foreign plural. See PLURALS (b).

Current ratio: 16:1

lacy. So spelled—not *lacey. For an example of this error, see bassinet.

Current ratio: 19:1

lade (= to load) is an archaism in all senses, except in shipping contexts. See laden.

laden. A. As a Past Participle Equivalent to loaded. Laden survives today as a participial adjective <laden barge> and not as a past participle. (See irregular verbs (b).) To use laden as a part of the verb phrase is to be guilty of archaism, although it is still used in shipping contexts <the ship was laden by union workers>. But sometimes, in literary contexts, laden is simply the right word <with rue my heart is laden>. See lade.

Although *ladened is permissible in Scottish English—since laden is the Scottish equivalent of lade, v.t. & v.i.—it is a solecism elsewhere. E.g.:

- “She stares out from the magazine cover, line-free, mascara-laden [read laden] and pouting, looking something like a teenage daughter who’s petulant after being asked to do the dishes.” Abigail Trafford, “Mythical Plauntin’ of Youth,” Wash. Post, 26 Nov. 1996, Health §, at Z6.

Current ratio (laden vs. *ladened): 473:1

B. For ridden. Ridden is the more general term, meaning “infested with,” “full of,” or “dominated, harressed, or obsessed by.” Laden has not shed its strong connotation of “loaded down.” Hence a place might be laden with things if they had been stacked there; or, more plausibly, a truck or barge might be laden with goods. But figuratively, laden fails as an effective adjective if the original suggestion of loading is ignored. E.g. “This winter she’s going to teach herself how to use the GIS computerized mapping system so she can map out mosquito-laden [read mosquito-ridden] areas and make it easier on the workers.” Pam Starr, “The Bug Lady: No One Knows Insects Like Dreda McCreary,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 15 Oct. 1997, at E1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
-laden for -ridden (in the sense “infested with”): Stage 2

ladies’ man; lady’s man. The phrase is commonly written both ways, but ladies’ man (the predominant form since the late 19th century) is more in keeping with the sense of many women. Some dictionaries seem to misdefine the phrase: “a man very fond of the company of women and very attentive to them” (WNWCD), “a man who shows a marked fondness for the company of women or is esp. attentive to women” (W11). The main element is missing there because such a man could still be so oafish as to seem repulsive to women. That is, a ladies’ man must be not only fond of women but also popular with them. See lady.

Current ratio: 4:1

lady. This word has become increasingly problematic. Though hardly anyone would object to it in the phrase ladies and gentlemen or on a restroom sign, most other uses of the term might invite disapproval—depending on the readers’ or listeners’ views about sexism. It isn’t a skunked term, but it’s gradually becoming something like one. And this process has been occurring since at least the mid-20th century: “I don’t know any word that has been so beaten down since it simply fills a literary lacuna.” Book Rev., “Celine Away,” Village Voice, 11 July 1995, at 12.

The linguist Cecil Raynor Hancock of Chicago observed in 1963 that Americans are divisible into three groups when it comes to using lady: (1) those who use lady in preference to woman when referring to female adults of any social class (a group that has steadily dwindled); (2) those who generally use woman in preference to lady, but who use lady in reference to social inferiors; and (3) those who use woman uniformly
regardless of social class or familiarity, except in a few set formulas such as ladies and gentlemen. See "Lady and Woman," 38 Am. Speech 234–35 (1963). Hancock rightly notes that "the use of lady at present apparently gives more sociological information about its user than about the person described," adding: "woman is probably the safer choice of the two." Ibid. at 235.

lady's man. See ladies' man.

*laesae majestas; *laesae majestatis. See lese majesty.

Lafayette. The Marquis de Lafayette's name was pronounced /lah-fay- et/. The name of the Louisiana city is /laf-ee-yet/.

laid; lain. See lay.

laissez-faire; *laisser-faire. The former spelling has long been standard. Some British publications, however, continue to use the outmoded spelling (laisser)—e.g.:


- The phrase is pronounced /les-ay fair/—not /lah-zay/ or /lay-zay/.

Current ratio: 69:1

lament used intransitively <lamented over the loss> instead of transitively <lamented the loss>:

Stage 1

Current ratio (lamented the vs. *lamented over the): 58:1

lamentable is pronounced either /lam-on-ta-bal/ or /la-men-ta-bal/. Traditionally, the first of these pronunciations has been considered the better one.

landowner has been written as one word in both AmE and BrE since the early 19th century. The same is true of landownership.

landward(s). See DIRECTIONAL WORDS (a).

*laniard. See lanyard.

lanolin (= a fatty substance in cosmetics and emollients) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Lanoline is a variant.

Current ratio: 20:1

lanyard, a word referring to various types of cords or ropes, has been predominantly so spelled since the mid-19th century. *Laniard is a variant spelling.

lapelled (= [of a coat or jacket] having a front that is joined to the collar and folded back on each side) is so spelled in AmE and BrE alike. Why is the final -l- doubled in AmE, though not in leveled? Because the final -l- in lapelled occurs in an accented syllable. See SPELLING (b).

lapsable. So spelled—preferably not *lapsible. See -ABLE (a).

Current ratio: 8:1

lapsus linguae; lapsus calami. These Latinisms are fancy ways of referring to slips of the tongue (linguae) or of the pen (calami). The phrase lapsus linguae /lap-sas ling-gwee/ is the more common one—e.g.:

"In a lapsus linguae, Pam Weiger, a Fire Department spokeswoman, said, ‘We ended up transporting sick of them, I mean six of them, to Mount Vernon

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
\section*{larency}

See burglary.

large, unlike burglary, is not a word that can be idiomatically coupled with other words denoting measure, such as breadth, depth, distance, height, length, weight, and width. But writers often misuse large when great would be the right word—e.g.:

- "About 46 percent of the state's bridges are not wide or high enough, have lanes that are too narrow or can't handle large [read great] weights or high speeds." Mei-Ling Hopgood, "Missouri's City Highways All Choked Up," \textit{St. Louis Post-Dispatch}, 6 Feb. 1997, at A1.

- "Every so often, gravity from a planet acts like a 'sling-shot,'" Mumma said, hurting a comet large [read great] distances from the sun." Diedtria Henderson, "Unlocking Comets' Secrets," \textit{Seattle Times}, 18 Mar. 1997, at A12. (Because gravity is a property rather than an emanation, the phrase the gravity of a planet would be more logical in that sentence than gravity from a planet.)

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\textbf{Language-Change Index}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{large} for \textit{great} with words of measure <great distance>: Stage 1
\end{itemize}

\section*{large-sized; large-size, adj.}

This \textit{phrasal adjective} is usually redundant. The predominant form (twice as common) is \textit{large-sized}. Although \textit{large-sized} \textit{apparel} is defensible, \textit{large-sized} \textit{business} is not.

\section*{largesse; largess.}

\textit{Largesse} (= generous giving; munificence) has long been the standard spelling in English. The \textit{galligasm} was first borrowed into Middle English and was fully anglicized as \textit{largess} by the 16th century. AmE mostly stuck with that spelling through about 1950, while BrE had reverted to the Frenchified spelling \textit{largesse} by 1900. Today \textit{largesse} predominates in AmE as well as BrE. Although the preferred pronunciation is the anglicized /lahr-jes/, the word is often pronounced in the French way, that is, /lahr-zhes/.

\section*{larva (= a newly hatched insect) predominantly forms the plural larvae /lahr-vee/ in AmE and BrE alike. Avoid pronouncing the plural form as /lahr-vi/ or /lahr-vay/.

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Current ratio (larvae vs. larvae): 201:1

\section*{larynx /larinx/ is sometimes, through \textit{metathesis}, mispronounced /lar-\-niks/ or /lahr-\-niks/. From the latter mispronunciation comes the inevitable misspelling—e.g.:

- "[Ken] Raabe [a puppeteer] uses an object called a swazzle, a kind of small artificial larynx [read larynx] placed at the back of his throat, to make the traditional shrill, raspy voice of Punch." Nancy Maes, "Clowns at Custer's Last Stand," \textit{Chicago Trib.}, 15 June 2001, at 35.


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\textbf{Language-Change Index}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{larynx} misspelled and mispronounced *\textit{laryn}: Stage 1
\end{itemize}

Current ratio: 679:1

Current ratio (larynaxes vs. larynges as pl.): 1:1

\section*{lasagna, denoting a popular Italian dish, is the standard spelling in AmE. \textit{Lasagne} (the Italian plural) predominates in BrE.

Current ratio (lasagna vs. lasagne): 4:1

\section*{lasso. Pl. lassos, not *lassoes. See plurals (d).}

\section*{last analysis, in the. See in the final analysis.}

\section*{last but not least.}

First and foremost, it needs to be said that this tired expression is best avoided. Second, please realize that \textit{least} is the most emphatic word in the phrase, thereby suggesting the opposite of what is being asserted. Try \textit{finally} instead.

\section*{last name. See names (d).}

\section*{last rites (= a sacrament in which a priest blesses and prays for a person who has fallen critically ill or been grievously injured) is occasionally misrendered *last rights—e.g.: "Less than a year later, he would give her son, Albie, his last rights [read last rites] as he lay dying in a hallway." Peter Gelzinis, "Charlestown's Rev. Coyne Is Worthy of Name 'Father,'" \textit{Boston Herald}, 16 June 1996, at 16. Cf. rite of passage.}

A former term for last rites is extreme \textit{unction}, but the Roman Catholic Church changed the name in 1972 to shift the focus from dying to healing, spiritually and physically. Today the rite is called, variously, sacrament of the sick, anointing of the sick, and sacra-ment of healing.

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\textbf{Language-Change Index}

\begin{itemize}
\item *last rights for last rites: Stage 1
\end{itemize}

Current ratio (last rites vs. *last rights): 30:1

\section*{late. A. \textit{The late}.}

This expression is elliptical for \textit{lately} (i.e., recently \textit{deceased}). How long this can be used of a dead person depends on how recently that person died, but anything more than five years or so is going to strike most readers as odd (e.g., \textit{the late John F. Kennedy}). Of course, there's no absolute statute of limitations; the question is whether a fair number of reasonable readers would know or need to be reminded that the person has died. But the expression serves as more than just a reminder. It also offers a note of respect—and perhaps even a touch of sorrow. So in the fall of 1997 people said \textit{the late Princess Diana} not because anybody needed to be reminded that she had died in August of that year—everyone knew it—but because people mourned her death. By the same token, a widowed spouse might continue to use \textit{my late husband} or \textit{my late wife}.
The late is also helpful in historical contexts to indicate that someone has recently died <the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was seen at the time as a tribute to the late John F. Kennedy>.

B. Late residence. The usage his (or her) late residence, common in obituaries from the late 20th century, was first mentioned in usage commentary in 1984. See David L. Gold, "Media Watch: His Late Residence," 59 Am. Speech 96 (1984). But in fact the phrase dates back to the 18th century and was fairly common in the 19th. Because late means "recently deceased," this is an odd instance of hypallage. It makes little sense. The best editorial practice is to let the context make clear that a decedent’s residence is being referred to—e.g.:

- "A celebration of Frances’ life will be held at her late residence, 6545 Murano Way, Lakeworth, FL on Saturday, Apr. 26, 2008 from 1–5 PM." Funeral Notices” (Frances (Sweeney) Foster), Palm Beach Post, 24 Apr. 2008, at B8.
- "Died May 26, 2008, peacefully, at Sliève Dhu Nursing Home. Funeral from her late residence, 11 Whiteforth Road, Aughlishnafin, Castlewellan, tomorrow (Wednesday) at 2:00 p.m. for service in Clough NonSubscribing Presbyterian Church, followed by interment in adjoining churchyard. Friends welcome to call at her late residence." Wilson, Sarah Jane (Sadie)” (obit.), Belfast Telegraph (Ireland), 27 May 2008.

later. A. Without Temporal Context. Later should not be used unless a proper time frame has already been established. E.g.:

- "As Salman Rushdie, later the target of an Islamic fatwa calling for his death [read who was to become the target of an Islamic fatwa calling for his death], stated in 1985, . . . ."

B. Later on. The distinction between later and later on rests on two points: euphony and formality. Occasionally, later on simply sounds better in a sentence. It is always less formal—e.g.:

- "Later on, I realized it was a good thing I had paid Billy’s reputation that trite little compliment." Larry McMurtry, Anything for Billy 14 (1988).

Cf. early on.

late residence. See late (b).

lath; lathe. A lath /lath/ is a long narrow piece of wood used as an underlay for some other building material, such as plaster or tile. A lathe /lath/ is a machine that shapes wood or metal by having it rotated against a sharp tool within the machine.

Latinisms. In the English language, Latin words and phrases typically fall into one of six categories:

1) those that are now so common that they’re barely recognizable as Latin (bonus, data, vice versa);
2) those that are reduced to abbreviations in scholarly contexts (e.g., i.e., ibid., id.);
3) those used in jargon of doctors, lawyers, and scientists (metatarsus, habesas corpus, chlorella);
4) the mottoes and maxims used especially in ceremonial contexts (E pluribus unum, Sic transit gloria mundi);
5) those that literate people know and occasionally find useful (ipse dixit, non sequitur, rebus, mutatis mutandis); and
6) the truly rare ones that characterize sesquipedality (ceteris paribus, hic et ubique, ignoratio elenchii). Increasingly, the view among stylists is that unless you know that your audience is fairly erudite, categories 3 through 6 are dangerous territory.

For an interesting list of Latinate adjectives describing various animals, see animal adjectives. On whether to italicize words borrowed from Latin and other languages, see italics (b). On pluralizing Latin terms, see plurals (b) & hypercorrection (a).

Latino; Latina. See Hispanic.

latter. See former.

latterly, an archaisms characteristic of 19th-century prose, is essentially equivalent to later or lately. It occurs seldom in AmE but occasionally in BrE—e.g.:

- “Latterly he professed himself increasingly saddened by the manipulative nature of the business he had helped to create.” Edward L. Bernays” (obit.), Daily Telegraph, 13 Mar. 1995, at 23.
- “In the early years, its work was mainly inspections of long-stay hospitals; latterly, it moved into thematic reviews of services.” David Brindle, “Demise of the Eyes,” Guardian, 2 Apr. 1997, at 6.

When the word does appear in AmE, it is usually in a literary context—e.g.: "A novelist himself, once a New York editor, formerly director of the Iowa Writers Workshop and latterly of the Napa Valley Writers’ Conference, these days Leggett lives and writes here in the Bay Area.” David Kipen, “Saroyan as Monstrous Narcissist,” S.F. Chron., 10 Nov. 2002, Sunday Rev., at 1.

laudatory; *laudative; laudable. The first two both mean "expressing praise." But *laudative is a needless variant of laudatory, the much more common word. Laudable, in contrast, means "deserving praise." The distinction is the same as that between praiseworthy (= laudable) and praiseful (= laudatory).

The misuse of laudatory for laudable is lamentably common—e.g.:

- "Indeed, like Nixon before him, a jaundiced view of Clinton and his motives causes many to oppose or at least look askance at even his most laudatory [read laudable] goals.” Jeff Rivers, “Cast Aside National Cynicism Left Over from Watergate,” Hartford Courant, 4 Aug. 1994, at A2.
• “But for all its laudatory [read laudable] achievements, the council-manager model can be aloof, even distant, from the people who are paying for it.” “Government Merger,” Herald-Sun (Durham, N.C.), 8 Sept. 1994, at A12.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index
laudatory misused for laudable: Stage 2
Current ratio (laudable goal vs. *laudatory goal): 39:1

launch
has become a vogue word when used in the sense “to begin, initiate”—e.g.:
• “DuPage County is launching an innovative ‘last chance’ educational initiative for students expelled from school because of drug selling.” Casey Banas, “Last Chance Offered to Kids Facing Expulsion,” Chicago Trib., 12 Feb. 1997, at D1.
The related noun <the first launch in California will be in San Diego> is much the same.

laundromat
is sometimes misspelled *laundry mat—e.g.:
• “He followed the scent to the vent fan on the nearby laundry mat [read laundromat], then to the dryers inside where bulging pillow cases were tumbling.” R.K. Shull, “Waiting for the Smoke to Clear,” Indianapolis News, 19 July 1999, at C1.
• “The Rizzo family returned to the laundry mat [read laundromat].” Alex Lizzie Jr., Bonding the Rizzos’ [read Rizzos’] Family Vacation 100 (2007).

Although laundromat appears to be a portmanteau word, perhaps derived from laundry and automat, it is actually a servicemark for a brand of washing machines, and, briefly, a chain of do-it-yourself laundries.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index
*laundry mat for laundromat: Stage 1
Current ratio (laundromat vs. *laundry mat): 18:1

*lava bread. See laver bread.

lavaliere; *lavalier; *lavalliere; *lavalliére. Lava-liere is the standard spelling for the word meaning (1) “a microphone that is clipped to clothing and used typically in broadcast studios and theaters”; or (2) “a style of jewelry and clothing.” (The microphone was so named because it was originally hung around the neck like jewelry.) Although the term derives from the name of a French courtesan, Louise de la Vallière (1644–1710), the anglicized lavaliere is pronounced /lah-vo-lay-er/. The other three spellings are variant forms, the last two being overt gallicisms (pronounced /lah-vahl-yair/).

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 57:34:17:1

laver bread (= a Welsh dish consisting of seaweed that is boiled, dipped in oatmeal, and fried) is sometimes wrongly written *lava bread, doubtless because one unfortunate but common pronunciation of laver is almost identical with that of lava. E.g.:
• “We started with a trip to the Lleyn Peninsula in North Wales, dreaming of mountains and seascapes and lava [read laver] bread with dinner.” Mary Dejevsky, “Happiness Is Rediscovering Nationhood,” Independent, 9 Apr. 2010, Comment §, at 42.
The better pronunciation—the only one recognized in most current dictionaries—is /lai-va/.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index
*lava bread for laver bread: Stage 2
Current ratio (laver bread vs. *lava bread): 4:1

lavish, vb. As a transitive verb, lavish takes a direct object, but it is traditionally a thing, not a person. That is, you lavish gifts on a person, not a person with gifts. But since the late 1970s, writers have engaged in object-shuffling with this verb—e.g.:
• “The NCAA will announce Notre Dame’s first major rules infractions in the school’s history today, ending a two-year investigation into the relationship between players and former boosters who lavished them with gifts, money and trips [read lavished gifts, money, and trips on them], an NCAA source said.” Malcolm Moran, “No Luck: Notre Dame Faces Sanctions,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 17 Dec. 1999, at C4.
• “Mayor Willie Brown welcomed Philippine President Joseph Estrada with open arms Tuesday, lavishing him with compliments [read lavishing compliments on him] and encouraging him to maintain ties with the Bay Area.” Pia Sarkar, “Philippine 1st Couple to Get Royal Welcome”, S.F. Examiner, 26 July 2000, at A4.

Despite those desirable edits, this nontraditional usage does seem to give the language more versatility when the thing being lavished takes many words to express—e.g.: “She had lavished him with the adoration and protectiveness of a childless woman who has borrowed a precious gift, especially a gift from God.” Sharon Rab, “The Red Dress,” Dayton Daily News, 6 Aug. 2000, at C3. That sentence is particularly challenging to try to rewrite by using the traditional idiom. One solution would be to make it the idiomatic lavished on him the adoration . . . . Another would be to replace lavished with another verb, such as showered: She had showered him with the adoration and protectiveness of a childless woman who . . . . A third would be to allow this extension in the use of lavish. Linguistic
lawful. See legal.

lawyer; attorney; counsel; counselor. The two most common among these, lawyer and attorney, are not generally distinguished even by members of the legal profession—except perhaps that lawyer is often viewed as having negative connotations. So one frequently hears about lawyer-bashing, but only the tone-deaf write attorney-bashing—e.g.: "Attorney-bashing [read lawyer-bashing] always will be a popular pastime." Theodore M. Bernstein, *The Careful Writer* (1994), at A1.

Because lie is intransitive, it has only an active voice (e.g., "he lies on his bed"). But lay (= to put down, arrange) is always transitive—it needs a direct object (e.g., "please lay the book on my desk"). The verbs are inflected as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Present Tense</th>
<th>Past Tense</th>
<th>Past Participle</th>
<th>Present Participle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lay, v.t.</td>
<td>lay</td>
<td>laid</td>
<td>laying</td>
<td>laying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lie, v.i.</td>
<td>lie</td>
<td>lay</td>
<td>lain</td>
<td>lying</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To use lay without a direct object, in the sense of *lie*, is nonstandard (<i>l</i>awyers, <i>a</i> dvocates do it, but most writers have little difficulty getting it right—e.g.: "Katrina Kurati said she and her husband, Dan, had just lain down in their bedroom when the bomb went off around 10:45 p.m." Mack Reed, "Pipe Bomb Rips Car, Jolts Simi Neighborhood," *L.A. Times*, 30 Apr. 1994, B9.

The most unusual of these inflected forms, of course, is lain, but most writers have little difficulty getting it right—e.g.: "Prosecutors later claimed the witness had lain down next to two of the murder victims, expecting to die." Tom Jackman, "Witness in Three Murder Cases Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy," *Kansas City Star*, 28 June 1994, B1.

"Massive seed banks that have lain dormant for decades are expected to re-emerge from freshly exposed muck." James F. Mccarty, "Project Set to Restore Mentor Marsh," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 31 Aug. 2015, A6.

See lie & irregular verbs.

B. *Law for lie*. This is one of the most widely known of all usage errors—e.g.: "Mr. Armstrong [debating against Alan Dershowitz] was not to be outdone . . . But Mr. Dershowitz did not lay [read lie] down." William Gable, "Face to Face, 2 Lawyers Feud Away, Slap for Slap," *N.Y. Times*, 19 Jan. 1991, at 15.

"The girls were ordered to lay [read lie] face down on the floor and were told they would have their throats slit if they yelled." *Girls' Final Hours Detailed in Court*, *Amarillo Sunday News-Globe*, 15 May 1994, A17.

In AmE, counsel and counselor are both, in one sense, general terms meaning "one who gives (legal) advice;" the latter being the more formal term. Counsel may refer to but one lawyer <opposing counsel says> or, as a plural, to more than one lawyer <opposing counsel say>. See *counsel* (b).

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Conservatives will prefer the first two solutions; liberals will be perfectly happy with the third.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*lavishing someone with gifts for lavishing gifts on someone*: Stage 4

Current ratio (lavished gifts on him vs. *lavished him with gifts*): 1.2:1

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**Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but . . . **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but . . . **Stage 5:** Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-ii.)

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-ii.)

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lay low

- “But Walters did not ask any questions, investigators said. He ordered the two to get out of the car and lay [read lie] on the ground, according to Strouse's girlfriend.” Peter Fimrite, “Deadly End to Sunday Drive on Dusty, Rural Road,” S.F. Chron., 23 May 1995, at A13.

Similarly, although a sickness can lay you low, if you’re in that position you’re lying low—e.g.: “Back when James A. Baker 3d was lying low over at the White House, the first invisible chief of staff, cynics in the West Wing said he was trying to avoid being tied too closely to a Presidential campaign that seemed in the West Wing said he was trying to avoid being tied too closely to a Presidential campaign that seemed headed for the political dump.” “Baker Takes New Role, Leading 'Winnable' Bid,” N.Y. Times, 31 Oct. 1992, at 8. But American journalists get it wrong as often as they get it right—e.g.:


A common mistake is laying in wait for laying in wait—e.g.:

- “Dunlap has been accused of laying [read lying] in wait until closing time at the Chuck E Cheese restaurant, then systematically shooting the five employees still on duty.” Ginny McKibben, “Ex-Friend Links Dunlap to Burger King Robbery,” Denver Post, 1 Apr. 1995, at B4.

Some blame the confusion in part on the children’s prayer that begins, “Now I lay me down to sleep.” But there, lay is properly transitive (me, meaning “myself,” being its object). It is grammatically equivalent to “Now I lie down to sleep,” though metrically speaking the latter doesn’t have a prayer.

**Language-Change Index**

lay low misused for lie: Stage 4

1. lay low for lie low (as a present-tense form):
   2. Current ratio (to lie low vs. *to lay low): 1.2:1

lay low misused for lay: Stage 4

3. laid low for lay low (as a past form):
   4. Current ratio (they lay low vs. *they laid low): 1.8:1

C. Laid for Past-Tense lay. The lay-for-lie error also occurs with the past-tense forms—e.g.: “He laid [read lay] down flat on the ground and looked around for an object or landmark he might have missed from a higher angle.” “Pumpkin Place,” Amarillo Daily News, 4 Mar. 1996, at C1.

**Language-Change Index**

laid misused for past-tense lay: Stage 4

1. Current ratio (he lay down on vs. *he laid down on): 9:1

D. Laid for lain. Not surprisingly, the same mistake occurs with the past participles as well—e.g.:

- “Or the epilepsy might have laid [read lain] dormant, triggered by the ball's blow, she says.” Susan H. Thompson, “Boy Loses Chunk of Brain, Regains His Life,” Tampa Trib., 16 Sept. 1996, Baylife §, at 1.
- “Foes have lashed out with claims that the plan was hastily worked out over the past few weeks after the deregulation idea had laid [read lain] dormant for two years.” Dave Sheingold, “Landline Oversight Fading,” N.J. Record, 20 May 2015, at A1.

**Language-Change Index**

laid misused for past-participle lain: Stage 4

1. Current ratio (had lain idle vs. *had laid idle): 29:1

E. Lain for the Past-Participial laid. This is a ghastly example of hypercorrection, that is, choosing the more far-fetched (and, as it happens, wrong) term in a contorted attempt to be correct—e.g.:

- “Earlier in the day, several people had lain hands [read laid hands] on Zachary and prayed for him. This is common at the crusades, as many people seem to think that God has anointed them.” Mike Thomas, “The Power and the Glory,” Orlando Sentinel, 24 Nov. 1991, at 9.
- “The goal of the bill is to both avoid the pattern of attempted murder charges being pleaded down to misdemeanor offenses and to make sure the severity of the act is lain [read laid] out plainly.” Abigail Goldman, “Metro Keeps Close Tabs on Fury in the Home,” Las Vegas Sun, 18 Mar. 2009, Metro §, at 1.

**Language-Change Index**

lain for past-participial laid: Stage 1

1. Current ratio (had laid the foundation vs. *had lain the foundation): 153:1

lay low. See lie low.

layman; layperson; lay person. Layman, the most common among these terms, is generally regarded as unexceptionable—in reference to members of both sexes, of course. E.g.:

Lay person (two words) dates from the early 18th century, but the one-word compound layperson is an Americanism dating from the early 1970s. Though much less common than layman, it frequently appears, especially today in the one-word form—e.g.:

- “Since [1979], the school’s principals have been laypersons, and most of the sisters have given up teaching duties,” George Morris, “Still Serving: Group of Sisters at St. Aloysis Has Seen Lots of Things Change,” Advocate (Baton Rouge), 2 Mar. 1997, at A4.


For the reasons for avoiding layperson, like all other words ending with the suffix -person, see sexism (c).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
layperson for layman: Stage 4
Current ratio (layman vs. layperson): 4:1

lay off. See fire.

lay of the land; lie of the land. The first is the usual AmE form, the second the BrE, for this phrase meaning (1) lit., “the arrangement of an area’s terrain; topography”; or (2) fig., “the facts of a given situation; the current state of affairs.” Lay of the land was predominant in AmE by 1840, lie of the land in BrE by 1880.

lay waste. The traditional idiom is an unusual one: either they laid waste the city or (a variant form) they laid the city waste. Lay is the verb; city is the object; and waste is an adjective serving as an objective complement. The structure of they laid waste the city is like that of the unobjectionable they laid bare the problems.

In 1965, an academician polled about 100 college students in New York, only a quarter of whom preferred the traditional phrasing; half preferred the phrasing laid waste to the city. In that version, lay is the verb; waste is a noun serving as a direct object; and a prepositional phrase follows. The phrasing doesn’t make any literal sense.

A look at relative frequencies in 2003 suggested that in modern print sources, the version with the superfluous to outnumbered the one without it by a 3-to-1 ratio. Even Newsweek editors had adopted the preposition: “Old-time carpet-bombing laid waste to great swaths of territory.” John Barry & Evan Thomas, “The Fog of Battle,” Newsweek, 30 Sept. 2002, at 36. It looked as if the new idiom was laying waste the old one—that is, laying waste to the old one. But by 2008 a more extensive linguistic corpus showed that the traditional transitive version had retained the lead by a 2-to-1 ratio.

lead > led > led. So inflected. The past tense of the verb lead (/led/)—meaning “to guide or direct”—is led. But as a noun, lead (pronounced /led/) refers either to a metallic element or to a thin stick of marking substance in or for a pencil (though the graphite in pencils has not contained the metal lead for many years). Writers often mistake the past-tense spellings, as if this verb were analogous to read—read—e.g.:

- “Dr. Stewart, a co-author of the study, established her reputation in the field of radiation and health with her findings, published in 1956, that prenatal X-rays had lead [read led] to an increase in cancer deaths among children in Britain.” Matthew L. Wald, “Pioneer in Radiation Sees Risk Even in Small Doses,” N.Y. Times, 8 Dec. 1992, at A2.

- “Representative David E. Bonior, left, the Democratic minority whip who lead [read led] the all-night debate, rubbed his eyes at the end of a leadership caucus on several issues before the House.” “Irate Democrats Tie Up the House Till Daylight,” N.Y. Times, 30 June 1995, at A10 (photo caption).

- “After an upset win over No. 2 Stanford on Friday, Texas made it clear there would be no letdown against the Mustangs as Aldrich posted 10 kills and Doran lead [read led] the defense with 11 digs en route to claiming the first set in 15 minutes.” David Crabtree, “Horns Make Short Work of SMU,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 8 Sept. 1999, at C3.

See irregular verbs. Cf. mislead.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
led, the past tense, misspelled lead: Stage 2
Current ratio (had led to the vs. *had lead to the): 117:1

leaf. Pl. leaves. See plurals (c).

leaflet; leafletting: *leafletting. The spelling leafletting has been predominant in AmE and BrE alike since about 1960. *Leafletting is a variant. See spelling (b).

Current ratio: 5:1

lean > leaned > leaned. The form *leant /lent/ as a past tense and past participle is largely obsolete, though still appearing occasionally in BrE.

Current ratio: 20:1

leapt; leaped. Both are acceptable past-tense and past-participial forms for the verb leap. Because leapt is pronounced /lept/, the mistaken form *lept is frequently encountered—e.g.:

• “The booming, friendly Texas drawl didn’t just come across the telephone line; it left [read leapt] across it and grabbed the person on the other end.” David Hanners, “LB] Phone Conversations Provide Shadings of Epochal Era,” Dallas Morning News, 26 Sept. 1993, at A47.

• “Sharon Kelly . . . leapt [read leaped] to her feet in joy when the award was announced.” Julie Irwin, “Five City Schools Share $25,000 for Excellence,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 30 Oct. 1997, at C2.

*leapt*, which used to be the more common form in 20th-century BrE (but not in the 19th century), is steadily being displaced by *leaped*. In frequency of use, the two forms are neck-and-neck in modern BrE print sources, but *leaped* has been predominant in AmE since the 18th century.

**Language-Change Index**

*leapt* misspelled *leapt*: Stage 1

*learned; learnt*. In AmE, the past tense is *learned*; in BrE, it’s often *learnt*. To use *learnt* in AmE is an affectation.

As an adjective, *learned* has two syllables /lәr-nad/, and as a past-tense verb, one /lәrn.d/. The adjective means “possessing or showing broad or systematic knowledge; erudite.”

*leasable*. So spelled.

**lease**, vb.; *let*. Let (10th c.) is 300 years older than *lease* (13th c.) in the sense “to grant the temporary possession and use of (land, buildings, rooms, movable property) to another in return for rent or other consideration.” But both are well established, and they are equally good. As used by (real) estate agents in BrE, the term “*To Let*” is more common than the phrase “For Rent,” the usual term in AmE.

To say that one *leases* property nowadays does not tell the reader or listener whether one is lessor or lessee. From its first verbal use in the 13th century, *lease* meant “to grant the possession of,” but in the mid-19th century the word took on the additional sense “to take a lease of; to hold by a lease.” This ambiguity has made the preposition used important to clarity: the lessor *leases to* and the lessee *leases from*. See *rent*, vb.

*leasor; *leasee*. These are aberrations in Modern English for *lesser* and *lessee*. E.g.:

• “The city would require the *lessee* [read *lesser*] to construct at least 55,000 square feet of maintenance hangar space.” “Government Actions,” Wash. Post, 12 Apr. 1990, at V5.

• “The City Council repealed the archaic law that gave land *lessors* [read *lesser*] exclusive rights to the first 100 feet of water.” Scott Richardson, “McLean County Lakes Offer Hot Fishing Prospects,” Pantagraph (Bloomington, Ill.), 6 Mar. 1997, at B7.

See *lesser*.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *leasor* for *lesser*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (lesser vs. *leasor*): 1,283:1

2. *leasee* for *lessee*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (the *lessee* must vs. *the leasee* must): 103:1

*least worst*. This phrase, like its kissing cousin *least worse*, doesn’t make literal sense: it should be *least bad*. If you have several undesirable options with varying levels of undesirability, only one can be the *worst*. All the others are *less bad*, and the least undesirable is the *least bad*. With a superlative adjective such as *least*, it’s incorrect to use either a comparative or a superlative adjective: hence *bad* is correct.

In each of the following examples, the illogical phrase—most often it’s a spoken error, but sometimes (especially in BrE sources) it’s the writer’s fault—should be replaced by *least bad*. E.g.:

• “Lamar Alexander, trying to convince voters he was more than the ‘*least worst*’ [read ‘*least bad*’] choice, had to roll out a refreshed agenda.” Nancy Gibbs & Michael Duffy, “The Secret Test of New Hampshire,” Time, 26 Feb. 1996, at 20.


• “It is difficult to say which is the *least worst* [read *least bad*] pair,” Benedict Nightingale, “Where All Is for the *Worst*,” Times (London), 20 Aug. 1997, at 31.


Cf. *worse comes to worst*. See comparatives and superlatives & illogigc.

**Language-Change Index**

*least worst* or *least worse* for *least bad*: Stage 3
   Current ratio (*least bad* vs. *least worst* vs. *least worse*): 22:9:1

*leave alone; let alone*. Traditionally, there has been a distinction: *leave me alone* means “leave me by myself (in solitude); *let me alone* means “stop bothering me.” But only extreme purists will fault someone who uses *leave alone* in the nonliteral sense. Today that phrase is far more common than *let alone*. E.g.:


Before 1920, the collocation *let him alone* (or *let her alone*) appeared far more frequently in print. But that trend was reversed by about 1915 in BrE and 1930 in AmE.

*Let alone* is also used to mean “not to mention” or “much less” (*ch* no longer drinks beer or wine, let alone bourbon or tequila).
itself as a standard term. The usual word is the age-old lectureship, which is now about 30 times as common in print sources—e.g.: “His extra-curricular activities include guest lectureships at Juilliard and charities like Paul Newman’s Hole in the Wall Camp for seriously ill children.” Joe Williams, “Busy Kevin Kline Makes Time for His Hometown,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 22 Nov. 2002, Mag. §, at F1.

Those who write *lectureship—and today it is mostly confined to BrE—are likely to be thought pretentious. The following sentence suggests, no doubt unwittingly, that Oxford is a more pretentious place than Liverpool: “After a lectureship [read lecturership] at Merton College, Oxford, and an assistant lectureship at Liverpool University, Roberts was elected, aged 26, Professor of History at the Rhodes University College.” “Professor Michael Roberts” (obit.), Daily Telegraph, 25 Jan. 1997, at 13.

**Language-Change Index**

*lectureship for lectureship: Stage 1

Current ratio (lectureship vs. *lectureship): 30:1

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**Legal holiday; bank holiday.** A legal holiday is a day designated by law as a holiday, accompanied by the closing of most public offices and paid leave for most public employees. Observance of a legal holiday by the private sector is voluntary. A legal holiday may be established by the national government (e.g., July 4 as Independence Day) or a state government (e.g., March 2 as Texas Independence Day).

A bank holiday is a day designated by law for the closing of banks and paid leave for bank employees. Bank holidays are standardized in many countries, but are not observed in the United States.

**Legalese.** Despite popular prejudices, not all uses of legal language are bad. But unnecessarily complex legal jargon—or “legalese”—is widely viewed by legal scholars as the source of many problems: (1) it alienates people from their legal system; (2) it besots its users—namely, lawyers—who think they’re being more precise than they really are; and (3) it doesn’t communicate efficiently, even to other lawyers, despite occasional claims to the contrary. (See obscurity.) For solid treatments, see Garner’s Dictionary of Legal Usage (3d ed. 2011); Bryan A. Garner, Legal Writing in Plain English (2013); Joseph Kimble, Lifting the Fog of Legalese (2006); David Mellinkoff, The Language of the Law (1963); and Richard C. Wydick, Plain English for Lawyers (5th ed. 2005). For a law dictionary that explains all the arcana, see Black’s Law Dictionary (10th ed. 2014).

**Legitimation.** The act or process of rendering or authoritatively declaring (a person) legitimate; or (2) the action or process of making lawful; authorization” (OED). E.g.: “Both halves of the grand bargain outlined then—security and legitimation for Israel, land and power for Palestinians—are now in doubt.” Barton Gellman, “Israel–Palestinian Peace Process ‘Hanging by a Thin

**legitimate**, vb. See *legitimize*.

**legitimization**. See *legitimacy*.

**legitimize**. See *legitimize*.

**legitimization.** See *legitimacy*.

**legitimize; legitimate**, vb.; **legitimize.** *Legitimate* is the oldest of these verbs, dating from 1531, but it’s not the most frequent. *Legitimize* outnumbers the traditionally preferred *legitimate* by a large margin in modern print sources. It refers to establishing the legitimacy of anything or anyone (except with regard to parentage)—e.g.:


**Legitimate**, as a verb (/lædʒə-mayt/), though given priority by most dictionaries and preferred by various authorities, is a needless variant in all but one sense: "to make an otherwise illegitimate child into a legitimate one." E.g.:

- "Fathers of children born out of wedlock cannot categorically be held accountable for not legitimating the child by marrying the expectant mother." Wolfgang P. Hirczy de Mino, "From Bastardy to Equality," *J. Comp. Family Studies*, 1 Apr. 2000, at 231.

This differentiation between *legitimate* and *legitimize* has become fairly well marked in recent years. We should encourage it.

*Legitimize* was formerly considered preferable to *legitimize* on principles of word formation. For example, both H.L. Mencken and G.H. Vallins used this longer form. Today the penultimate syllable would be dropped—e.g.:

- "His neologism . . . enters into sound idiom and is presently wholly legitimized [read legitimized]." H.L. Mencken, "The Nature of Slang" (1919), in *A Language Reader for Writers* 150, 156 (James R. Gaskin & Jack Suberman eds., 1966).
- "‘Nearby’ is, as yet, an unlawful union, but common usage is tending to legitimatise [read legitimize] it." G.H. Vallins, *Good English: How to Write It* 196 (1951).

- "There is one idiom in which attraction legitimizes [read legitimizes], as it were, an otherwise false agreement." G.H. Vallins, *Better English* 16 (4th ed. 1957).

Today, however, *legitimize* occurs quite rarely. It is a needless variant.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *legitimize*: Stage 5
2. *legitimate* (/lædʒə-mayt/) in the specialized meaning "to make [a nonmarital child] legitimate": Stage 5
3. *legitimize* for *legitimize*: Stage 1
Current ratio (legitimized vs. *legitimatized*): 54:1

**leisure** (= time spent in relaxation or at ease) is pronounced /liː-zhɑːr/ in AmE or /lɛzər/ in World English—but preferably not /lɛj-ər/ anywhere.

**leitmotif** (= a recurrent musical or metaphorical theme associated throughout the work with a specific character or situation) is the standard spelling. *Leitmotiv*, though more faithful to the German loanword, is but a variant in English. That is, the word was anglicized to make it align with an older import into the English language: *motif*. In fact, though, the meaning of *leitmotiv* (which smacks of *sesquipedality*) is so close to that of *motif* that one wonders why it is ever needed. The pronunciation is /lɪt-məθ-tɪf/. See GRAMMATICALISMS.

lend > lent > lent. So inflected. *Lended* is an error that has occasionally appeared since the early 19th century—e.g.:

- "As cheesy as the acting was in Resident Evil, I thought it lended [read lent] a B-movie charm to the proceedings." Jeff Kapalka, "Future Dreams and Nightmares from the Past," *Syracuse Herald Am.*, 27 Sept. 1998, at 12.

See IRREGULAR VERBS & *loan*.

**length** (= an end-to-end measurement of size, distance, time, etc.) is pronounced /lɛŋkθ/ or /lɛŋkθ/—but not /lɛnt/ or /lɛnθ/.

**lengthwise; lengthways.** The former has been the established standard form since about 1800. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 7:1

**lengthy.** Throughout the 19th century, many BrE speakers considered this word an ugly Americanism. But it is now standard throughout the English-speaking world. The only restriction is that it should refer to books, talks, or arguments, with the implication of tedium. It shouldn't refer to physical distances,

**Language-Change Index**

lengthy for long in senses not referring to distance: Stage 5

leniency; *leniency*. The former has been standard since 1800. The latter is a needless variant. E.g.: "Shas Party leader Aryeh Deri . . . is alleged to have avoided. In BrE, the phrase tends to be hyphenated; in AmE, it usually isn’t. E.g.: • “Ad posters for the film fail to take into account Thai sensibilities by picturing Foster above the king. This is considered a great insult by Thais and a possible lese majesty. Thai royals must be pictured above commoners.” James East & Dana Harris, "Thailand Picks a Sword Fight with 'Anna Pic,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, 22 Nov. 1999, at 4.

- "[Bill] Richardson’s true lese majesty, however, was not his one-time no-show on a security question that within days was forgotten. It was his continuing opposition to congressional larding of pet projects into appropriations bills." Robert Novaks, "Energy Secretary Feels Senators’ Wrath for Scorning Pork Legislation," *Augusta Chron.*, 13 Sept. 2000, at A4.

The anglicized pronunciation is /lez ma-jә-stee/.

Current ratio (first four headwords): 26:13:11:1

**less. A. And fewer.** Strictly, less applies to singular nouns <less tonic water, please> or units of measure <less than six ounces of epoxy>. Fewer applies to plural nouns <fewer guests arrived than expected> or numbers of things <we have three fewer members this year>. The empirical evidence in print sources bears out the distinction: the collocation fewer people is about seven times as common in books published today as *less people.*

If you have trouble distinguishing the two words, try substituting a phrase. If "not as much [as]" fits, make it less. If "not as many [as]" is better, use fewer. See COUNT NOUNS AND MASS NOUNS & FEWER.

The exception in using fewer occurs when count nouns essentially function as mass nouns because the units are so very numerous or they aren’t considered discrete items (the idea of individual units becomes meaningless). Hence less is used correctly with time and money: one isn’t, ordinarily, talking about the number of years or the number of dollars but rather the amount of time or the amount of money. E.g.: • “On that mantra, Larry Clark has built a $45 million-a-year company in less than five years.” Max Jarman, "Homebuilder on Fast-Grow Track," *Ariz. Bus. Gaz.*, 30 Nov. 1995, at 17.


Fewer, in fact, is incorrect when intended to refer to a period of time—e.g.: "You can run from sea level to the sky and back to earth in as fast as 45 minutes (so far), but even today, going round-trip in fewer [read less] than 60 minutes carries a special cachet." Lew Freedman, "Their Own Mountain," *Anchorage Daily News*, 29 June 1997, at D1. But if the units of time are thought of as wholes, and not by fractions, then fewer is called for <fewer days abroad> <fewer weeks spent apart>.

Hence we say less documentation but fewer documents; less argumentation but fewer arguments; less whispering but fewer remarks; less ambiguity but fewer ambiguities; less of a burden but fewer burdens; less material but fewer items; less fattening but fewer calories.

The degree to which less occurs where fewer would be the better word is a matter of some historical dispute. In 1969, a linguist reported that "the use of less in referring to discrete countables is very rare" in edited English. Louise Hanes, "Less and Fewer," *44 Am. Speech* 234, 235 (1969). But earlier that decade, another writer

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-ii.)

had nearly called the usage standard American English: “Modern writers and contemporary educated speakers often ignore the distinction between less and fewer, and you will find less frequently used with plural nouns in current magazines, newspapers, and books, and will hear it even more frequently from the lips of educated people. Such being the case, less cannot realistically or effectively be restricted to singular nouns.” Norman Lewis, Better English 252 (rev. ed. 1961).

Although the modern evidence seems to suggest that Lewis was more accurate than Hanes in describing what you’ll find in edited English, fastidious writers and editors preserve the old distinction. But the loose usage crops up often—e.g.:•  “She says it, but fact is, she’s a linguist—a student of words. We need more of them, not less [read fewer]; more words, more students.” Lorene Cary, “As Plain as Black and White,” Newsweek, 29 June 1992, at 53.
•  “There were less [read fewer] than 300,000 marriages in 1993, the lowest level since the second world war, leaving clerics with little to do on Saturday mornings but twiddle their thumbs.” Nick Gardner, “Secure Your Future by Tying the Knot,” Sunday Times (London), 6 Aug. 1995, § 5, at 5. (Why, with a number like 300,000, isn’t the idea of an individual increment meaningless? Because, although one might think of dollars in that light, one doesn’t think of marriages in that way.)•  “You will have less [read fewer] people to call and haunt about paying for their outfits and buying their accessories.” “Advice for the Bride,” Boston Herald (Mag.), 19 Oct. 1997, at 6.

The linguistic hegemony by which less has encroached on fewer’s territory is probably now irreversible. What has clinched this development is something as mundane as the express checkout lines in supermarkets. They’re typically bedecked with signs cautioning, “15 or fewer items.” The latter is the better—e.g.:•  “But Boras points out that Park had only one fewer [read less] quality start than Randy Johnson and Curt Schilling of the Arizona Diamondbacks.” Jason Reid, “Silence Speaks Loudly to Park Baseball,” L.A. Times, 19 Nov. 2001, at D1.
•  “In studies, women given the gel during open pelvic surgery had only one fewer [read less] internal scar but almost twice the risk of infection.” Lauran Neergaard, “FDA Reverses Decision on Gel,” State (Columbia, S.C.), 20 Nov. 2001, at A8.
•  “Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham . . . has one fewer [read less] hat than we said the other day.” Al Kamen, “Cheney Losing His Voice,” Wash. Post, 21 Nov. 2001, at A21.

Current ratio: 12:1

C. And lesser. Lesser, like less, refers to quantity, but is confined to use as an adjective before a singular noun and following an article <the lesser crime> or alone before a plural noun <lesser athletes>, thus performing a function no longer idiomatically possible with less. Dating from the 13th century, this formal usage allows lesser to act as an antonym of greater.

Occasionally, lessor (= landlord) is misused for lesser—e.g.:•  “The nuclear-arms race has produced 70,000 nuclear bombs by the United States and a lessor [read lesser] amount [read number] by the former U.S.S.R.” Letter of Minerva Rees Massen, “In the Wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” S.F. Chronicle, 5 Aug. 1995, at A20.

See lessor.

D. Adjective for Noun. As a noun, less means “a smaller amount” or “something not as important.” Occasionally, writers make it an adjective when it should be a noun—e.g.: “He wants business to make money and everyone to pay less taxes [read less in taxes].” “The New, Improved Powell,” N.Y. Times, 13 Sept. 1995, at 14.

Language-Change Index
less for fewer in reference to a plural count noun: Stage 3
Current ratio (fewer people vs. *less people): 7:1

B. One less or *one fewer? If, in strict usage, less applies to singular nouns and fewer to plural nouns, the choice is clear: one less golfer on the course, not *one fewer golfer. This is tricky only because less is being applied to a singular count noun, whereas it usually applies to a mass noun. Burt Bacharach got it right in “One Less Bell to Answer” (1970). Since at least 1700, most published authors have gotten it right. And most contemporary writers get it right—e.g.:•  “I couldn’t care less that NFL players will receive one less game check.” “Capital-Journal,” Topeka Capital-J., 16 Sept. 2001, at X2.
•  “Some Middle Georgia cancer patients may have one less thing to worry about this time next year.” Charlie Lanter, “Pulaski Hospital to Build Cancer Treatment Center,” Macon Telegraph, 15 Nov. 2001, at 3.
•  “Some industry observers worry about a deal that will lead to one less independent news organization.” Mark Kempner, “In a Merger, CNN, ABC May Shoot for the Stars,” Atlanta J.-Const., 3 Nov. 2002, Bus. §, at 1.

Nearly one-tenth of the time, however, writers use *one fewer, an awkward and unidiomatic phrase. One can’t help thinking that this is a kind of hypercorrection induced by underanalysis of the less-vs.-fewer question—e.g.:•  “But Boras points out that Park had only one fewer [read less] quality start than Randy Johnson and Curt Schilling of the Arizona Diamondbacks.” Jason Reid, “Silence Speaks Loudly to Park Baseball,” L.A. Times, 19 Nov. 2001, at D1.
•  “In studies, women given the gel during open pelvic surgery had only one fewer [read less] internal scar but almost twice the risk of infection.” Lauran Neergaard, “FDA Reverses Decision on Gel,” State (Columbia, S.C.), 20 Nov. 2001, at A8.
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lessor; lessee. Landlord and tenant are simpler equivalents that are more comprehensible to most people. For a mistake involving lessor and lesser, see less (c). See also lease & *leasor.

lest. A. Sense. Because lest means "for fear that," it should be followed by a negative idea. It isn't equivalent with in case—one can't rightly say, "She plans to take along a camera lest [read in case] she find a breathtaking view." Indeed, the negative idea is overwhelming in modern usage—e.g.: "Its members would do well to study, lest they find themselves met by a wall of suspicion, or worse yet indifference." Betty Winston Baye, "Ralph Reed: The Black Messiah?" Courier-J. (Louisville), 20 Feb. 1997, at A11.

Some passages present close calls. Yearning for something that you've just discovered isn't generally considered a negative thing unless you've just planned the opposite. In the following example, in which just that problem emerges, the probable sense is or, or else, or because: "If you've just remodeled your kitchen into a high-tech wonderland, do not read Viana La Place's new book lest [read or, or else, or because] you might find yourself yearning for a serene, minimal kitchen like hers." S. Irene Virbila, "Our Annual Cookbook Special," L.A. Times, 12 Dec. 1996, at H11.

B. Mood Following. Lest is best followed by a verb in the subjunctive mood, not in the indicative, because lest points to something that is merely possible, not definite. E.g.:

- "Lest there be any doubt about the extent of the trouble, Archuleta points to the fact that most production companies now routinely include in their filming budgets some money to pay off harassers." Cynthia H. Craft, "Acts of Extortion Steal the Scene from Film Crews," L.A. Times, 15 Mar. 1995, at A1.
- "As with any spice, however, it shouldn't be overheated lest it burn." Ann Steiner, "Color from Paprika Gives Food a Boost," Houston Chron., 4 Dec. 1996, at 13.

Occasionally, though, writers ill-advisedly use the indicative—e.g.: "Certain foreign policy experts urged . . . that the West shouldn't press Mikhail Gorbachev too hard to liberate his dissidents lest it makes it harder [read become harder] for him to do other good things." Suzanne Fields, "Trouble Ahead for Israel's Labor Party," Wash. Times, 16 Mar. 1995, at A19.

Idiomatically speaking, if a modal verb follows lest, it should be might (or perhaps should), not will or would—e.g.:


-LET. See diminutives (i).

let, v.t. See lease.

let. For the use of this word in opposite senses, see contronyms.

let alone. See leave alone.

let go. See fire.

let's. A. Let's you and I. First, think of let's: let us. Us is in the objective case. Another form of the phrase (still in the objective case) would be let you and me (you and me agreeing with us). The construction let you and I is ungrammatical—and fairly rare.

But what about let's you and I? That is, let us, you and I. This, too, is ungrammatical—us and you and I being in apposition. (See appositives.) It's an error of some literary standing. T.S. Eliot began "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917) in this way: "Let us go then, you and I." In that sentence, go is an infinitive without an express to (sometimes called a "bare infinitive"), and an infinitive has as its subject a pronoun (us) in the objective case—not the nominative case. Yet the appositive for us—namely, you and I—is in the nominative case. This is an oddity, but today let's you and I [+ verb] is common in spoken and written English alike. H.W. Fowler might have called it a "sturdy indefensible"—e.g.:

- "This upcoming Father's Day weekend, let's you and I renew our commitments to our kids and be the dads we always intended to be." Doug Hall & Russ Quaglia, "Dad's Resolution," Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 14 June 1999, at E2.
- "'Let's you and I think about it for a second,' he said during lunchtime." Cheryl Blackerby, "West Palm's Sudden Fame Trumps Palm Beach," Palm Beach Post, 18 Nov. 2000, at B1.

Nevertheless, in print sources that have appeared since 1900, the phrasing let's you and me has predominated slightly over let's you and I—so take heart if you prefer the more grammatically rigorous phrasing.

Current ratio: 1:1

B. *Let's us. This phrase is nonstandard for let's.
leukemia (a type of blood cancer) is now the standard spelling in all varieties of World English. From about 1940 to 1970, *leukaemia* was standard BrE, but since 1970 *leukemia* has become predominant even there.

Current ratio: 5:1

levy, n.; levee. Levy may act as a noun in two senses: (1) "the imposition of a fine or tax, or the fine or tax so imposed"; and (2) "the conscription of men for military service, or the troops so conscripted." The plural is levies—e.g.: "During the housing boom, voters passed hundreds of open-space tax levies to control growth and sprawl." Dennis Cauchon, "Officials Open Coffers for Open Space," USA Today, 28 May 2008, at A3.

Levee, meanwhile, is the noun meaning "a river embankment; dike; pier." In BrE, primarily, it also has the sense "a formal reception." Occasionally levee is used as a verb, meaning "to provide with a levee (dike)." The plural is levees, but misspellings are common—e.g.: "Insurers are estimated to have paid as much as $60 billion for damages caused by Hurricane Katrina, but about $25 billion of that was considered the result of flooding when the levees [read levees] broke in New Orleans." Randy Diamond, "Storm Model Raises Doubts," Palm Beach Post, 4 May 2007, at A1.

Levee is fairly often misspelled levy—e.g.: "The levy [read levee] broke about five blocks away, split like a cheap pair of pants and turned an industrial canal into a raging wall of water." Scott Ostler, "Football in New Orleans," S.F. Chron., 3 Dec. 2006, at C1.

**Language-Change Index**

levy misused for levee: Stage 1

levy, v.t, = (1) "to impose (as a fine or a tax) by legal sanction" <the court levied a fine of $500>; (2) "to conscript for service in the military" <the troops were soon levied>; (3) "to wage (a war)" <the rebels then levied war against the government>; or (4) to take or seize (property) in execution of a judgment <the creditor may levy on the debtor’s assets>.

In sense 1, this verb is sometimes mangled through object-shuffling: "He quit hours after the football program was levied with sanctions that included a two-year ban on post-season play, a loss of 10 scholarships for each of the next two recruiting classes, and removal from the Pac-10’s television revenue-sharing pool for 1993, costing the program an estimated $1.4 million." Jim Cour, “Coach Quits in Protest,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 23 Aug. 1993, at C1. A program (or person) is not levied with a penalty; rather, the penalty is levied against the program (or person).

The word is pronounced /le-vee/; it’s sometimes wrongly pronounced like the surname Levy (usually /lee-vee/).

lexicography; lexicology. Lexicography is the making of dictionaries; lexicology is the study of words and their origins, meanings, and uses.

*leze mastery. See lese majesty.

liability. See disability (A).

liable (= subject to or exposed to) should not be used merely for likely. Liable best refers to something the occurrence of which risks being permanent or recurrent. E.g.:

- “Taking away any function for more than a few days is liable to result in loss of that capability.” Richard J. Ham, "After the Diagnosis," Post Graduate Medicine, June 1997, at 57.

In law, liable also means "responsible" or "subject to a penalty" <the landowner may be liable if someone is injured while on the land>.

Liable has three syllables (/li-ə-bal/), not two, and so is pronounced differently from libel.

liaise, v.i., is a back-formation from liaison, meaning "to establish liaison" or "to act as a liaison officer" <diplomats who liaise with Soviet officials>. First used in the 1920s, this word is still stigmatized in some quarters as being cant or jargon. It is pronounced /li-ə-zahn/. The word is more common in BrE than in AmE—e.g.:

- “The FA’s marketing and media team are here in force, liaising with sponsors such as Nationwide and Umbro.” Richard Williams, “Team England Thriving on an Army of Helpers,” Guardian, 14 June 2002, at 6.
- “His possible dismissal attracted huge attention among West Bankers, many of whom regard him with distaste—partly because he has liaised with Israel and the CIA.” Phil Reeves, “Security Chiefs Refuse to Accept Dismissal by Arafat,” Independent, 4 July 2002, at 13.

The word occasionally crops up in AmE—e.g.: “For 10 to 20 hours during an average week, she’s the neighborhood’s chief advocate, cook and bottle-washer, liaising with the cops, pols, bureaucrats, and merchants who interact with her domain.” David Nyhan, “A Rare Natural Resource Known as Annisa,” Boston Globe, 21 Nov. 1999, at C4.

**Language-Change Index**

liaise as a word: Stage 5

liaison is pronounced either /li-ə-zahn/ or /li-ə-zyahn/, the first being more common in both AmE and
BrE; /lay-ә-zahn/ is a mispronunciation. (See pronun-
ciation (n.).) The nontechnical senses of the word are (1) n., “an illicit love affair”; (2) n., “communication established for the promotion of mutual understanding; someone who establishes such communication”; and (3) adj., “acting as an intermediary” /liaison officer/. The word is commonly misspelled *liaison and (especially) *liaison.

libel /li-bal/. Pronounce it carefully. The word is often mispronounced, through ephenthesis, the way liable /li-ә-bal/ is pronounced. See pronunciation. For the sense of the word, see defamation.

libido. Although dictionaries once recorded /li-ә-bәdoh/ as the preferred pronunciation, /li-bee-doh/ is now the established preference in AmE. The plural is libidos—not *libideoes. Current ratio (libidos vs. *libideoes): 208:1

library is pronounced /li-brә-ee/—not /li-ber-ee/. See pronunciation (b).

licit. See legal.

licorice (/li-kә-ә-riish/) has been the standard spell-
ing in AmE since about 1900. Liquorice has been the standard spelling in BrE since the 18th century. This word shouldn't be confused with its uncommon homophones, lickerish (= lascivious, lecherous) and liquorish (= tasting like liquor).

lie > lay > lain. So inflected (except when lie means “to utter a falsity”—see below). A murderer may lie in wait. Yesterday he lay in wait. And for several days he has lain in wait—e.g.: “The Ramseys say an intruder may have lay [read lain] in wait for hours before kill-

In the sense of telling an untruth, the verb is inflected lie > lied > lied.

liege, a term recorded in English from the 14th cen-
tury, is a kind of contronym: it can denote either a medieval vassal sworn to allegiance to a feudal lord or the feudal lord to whom the vassal swears allegiance. In fuller phrasing, the vassal is a liegeman, the lord a liege lord. The main point of this entry, however, is to note the pronunciation: /leej/—not /leezhl/. Cf. siege.

lie low; lay low. The latter phrase is common but loose. The two phrasings both appear in print, but the correct lying low is three times as common as laying low. See lay (b).

lie, n. (= a legal right or interest that a creditor has in another's property, lasting usu. until a debt that it secures is satisfied), is pronounced most properly /lee-ә-n/, or commonly /leen/ or /lin/.

lie of the land. See lay of the land.

lieu /lou/. See spelling (a).

life-and-death; *life-or-death. Though the sense is “relating to a matter of life or death,” idiom has long sanctioned and in this phrase, not or. Life-and-death has vastly predominated in print sources since the phrase became popular in the early 19th century. It still predominates—e.g.: • “Easy’s temperament lets him saunter his way into any number of life-and-death situations and barely break a sweat.” Adina Hoffman, “Denzel: So Noir and Yet So Far,” Jerusalem Post, 1 July 1996, Arts §, at 5. • “It’s a life-and-death issue, with the potential to affect any Canadian adults.” “Make Euthanasia an Election Issue,” Alberni Valley Times (Can.), 1 Sept. 2015, at A4.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*life-or-death for life-and-death: Stage 3 Current ratio (life-and-death vs. *life-or-death): 2:1

lifelong: livelong. Lifelong = lasting for all or most of one's life <Seymour's lifelong dream was to conduct the New York Philharmonic>. Livelong = (of a time period, esp. a day or a night) whole, entire <“the eyes of Texas are upon you, all the livelong day”>. Livelong was once more prevalent than lifelong, especially during the early 19th century, but then the fortunes of these two words reversed about 1860. Since then, instances of lifelong have steadily risen in modern print sources. Confusion of these words isn't as uncommon as it ought to be—e.g.: • “Born in Providence, a son of the late Peter Gomes and the late Mary Fortes, he had been a livelong [read lifelong] resi-

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
livelong misused for lifelong: Stage 1

*life-or-death. See life-and-death.

life-size, adj., has been the standard term from the beginning, in the first half of the 19th century. *Life-
sized is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 3:1

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-l.)
**lifestyle.** When this word was viewed as a neologism—in the 1960s through the 1980s—it was often disparaged as an unnecessary innovation and as a vogue word. But today it seems serviceable as denoting a concept widely regarded as important.

**Language-Change Index**

**lifestyle:** Stage 5

**lighted; lit.** Both are standard past-tense and past-participial forms. The most traditional forms are lighted as an adjective <a lighted torch> and as a past participle <have you lighted the fire yet?>. Lit is unimpeachable as a past tense—e.g.: “He lit another cigarette, inhaling deeply as the executives ran through several more subjects.” Ken Auletta, “Beauty and the Beast,” *New Yorker*, 16 Dec. 2002, at 65, 67. See irregular verbs.

Although he lighted the fire was the predominant phrase in print sources from 1700 to 1900, during the 20th century he lit the fire became predominant beginning around 1915. Let your ear guide you.

**Current ratio** (he lit the vs. he lighted the): 4:1

**lightning; lightening.** The first is the flashing phenomenon that occurs in an electrical storm. The second is the process of getting lighter, either in color or in weight. Sometimes, however, writers misuse lightening for lightning—e.g.: “After all, given the inroads the group made last year and absent a presidential lightening [read lightening] rod in the form of Ms. Showalter . . . .” Courtney Kennedy, “From Insurgents to the Establishment,” *Chron. of Higher Educ.*, 17 Dec. 1999, at A18. The opposite error rarely if ever occurs.

**Language-Change Index**

**lightening** misspelled lightening: Stage 1

**light-year; parsec.** Despite their appearance, these terms measure distance, not time. A light-year is the distance that light travels in one year in a vacuum (about 5.88 trillion miles). Although some figurative uses accurately reflect distances <the next town seemed light-years away>, the popular mind makes the term refer to time—e.g.:

- “And needless to say, the special effects are light years ahead [read way ahead] of what Disney had in the ‘60s.” Dan Taylor, “Anastasia’s a Flub? ‘Flubber’ Fine Art?” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa), 7 Dec. 1997, at Q27.
- “Although it seems like light years [read ages] since Rick Pitino departed, and his name rarely comes up in interviews these days, O’Brien made reference to the former Celtics coach and president during Sunday’s postgame media conference.” Mark Cofman, “Anderson Having a Ball in Playoffs,” *Boston Herald*, 23 Apr. 2002, at 78.

Joan Baez misused the term in her 1975 ballad “Diamonds and Rust”: “And here I sit / Hand on the telephone / Hearing a voice I’d known / A couple of light years ago / Heading straight for a fall.” It’s a lovely song but lousy science and loose usage.

A parsec has to do with second—not as a measure of time but as a measure of angle (circle = 360 degrees; 1 degree = 60 minutes; 1 minute = 60 seconds). A parsec is the distance that a star would be from the earth if its apparent position in the sky (its parallax, hence the par in parsec) shifted by one second of arc as the earth orbits the sun. It is equivalent to about 3.26 light-years. While parsec appears in print far less frequently than the better-known light-year, when used outside astronomy it is often used incorrectly. Even Han Solo (Harrison Ford) got it wrong in the original *Star Wars* movie when he bragged that his spacecraft, the *Millennium Falcon*, “made the Kessel run in less than 12 parsecs.” The purported meaning of the word varies widely—e.g.:

- “Just what is a ‘Battle Droid with STAR,’ anyway? Apparently, it’s some kind of bad-guy robot on an upright, flying motorcycle. He was in your local Target and Toys ‘R Us stores for about a parsec [read second] before fans snatched them all up.” Hank Stuever, “Space Junk Clears Path for ‘Star Wars,’” *Dayton Daily News*, 22 Nov. 1998 (implying a very short time).
- “‘Star Trek: Nemesis’ is better than the tepid ‘Star Trek: Insurrection’; falls short of ‘First Contact’ because the villain (Tom Hardy) couldn’t pick the lint off Borg Queen Alice Krige’s cape; and finishes half a parsec (a nose) [read a nose] ahead of ‘Generations.’” Arthur Salm, “Attack of the Clone,” *San Diego Union-Trib.*, 12 Dec. 2002, Entertainment §, at 14 (implying a very short distance).

Once again, these examples illustrate bad science and poor usage.

**likable (= [of a person] pleasant to be with and easy to like) has been predominantly so spelled in AmE since the 1890s. The standard BrE spelling, likeable, was established in the 18th century. Cf. livable & lovable.

**like. A. As a Preposition.** The object of a preposition should be in the objective case—you say *They are very much like us,* not *They are very much like we.* When the second-person pronoun is used, no problem arises: “I, like you, believe that Mozart was the greatest composer of all time.” But apart from the second person (in which the form remains the same), writers often get confused on this point, as with first-person pronouns—e.g.:

- “She, like I [read me], instantly fell in love with his beautiful face, huge blue eyes, unusually soft fur, and gentle disposition.” Patricia Livingston, “New Cat Forced Out but Finds Nice Home,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 3 Feb. 2000, at B11. (A suggested improvement: *Like me, she instantly fell . . . .*)
- “He, like I [read me], just can’t find any proof about the NHTSA’s cries that unhelmeted motorcyclists truly are an undue burden on society.” Letter of Donald Smith, “Helmet Law Will Not Solve Problem,” *Charleston Gaz.*, 22
This relatively simple precept is generally observed in writing, but has been increasingly flouted in American speech. Although examples of *like* used conjunctively can be found throughout the Middle English period, the usage was widely considered nonstandard from the 17th through the mid-20th centuries. Then defenders came along, raising it to the level of a standard **casualism**—e.g.:

- "Anyone who complains that its use as a conjunction is a corruption introduced by Winston cigarettes ought, in all fairness, to explain how Shakespeare, Keats, and the translators of the Authorized Version of the Bible came to be in the employ of the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company." Bergen Evans, *Grammar for Today*, *Atlantic Monthly*, Mar. 1960, at 80, 81.

A colloquialism *like* as a conjunction may be, but indefensible it certainly is not. It is first of all a widespread custom of speech, it has arisen naturally and in the same way that *as* has, and unless one starts from the *a priori* position that there is only one legitimate form of expression for every idea in speech, it makes as strong a bid for favor as the conjunction *as*.” George Philip Krapp, *Modern English: Its Growth and Present Use* 271 (Albert H. Marckwardt ed., 2d ed. 1969).

- "It is a generally accepted fact that *like* is widely used as a subordinating conjunction in colloquial and popular speech and in writing that reflects colloquial usage." C. Dale Whitman, "*Like* as a Conjunction," *49 Am. Speech* 156, 156–57 (1974).

Although this use of *like* can no longer be considered an outright solemism, as it once was, it hasn't moved far from the borderline of acceptability. It is acceptable casual English; it isn't yet in the category of unimpeachable English.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *like* as a conjunction: Stage 4

   Current ratio (as they do vs. *like* they do): 14:1
   2. *like* for as if or as though: Stage 4

   Current ratio (acts as if he vs. acts like he): 1.2:1

**C. As for *like***.

This is a form of **hypercorrection**—trying so hard to avoid error that you end up falling into an opposite error. Ernest Gowers saw the problem: "A fashion seems to be growing, even among some good writers, to prefer *as* to *l.* not only, rightly, as a conjunction, but also, ill-advisedly, as a prepositional adjective" (*FMEU2* at 336). E.g.: "As *read Like* most people, I have been fortunate to have many mentors in

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**Language-Change Index** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

- **Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but ... **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but ... **Stage 5:** Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

**Language-Change Index**
as misused for the preposition like <as you, I agree with that>—Stage 2

D. **Overused.** Like any other word, like can entangle a sentence if used indiscriminately—e.g.: "I have been buying most of my books from Barnes & Noble, whose two new superstores have come down on my old neighborhood shop like the Assyrians who came down like the wolf on the fold." Victor Navasky, "Buying Books: Theory vs. Practice," N.Y. Times, 20 June 1996, at A13. The two like phrases are especially jarring because they come at the end of an already involved sentence.

**E. As a Vague Word and Verbal Tic.** California is often falsely and invidiously charged with popularizing like as a space-filler: "California's biggest contribution to the American language is the use of the most versatile word ever—you guessed it, 'like.' Like, a word preceding every, like, noun and, like, verb, is almost the only description needed in a world where adjectives are, like, becoming a dying breed." Mark Egan, "Like, the Language Has Lots of Baggage," Wash. Times, 29 Sept. 1997, at A2.

In a 2008 study, a Midwestern teenager was asked why social networking was so important to her. She responded:

> It sounds stupid and everything but like once you like get into it it's really like addicting—just like everything. Like you have your song and like you write like all this stuff about yourself and like all my friends basically have it. So like we always like read each other's pages and like call each other and like kind of, and like you put like 300 pictures up so . . . people's pictures and stuff and comments. Don Campbell, "Plugging In, Tuning Out," USA Today, 10 Sept. 2008, at A11.

One is surprised only by the keenness of her first three words—that it sounds stupid.

Since the 1980s, be like has also been a low casualism equivalent to said in relating a conversation, especially among juveniles—e.g.: "And I'm like, 'Yes, I do.' But he's like, 'No, you don't.' And so I'm like, 'If you're just going to contradict me, then . . . .'" In teenagers, this usage is all but ubiquitous. In adults, it shows arrested development. Cf. be-verbs (c) & go (b).

**Language-Change Index**

*likely* as a spoken space-filler <i was, like, ready an hour ago>—Stage 2

**F. The likes of.** Is the likes of (= people or things of the same type as) disparaging? The linguist Dwight Bolinger calls the phrase, which didn't become widespread till the 19th century, "dysphemistic" (Language: The Loaded Weapon 122 (1980)). Sometimes it's disparaging, but not always. In fact, it's more commonly positive than negative:

- Positive: "We may be able to ring in the new year with a fireworks show the likes of which nobody's seen for a century." David Kipen, "A Literary Hodgepodge," S.F. Chron., 24 Dec. 2000, at 35.

But variations of the phrase, so-and-so and his or her like and something-or-something and the like, often have a more discernible tinge of negativity—e.g.:

- "Steve Drowne and his like, the middle-of-the-road jockeys who take work where they can get it, can afford no such protest," Alan Lee, "Jockeying for the Right to Have a Day Off," Times (London), 4 June 2001, Sports §, at 6.

See ilk (b).

**G. Faulty Comparisons with like.** See illogic (b).

**likely.** Traditionally, this word had to be preceded by a modifier such as very or quite <they will quite likely require additional supplies>. Today, however, it is common to use likely as an equivalent of probably and not to insist on the modifier <they will likely require additional supplies>. See apt (b).

**Language-Change Index**

likely as an equivalent of probably (as in We'll likely be on time)—Stage 5

**likes of.** See like (f).

**-lily.** See adverbs (b).

**limbo.** Pl. lombos. See plurals (d).

**limit; limitation.** A limit is whatever marks an end to something, as in city limits or speed limit. A limitation is the extent of one's capacity or a constraint that voids, as in physical limitations or statute of limitations.

**linchpin (= [1] a locking pin, as in an axle, or [2] anything crucial to holding the parts of something together),** a term dating back to Middle English, is preferably (and predominantly) so spelled. *Lynchpin,* which falsely suggests an association with lynch, is a chiefly BrE variant.

Current ratio (linchpin vs. *lynchpin): 3:1

line. See stand in line; wait in line.
linguist; linguist. Linguist is (1) a student of linguistics, or (2) a person fluent in many languages. Sense 1 is the specialist’s one; sense 2 is the popular one. The potential ambiguity of the term has led to the coining of another term, linguist. “—a rather self-conscious title which linguistics scholars themselves never use, but which is sometimes useful to help avoid confusing the two senses of ‘linguist.’” David Crystal, Linguistics 36 (1971). The OED dates linguist from 1895. Though comparatively rare, it does appear from time to time—e.g.:• “The primary interest of the linguist . . . is the sound of a language.” Lincoln Barnett, The Treasure of Our Tongue 272 (1964).• “[M]ost literary critics are not certain if the linguists can tell them anything about what makes literary text valuable.” Vasant Anant Shahane, Focus on Forster’s Passage to India 78 (1975).

linguistics; philology. Both, broadly speaking, refer to the study of language. But there are differences. Linguistics = the scientific study of language, comprising etymology, semantics, phonetics, morphology, grammar, and syntax. Philology = (1) literary or classical scholarship; or (2) a specialized branch of linguistics dealing with changes in language over time. In sense 2, philology is sometimes known as classical or historical linguistics.

Etymologically, philology denotes the love of ‘logos’ (speech, word, or reason). Since the English Renaissance, it has denoted the love of learning and literature—in a broad sense. Since the 18th century, it has also meant the humanistic study of languages, especially in a historical or comparative way. But the word has been very much out of academic fashion since about the mid-20th century.

lip-sync, vb.; lip-synch. To lip-sync, of course, is to move one’s lips silently in synchronization with recorded vocals, either one’s own or someone else’s. Although the dictionaries are split between the sync and synch forms, the slight leader in print is lip-sync. But this is true only for the uninflected form: lip-synching, lip-synched, and lip-syncher are far more prevalent than the anomalously formed lip-syncing, lip-synched, and lip-syncher. Oddly, however, the inflected forms of sync (when used alone) are more common than those of *synch. In the interests of uniformity—to keep the language in some degree of harmony, if not sync—the syncing–synced forms should be preferred in all derivative phrases. See sync. So lip-sync seems destined to prevail.

Occasionally people misunderstand the phrase and write *lip-sing—e.g.: “This is where freshmen and seniors together do wacky performances and where teachers lip sing [read lip-sync] in front of the students,” Sullivan said.” Grace Camacho, “A Golden Birthday,” Orange County Register, 16 Nov. 2000, at 1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*lip-sing for lip-sync: Stage 2

liquefy. So spelled. *Liquify, which predominated till about 1750, is now considered a misspelling. E.g.: “McClintock doesn’t want any news of the existence of the virus—a fast-acting strain that liquefies internal organs and has a 100 percent mortality rate—to leak out.” James Verniere, “Germ of an Idea,” Boston Herald, 10 Mar. 1995, at S3. Cf. rarefy & stupefy. See -fy. See also spelling (A).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
liquefy misspelled *liquefy: Stage 2

CURRENT RATIO: 8:1

liqueur. See liquor.

liquid. See fluid.

*liquify. See liquefy.

liquor; liqueur. Although liquor /lik-әr/ is any alcoholic drink in BrE (including beer and wine), it is generally only a strong alcoholic drink in AmE (gin, vodka, rum, etc.). In all varieties of English, liqueur /li-kweer/ is a strong sweet alcoholic drink usually taken in a small quantity after a meal. Liquor often wrongly displaces liqueur—e.g.:
• “The drinks group is to unveil a £25 million promotional campaign for Baileys—it’s biggest investment in the cream liqueur [read liqueur] brand.” “Need to Know,” Times (London), 4 Nov. 2008, at 40.

• “So what exactly is a Bushwacker? It’s a milkshake mix, coffee liqueur [read liqueur], chocolate liqueur [read liqueur], and white rum, according to Carmichael.” Kevin Robinson, “Bushwacker Fest Cools Summer Heat,” Pensacola News J., 4 Aug. 2013, at C10.

• “The new expanded dessert menu will include Sexy Bananas Foster, which is bananas caramelized with dark brown sugar, flambéed with rum and banana liqueur [read liqueur], and served with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.” Laura McFarland, “The Cajun Experience Opens New Restaurant,” Winchester Star (Va.), 21 May 2014, Life §, at 4.

liquorice. See licorice.

lissome; lissom. See lithe.

listen; hear. To listen is to try to hear, especially in order to understand, appreciate, or identify something. To hear is simply to perceive with the ear, whether with effort or not.

Listserv. See e-mail list.

lit. See lighted.

litany; liturgy. Etymologically speaking, a litany is a series of prayers; a liturgy is the canon of a religious service. In addition, litany has taken on the extended sense “a long and often repetitive recitation or listing” (<litany of complaints>.

litchi. See lychee.

liter (the basic measure of liquid in the metric system) is so spelled in AmE, litre in BrE. See -er (b). The AmE spelling became firmly established about 1900.

literally = (1) with truth to the letter; or (2) exactly; according to the strict sense of the word or words. Literally in the sense “truly, completely” is a slipshod extension. E.g.: “Behavioralists and post-behavioralists alike, literally or figuratively, learn what they know of science from the natural sciences, from the outside.” (Read: Behavioralists and post-behavioralists alike learn what they know of science from the natural sciences, from the outside.)

When literally is used figuratively—to mean “emphatically,” “metaphorically,” or the like—the word is stretched paper-thin (but not literally). E.g.: “When I got to practice, I was stunned by the overwhelming fear the press had of Lombardi…literally petrified. He held everyone at bay and did very few interviews.” Nick Canepa, “First Game Was a Battle of TV Aerials,” San Diego Union-Trib., 28 Jan. 1988, Super Bowl §, at 22. (Because we know it is a metaphor, simply say: When I got to practice, I was stunned that the press was overwhelmingly petrified by Lombardi. He held everyone at bay and did very few interviews.)

• “His coaches said BYU threw a different look at the Aztecs than last November, when he literally [delete literally] bombed the Cougars for 52 points.” Tom Krasovic, “Aztecs Thinking Aerial Route Is the Way to Go,” San Diego Union-Trib., 22 Sept. 1992, at C1.

• “For Chip Sullivan, former club professional turned PGA Tour pro, life literally [delete literally] has been turned upside down.” Randy King, “PGA Life Different than [read from] Being Home on the Range,” Roanoke Times, 15 Jan. 1997, at B1. (On the use of different in that headline, see different (A.).)

A New Yorker cartoon that appeared on 28 February 1977 (p. 54), by Lorenz, had this funny bit of dialogue: “Confound it, Hawkins, when I said I meant that literally, that was just a figure of speech.” Although W3 (1961) acknowledged that literally could be used to mean “in effect, virtually,” it didn’t record the complete reversal in sense that led literally to mean “metaphorically” or “figuratively.” This reversal appears to have been first recognized in the early 1970s. See “What Is Literally Literally?” 48 Am. Speech 210 (1973).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX literally for figuratively <we’re literally toast>: Stage 3

LITERARY ALLUSION. An allusion, if it isn’t too arcane, can add substantially to the subtlety and effectiveness of writing. To work, the allusion should refer to a common body of literature with which every cultured person is familiar. Increasingly, though, there isn’t any such body of literature. Even Shakespeare’s Hamlet is hopelessly recondite to many modern readers. So it’s hard to bring off a good allusion if it doesn’t relate to current events or popular culture.

The effective writer is wary on the one hand of hackneyed allusions, and on the other hand of allusions so learned that they’re inaccessible to the average educated reader. The following Shakespearean allusion, with the word heir, is likely to befuddle many readers: “He worries about graffiti. He knows the recession has hit the buildings’ owner, so he worries about the paint job and the thousand shocks a building is heir to in a rough neighborhood where people have things besides architectural design on their minds.” Lawrence Christon, “A Lasting Imprint,” L.A. Times, 15 Oct. 1995, at E1. This passage alludes to Hamlet’s famous to-be-or-not-to-be soliloquy: “and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to” (Hamlet 3.1.61–62). The allusion works well even for the reader who doesn’t recognize the Shakespearean echo. Ideally, the words in an allusion flatter those who recognize it while not bothering those who don’t.

Of course, if an allusion is worthwhile, then it’s worth getting right. Johnnie Cochran, the famous defense lawyer in the O.J. Simpson murder trial, referred to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but his memory of the plot failed him: “Eleanor Knowles Dugan is the first of several to point out that Johnnie Cochran got himself all upscrewed when he said, ‘The prosecution is trying to portray Fuhrman as Mr. Hyde but he’s really Dr. Jekyll.’ Jekyll was the good guy, Johnnie.” Herb Caen, “Is It Friday Yet?” S.F. Chron., 15 Sept. 1995, at A20.
*literateur. See littérateur.

literati, the Italian plural of literato (“lettered person”), corresponding to the Latin litteratus, is established as a plural in English. The closest singular is the gallowic is literalité (≡ a literary person). Whoever misuses litterati as a singular is indisputably not a littérateur—e.g.: • “Among the more remarkable things about the guide is that Bartholomew, scarcely a litterati [read a littérateur], never dreamed of writing it at all.” Charlie Meyers, “If Books Could Thrill,” Denver Post, 28 Jan. 1998, at D16. • “In the entries . . . are gems of her novels, but the writings are not the self-conscious renderings of a litterati [read a littérateur] writing for posterity.” Marcy Smith Rice, “Dawn Powell’s Time to Be Reborn,” News & Observer (Raleigh), 25 Oct. 1998, at G5. • “He is a litterati [read a littérateur], musician, bon vivant, surfer dude and fly fisherman.” Phil Richards, “Colts’ Debut: Indy’s Good Catch,” Indianapolis Star, 9 Sept. 2012, at A1.

See littérateur.

Some writers use litterati as a mass noun and match it with a singular verb, as if it were equivalent to a word like bourgeoisie <the bourgeoisie holds these ideas dear>.

language-change index

1. litterati misused to refer to a single person: Stage 1
2. litterati as a mass noun with a singular verb: Stage 2

literatim. See verbatim.

literature is pronounced /lit-ar-ət-chur/—not /lit-ar-ə-t-yoor/ (or /lit-ar-chur/). See pronunciation (b).

lithe; lissome; lissom; *lithesome. Lithe = supple; flexible; limber. Lissome (sometimes spelled lissom, especially in BrE) is synonymous with lithe, except that lissome additionally suggests graceful movement <perhaps the most lissome ballet dancer in the troupe>. Although *lithesome dates from the late 18th century and is illustrated in the OED with three examples from the 19th, it remains a needless variant of lithe.

litigator; litigant. When it originated in the late 19th century, litigatori was a needless variant of litigant. But now those two terms have been differentiated. While a litigant is a party to a lawsuit, a litigatör is a lawyer who conducts lawsuits. See differentiation.

litigious (= eager to resolve disagreements through lawsuits) is three syllables: /li-tij-əs/—not /li-tee-əs/ or /li-tij-ee-əs/.

litteératör (= a literary person), a gallicism, is sometimes misspelled *litterateur—e.g.: “However, poets and litterateurs [read littérateurs], unwilling or unable to risk all in writing a Homeric epic from scratch, soldier on with their translations of epic poetry.” Marshall de Bruhl, “La Victoria de Santa Anna,” L.A. Times, 9 Mar. 1997, Book Rev. §, at 6. Omitting the acute accent from the first -e- is acceptable. See littérateur.

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litteératör misspelled *literateur: Stage 1
Current ratio: 16:1

littler; littlest. These forms—the comparative and superlative for little—are perfectly good, although some writers have gotten the odd idea that they’re not.

liturgy. See litany.


Current ratio (livable vs. *liveable): 5:1

livelong. See lifelong.

liven (up). See enliven & phrasal verbs.

living in sin. This phrase, which reached its zenith in the 19th century, is on the wane. Even the Church of England has proclaimed that living in sin is a “most unhelpful” way of describing unmarried couples who cohabit. The Church estimates that four out of five couples live together before marrying. A major Church report in 1995 therefore concluded that the phrase should be dropped. Ruth Gledhill, “‘Living in Sin’ Is No Longer Sinful, Says Church Report,” Times (London), 7 June 1995, at 1.

lama. See llama.

load, n.; lode. Although they have similar etymologies, their meanings have fully diverged. Load (in its basic senses) means “a quantity that can be carried at one time” or, by extension, “a burden” <a load of work> <a load off my mind>. Lode carries the narrow meaning “a deposit of ore,” as well as the figurative sense “a rich source or supply.” The correct phrase, then, is mother lode (= an abundant supply), not *mother load. Although dozens of headline writers have used mother load as a pun (usually in reference to pregnant women), some have fallen into true error—e.g.:

• “She worked as a computer programmer, but kept plugging away at the music. And finally, she hit the mother load [read mother lode].” Tony Kiss, “Messina Never Gave Up Dream of Music Career,” Asheville Citizen-Times (N.C.), 3 Nov. 1996, at F1.


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*mother load for mother lode: Stage 1
Current ratio (the mother load vs. *the mother load): 11:1

load 569
load factor. See airlines.

*loadstar. See lodestar.

load. Pl. loaves. See plurals (c).

loan; lend. In strict usage, lend is the verb and loan the noun. The verb loan has long been considered permissible, however, when used to denote the lending of money (as distinguished from the lending of things). But both types of loaning are common. In print sources from 1600 to the present day, the collocation he lent has predominated over he loaned—in AmE and BrE alike.

Language-Change Index
1. loan (money) for lend (money): Stage 5
   Current ratio (lend money vs. loan money): 3:1
2. loan (a thing) for lend (a thing): Stage 4
   Current ratio (lend me a car vs. *loan me a car): 1:5:1

loathe; loath; *loth. Loathe (/loʊθ/) is the verb meaning "to abhor, detest." Loath (/loʊθ/), with its needless variant *loth, is an adjective meaning "reluctant." The verb spelling is often wrongly used for the adjective—e.g.:

- "If you are at a dinner, sitting at the head table, you may be loathe [read loath] to stand up and walk away because you are on display up there." Charles Osgood, Osgood on Speaking 80–81 (1988).
- "Even young fans, usually loathe [read loath] to adopt the musical tastes of their parents, are bewildered." Edna Gundersen, "Pink Floyd's Retrospective Progression," USA Today, 25 Apr. 1994, at D1.
- "They have done little but dither, insisting they are loathe [read loath] to interfere in the market." Barbara Yaffe, "Sales Will Slow, but Prices Won't Back Down," Vancouver Sun, 1 Sept. 2015, at C1.

Language-Change Index
loathe for the adjective loath: Stage 2
Current ratio (am loath to vs. *am loathe to): 7:1

loathsome. So spelled, even though the first syllable sounds like the verb rather than the adjective (see loathe). Perhaps as a result of the sound association, many writers err by writing *loathsome—e.g.:

- "The characters we first meet in 'Nurse Betty' are terminally dim, risible or loathsome [read loathsome]." James Verniere, "Zellweger Is a Reason to Love 'Nurse Betty,'" Boston Herald, 8 Sept. 2000, at S21.

Language-Change Index
loathsome misspelled *loathsome: Stage 1

*lobbier. See lobbyist.

lobby. The legislative senses derive ultimately from the architectural sense of the word. In 19th-century AmE, lobby came to denote (through the linguistic process known as metonymy) the people who habitually haunt the lobby of a legislative chamber to carry on business with legislators and especially to influence their votes.

As a verb, lobby has come to mean: (1) to frequent legislative chambers for the purpose of influencing the members' official business <the group lobbied against the proposed reforms>; or (2) to promote or oppose (a measure) by soliciting legislative votes <the organization lobbied a measure through the House>.

The agent noun is lobbyist, meaning “someone who lobbies.” The term originated during the American Civil War. See lobbyist.

lobbyist; *lobbyer; *lobbier. The second and third forms are needless variants. See lobby.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 3,751:2:1

location; locale; locality. All three terms are frequently used. They are generally equivalent, but only locale has the sense "the setting or scene of action or of a story."

loc. cit. See ibid.

locution. See elocution.

lode. See load.

lodestar (= a guiding light or principle) is so spelled—not *loadstar.

lodestone; loadstone. The term meaning "something that strongly attracts" is predominantly spelled lodestone in AmE and loadstone in BrE. The BrE spelling vastly predominated throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. In the mid–19th century, the word was respelled to make it correlate more strongly with its etymology (fr. the OE lode, meaning "way") and with its cognate lodestar. During the 20th century, this respelled version surpassed loadstone in AmE and still might in BrE.

Cf. lodestar.

lodgment; lodgement. This word (denoting [1] accommodations, shelter, lodgings; [2] the placing of something or someone into a fixed or stationary position; or [3] a place where something is positioned) is predominantly spelled lodgment in AmE, lodgement in BrE. But the medial -e- seems to be dropping in frequency in BrE. See mute e.

Logic. See illogic.

logical fallacy. See grammatical error.

logically. See sentence adverbs.

lollipop is the standard spelling. *Lollypop is a variant.

Current ratio: 11:1

lone; alone. Lone comes before the noun, alone after. Misusing alone for lone is an odd error: "Anything we fully do is an alone [read a lone] journey." Natalie
loose, adj. The traditional AmE preference, both in this phrase and in short-lived, has been to pronounce the second syllable /livd/, not /lived/. The AmE tendency to make it a short -i- is perhaps explainable on the analogy of the ordinary word lived; the BrE tendency may be influenced additionally by the phrase long live the Queen.

long-standing, adj. So spelled (with the hyphen).

longtime, adj. So spelled (without the hyphen).

*look badly. See badly (A).

look over. See overlook.

loom large. See bulk large.

loose, v.t.; loosen. See lose (A).

Lord, a traditional term for the Christian God, has come under attack: “Some U.S. churches are beginning to question the title of Lord for Jesus Christ, reports the Washington Post, noting that the word is laden with negative meaning; some groups are replacing the title with gender-neutral terms such as Redeemer, Comforter or Friend. Rev. James Crawford of Boston’s Old South Church said his United Church of Christ should be seeking ‘metaphors for Ultimate Reality that do not assume a cosmos or creation where . . . some male-like figure or being is in charge.’” “Religion Watch,” Globe & Mail, 24 Aug. 1993, at A16. Whether the term will continue to flourish or dwindle in use remains to be seen, but a long struggle seems assured. See sexism.

For more on the title in British nobility, see Tennyson.

Lord Tennyson. See Tennyson.

*Los Angelean. See Angeleno.

lose, v.t.; loosen. Lose, v.t., = to suffer the deprivation of; to part with. Loose is both an adjective meaning “unfastened” and a verb meaning “to release; unfasten.” Loosen bears a similar meaning, but whereas loose generally refers to a complete release <loosening one’s belt>. Additionally, loosen is figurative more often than loose is.

Loose is sometimes misspelled for lose—e.g.: “The Imperial Irrigation District also stands to loose [read lose] about seven percent of its allotment.” Dean E. Murphy, “California Water Users Miss Deadline on Pact for Sharing,” N.Y. Times, 1 Jan. 2003, at A11.

B. Lose no time. The phrase no time should be lost is famously ambiguous, suggesting either that something is urgently needed or that it’s so futile that it’s not worth the effort. “Urgently needed” is the usual sense, but not without a potential miscue—e.g.: “The General Assembly last Friday overwhelmingly passed a bill abolishing parole and reforming sentencing in Virginia, fulfilling in part Gov. George Allen’s central campaign promise. The House and Senate, however, did not at the same time approve a funding mechanism to make the plan a reality. No time should be lost on this.” “Parole Abolition Passes,” Virginian-Pilot & Ledger-Star (Norfolk), 5 Oct. 1994, at A14.

C. Lose out. See phrasal verbs.

lot. See a lot.

*loth. See loathe.

lotus. Pl. lotuses. See plurals (A).

louder (BrE for “a bullhorn”) is so spelled—not *loudhaler. See hale.

Louisianian; *Louisianan. The first is standard and traditional. The second is a variant that has grown in popularity since the 1940s. See denizen labels.

lour. See lower.

lovable (= worthy of or attracting love), dating from the Middle English period, has been predominantly so spelled in both AmE and BrE since the mid-19th century. *Loveable is a variant spelling. Cf. likable & livable.

lovelily. See adverbs (b).

low; lowly. Each can function as both adjective and adverb: a low profile; the supplies ran low; a lowly peasant; soar lowly through the clouds. Because of the potential ambiguity, ensure that either word’s meaning is clear from the context.

lower; lour, vb. Lower—as a virtual synonym of lower (= to scowl), and pronounced with the same vowel sounds /law-or/-is so spelled in most AmE dictionaries. It also means (of the sky or a storm) to be dark and menacing. Lour, the standard BrE spelling, is listed as a variant form. That’s unfortunate because the spelling lower is an instant and inevitable miscue. We’d be well advised to use lour instead, as the British do—e.g.: • “The visceral shock of the Scarpia theme, hammered out tutta forza in the opening bar of the piece, was here

• "His first lead was in Terence Fisher’s ‘The Curse of the Werewolf’ (1961), where his louring looks were seen to advantage." W. Stephen Gilbert, "They Live Again," Observer, 30 June 1996, at 6.

• “The chorus moves like zombies and wears meaningless Jeff Koons cartoon-character heads, as bully boys in uniforms threaten violence and avenging angels lour from the heavens.” Rupert Christiansen, "‘Tchaikovsky’s Magical Card Dealt with a Dead Hand," Daily Telegraph, 8 June 2015, at 23.

**low-key**, adj., is the standard form. *Low-keyed* is a variant.

**lowly.** See low.

**lubricious; lucullian.** This term—meaning (1) “lecherous, lewd” <a man known for becoming lubricious while drinking>; (2) “tricky, shifty” <a lubricious character who repeatedly eluded questioning>; or (3) “physically slippery” <a lubricious pole>—is preferably spelled *lubricious*. This form more accurately suggests the corresponding noun, *lubricity*. *Lubricous*, the standard form till about 1920, is now a needless variant.

Current ratio: 10:1

Lucullan (= lavish, luxurious) has been the standard term since the 18th century. *Lucullian* and *Luculean* are variant forms.

Current ratio (Lucullan vs. *Lucullian* vs. *Luculean): 9:2:1

**luggage.** See baggage.

**Luna.** See earth.

**lunatic** has the kind of lunatic?*, it should be used cautiously, if at all.


• “The 57-year-old Lovett and his ace collaborators . . . spent more than two hours showcasing their prodigious skills, blending gospel fervor with country’s endearing wit, the blues’ lusty urgency and folk’s spare, elegant beauty.” Preston Jones, “Review: Lyle Lovett and His Large Band at Bass Hall,” Ft. Worth Star-Telegram, 24 Aug. 2015, Entertainment §.

Sometimes writers misuse *lusty* for *lustful*—e.g.: “The affair included 400 e-mail communications, cyber sex and, finally, long and lusty [read lustful] phone calls.” Kathleen Kernicky, “Caught in the Net,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 3 Nov. 1996, at E1.

**lustrum** (= half a decade; a five-year period) must be one of the most overlooked yet most potentially useful words in the English language. The standard plural is *lustra*, not *lustrums*.

**lusty.** See lustful.

**lutenist; lutanist.** One might well simply choose to say lute player. But if one of the -ist forms is called for, make it *lutenist* (the predominant form since about 1850).

Current ratio: 5:1

luxurious; luxuriant. These two words long ago underwent differentiation. **Luxurious** = characteristic of luxury <luxurious hotel>. Luxuriant = growing abundantly; lush <luxuriant foliage>. Cf. spartan.

Each word is sometimes confused with the other. Most commonly, *luxurious* is wrongly used for *luxuriant*—e.g.:


• “Frida Kahlo . . . was so proud of her luxurious [read luxuriant] facial hair that she painted it right on to her self-portraits.” Stephanie Mencimer, "The Trouble with Frida Kahlo,” Wash. Monthly, 1 June 2002, at 26.

But the opposite error, *luxuriant* for *luxurious*, also sometimes occurs—e.g.: “The Hostess House has the feeling of a large, luxuriant [read luxurious] home with plush velvet furnishings, an oak dance floor, a large

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. luxurious misused for luxuriant: Stage 2
2. luxuriant misused for luxurious: Stage 2

luxury (= a very great pleasure or comfort that isn’t absolutely required) is pronounced either /luk-zha-re/ or /lug-zha-re/.

lychee (the small round fruit of a Chinese tree of the soapberry family) is now predominantly so spelled in AmE and BrE alike—though the variant spelling mispronounced /mah-keez-moh/. It’s acceptable to say the first syllable with a schwa sound (/ma-/). The anglicized /-chiz-/ for the second syllable is gaining acceptance.

macho (= aggressively manly), borrowed from Spanish in the early 20th century, is best reserved for adjectival uses <macho bluster> <macho posturing>. Although the word has come into use as a noun synonymous with machismo, the latter term is more appropriate for that sense. See machismo.

macintosh; McIntosh; Macintosh. A macintosh (often, in BrE, shortened to nack) is a waterproof raincoat. Although the inventor was Charles Macintosh, the 19th-century Scottish chemist, the garment’s name has come to be spelled differently, with the internal -k-. Some writers spell the word according to the man’s correct name—macintosh—but this remains a mere variant, and the chance of reverting to that spelling is probably long past. A McIntosh (also termed a McIntosh red) is a late-maturing apple known for its juiciness and tang. And of course, a Macintosh is a brand of personal computer. Orally, the three terms can be confusing: “I ate the only McIntosh I could find,” “I took my macintosh with me,” etc. As one writer put it, “Even Macintosh, which once meant a type of raincoat [still does!] or a particular type of apple [ditto], now means something else to millions.” James Coates, “Its Future Uncertain as Buyout Rumors Persist,” Chicago Trib., 25 Jan. 1996, at N1.

MA

ma’am. This contraction of madam can be found pretty much throughout the English-speaking world. But it especially characterizes Southern, Midwestern, and Western AmE on the one hand, and British aristocratic speech (but only in reference to royalty) on the other. E.g.:

• “Greetings Ma’am: The Queen, in the only public appearance on her 70th birthday, is given flowers at the Church of St. Mary Magdalen at Sandringham yesterday.” 70th Birthday Flowers for the Queen, Independent, 22 Apr. 1996, at 5 (photo caption).

• “Yes, ma’am, the museum’s architect is Shreveport’s own, Mike McSwain.” “You’ll Find Van Cliburn on the Left, Just Past Elvis,” Times (Shreveport, La.), 27 Aug. 2015, at C10.

macabre is pronounced /ma-kahb-r[ә]/ or /ma-kahb/—preferably the former.

macaroni; *maccaroni. The first has been the preferred spelling since the 18th century. Current ratio: 30:1

macerate (= [1] to cause to waste or wither away from lack of nourishment, or [2] to steep or soak [something] in fluid so as to soften and separate into component parts) is pronounced /mas-ә-rayt/—not /may-sә-rayt/.

machete is best pronounced /ma-shet-ee/ or /ma-chet-ee/.

Machiavellian; *Machiavelian. The first has been the preferred spelling since the 18th century. Current ratio: 55:1

machination. The first syllable is more properly pronounced /mak/, not /mash/.

machismo /mah-keez-moh/ (= the quality of being macho; exaggerated masculine pride) is sometimes
substandard. The stigma should never have attached. The word is less formal than angry, irreful, wrathful, or wroth, but it’s perfectly acceptable and has been for centuries.

*madamoiselle. See mademoiselle.

madding crowd; *maddenning crowd. By historical convention, madding crowd is the idiom, dating from the late 16th century. Unlike maddenning, which describes the effect on the observer, madding (= frenzied) describes the crowd itself. Thomas Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” (1749) and Thomas Hardy's novel Far from the Madding Crowd (1874) helped establish this idiom, especially Gray’s “far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife.” In modern writing, madding crowd remains more than six times as common as its corrupted form.

But some writers get it wrong—e.g.:

• “Being typecast would bother me if my career weren’t flourishing outside of the show; the 47-year-old Williams says earnestly in a tiny office away from the maddening crowd [read madding crowd].” Joel Reese, “Here’s the Story, of a Man Named Williams,” Chicago Daily Herald, 13 Aug. 2002, Suburban Living §, at 1.

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*maddening crowd for madding crowd: Stage 2 Current ratio (madding crowd vs. *maddenning crowd): 6:1

mademoiselle. So spelled. *Madamoiselle is a frequent misspelling—e.g.:
• “Photo of Sherry Francis as Madame de Volanges, Mary Lilly as Madame La Marquise de Merteuil, Erica Welborn as Madamoiselle [read Mademoiselle] Cecile Volanges.” “A Stitch in Time,” Sunday Advocate (Baton Rouge) (Mag.), 24 Sept. 1995, at 14 (photo caption).


The term is abbreviated Mlle. in the singular, Mlles. in the plural. In BrE, the period after the abbreviation is never omitted.

maelstrom, originally a Dutch word referring to a grinding or turning stream, is frequently misspelled *maelstorn—e.g.: “The maelstrorn [read maelstrom] resulting from the refusal of Denver Nuggets basketball player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf to stand for the national anthem has prompted some to wonder if the line between reverence and disrespect isn’t . . . [hard] to delineate these days.” Karen Crouse, “Degrees of Respect Vary in NHL Arenas,” Orange County Register, 24 Mar. 1996, at C12.

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maelstrom misspelled *maelstorn: Stage 1 Current ratio: 1,375:1

Mafia; *Maffia. The latter—the Italian spelling—is merely a variant in English and ought to be avoided. The term is normally capitalized except when it refers figuratively to a non-Italian group <Chinese mafia>.

mafioso; mafiosi. A mafioso is a member of the Mafia, a secret criminal society. The Italian plural mafiosi is far more common than the anglicized *mafiosos. The feminine form mafiosa is rarely seen.

Although Mafia is predominantly capitalized in modern print sources, mafioso traditionally isn’t.

Magdalen(e). The (more famous) Oxford college is Magdalen; the Cambridge college is Magdalene. They’re spelled differently but pronounced the same. Although the Magdalen Islands, in Quebec, have an intuitive English pronunciation (/mag-da-lan/), the colleges are both pronounced /mawd-lan/. In fact, that pronunciation gave rise to the English word maidlin (= excessively sentimental), from Mary Magdalene’s traditional depiction as a sobbing penitent. Although her name is spelled with an -e on the end, the islands and the Oxford college omit it.

Magi (the three wise men who, according to the Bible, brought gifts to the baby Jesus) is pronounced /may-ji/ (rhymes with bay)—not /maj-i/. The singular Magus /may-gas/ is much less commonly encountered.

magic, adj.; magical. Native speakers of English don’t have nearly as much trouble using these words appropriately as lexicographers have classifying the uses adequately. Both may mean either (1) “of, relating to, or involving mystical powers that allow impossible things to be accomplished,” or (2) “of, relating to, or involving the performance of tricks for entertainment, esp. by sleight of hand.” Magic tends to be used attributively as a means of identification <magic word> <magic spell>, while magical tends to be more descriptive <with magical speed> <a magical evening together>. Hence magical often means “enjoyable, exciting, or romantic in an unusual way” <what a magical vacation>. Only magical functions as a predicate adjective <the effect was magical> <the rescuer must have been magical>. In the predicate position, magic tends to be perceived as a noun <It was magic!>.

magisterial; magistral; *magistratic; *magistratical. Although magisterial carries connotations of nobility, command, and even dictatorialness, it is also the preferred adjective corresponding to the noun magistrate. In this latter sense, *magistratic and *magistratical are needless variants. Magistral = (1) of a master or masters <an absolutely magistral work>; or (2) formulated by a physician <a magistral ointment>.

magistracy; *magistrature; *magistrateship. The first of these is the standard term either for the office, district, or power of a magistrate, or for a body of magistrates. *Magistrature and *magistrateship are needless variants.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 1,022:62:1
magentically. See magisterial.

*magistrateship; *magistrature. See magistracy.

*magistratic; *magistratical. See magisterial.

*magistrature. See magistracy.

Magna Carta. A. And *Magna Charta. The usual—and the better—form is Magna Carta. Time magazine used the variant spelling and found itself on the defensive: “We were unfairly reproofed for our spelling of the document Magna Carta [Living, Nov. 11]. Although many publications use the more familiar Magna Carta, most dictionaries prefer the word we used, charta, from the Latin word for paper.” “Going by the Rules,” Time, 16 Dec. 1991, at 9. Which dictionaries? Not W3, RH2, AHD, W11, or the OED—the last of which shows that the great document was known exclusively as Magna Carta from the 13th to the 17th centuries. And the leading British textbooks on the subject, by W.S. McKechnie and J.C. Holt, use Carta. For the full history of the vicissitudes of the two spellings, see Bryan A. Garner, “A Lexicographic Look at Magna Carta,” in Magna Carta: Muse and Mentor 85 (Randy J. Holland ed., 2014).

And what about the Time editors’ argument that charta is the Latin word for “paper”? That argument is empty: charta and carta are variant forms bearing the same meaning in Latin.

Current ratio: 2:1

B. Article with. Traditionally, Magna Carta did not take a definite article: one said Magna Carta, not the Magna Carta. This traditional usage is still followed closely in London and, less rigorously, elsewhere in England—e.g.:

• “The Declaration of Arbroath was a century after Magna Carta: and the baronial limitations on kingship in the earlier document were also to filter down, to give all a dim sense of being ‘freemen.’” John Lloyd, “Brave Heart’s Campaign Trail,” Fin. Times, 4 Jan. 2003, Books §, at 5.


• “It was Wilberforce’s hatred that abolished slavery. It was hatred of fascism that won the war. It was hatred that forged the Health Service, marched for civil rights, wrote Magna Carta.” A.A. Gill, “The Red Lion,” Sunday Times (London), 26 Jan. 2003, Features §, at 48.

But writers outside England—even elsewhere in the U.K., in Commonwealth countries, and in former colonies, including the U.S.—rarely follow suit. E.g.:

• “There have been many detested monarchs from bad King John, despite the fact that he signed the Magna Carta, onwards,” Brian Meek, “Why They Still Long to Reign over Us,” Herald (Glaspag), 26 Nov. 2002, at 14.

• “It takes a long time for a culture of democracy to emerge. . . . Arguably, the British experience began with the Magna Carta in 1215.” Keith Suter, “Africa Sinks into Danger of No Return,” Canberra Times, 14 Jan. 2003, at A1.


magnate; magnet. A magnate (/mag-ny*t/) is a tycoon, a person who has grown rich in a field that is usually specified <oil magnate>. A magnet (/mag-net/) is a piece of metal that attracts iron and aligns with the earth’s north and south poles (or with another magnetic field).

Magnate is occasionally misspelled magnet, an unattractive error—e.g.:


• “A sign outside the apartment building where Storm and Harrison live chronicles the history of Phillipsburg from 1654 . . . to 1887, when the town famous for its ‘beautiful architecture, excellent schools and churches’ attracted bankers, artisans and railroad magnets [read magnates] and South Main Street ‘was affectionately known as millionaire’s row.’” Nancy Averett, “Fire Damages Structure in P’burg Historic District,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 30 May 2000, at B1.

• “Railroad magnet [read magnate] Henry Flagler had hardly noticed the place when building the Florida East Coast Railroad southward in the 1890s to his new playground for the rich, Palm Beach.” Elliott Jones, “Creation of a Garden,” Press J. (Vero Beach, Fla.), 16 Nov. 2001, at C1.

Before the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, the terms magnate and tycoon both referred to prominent people in business and politics. In that era, however, the words were applied to super-rich industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller; the words suggest massive wealth and are still used more commonly with older industries. Hence it is more common today to read of a railroad magnate or an oil tycoon than a software magnate or a telecom tycoon.

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*railroad magnet for railroad magnate: Stage 1

magnifico (= a high-ranking or extremely prominent person; grande) forms the plural magnificos—preferably not *magnificos. See plurals (d).

Current ratio: 1:5:1

magniloquent (= characterized by high-flown, bombastic speech) should be restricted to contexts involving language. Strictly speaking, it can’t be about gesturing—e.g.: “To my nervous question about a tailcoat, he pointed magniloquently [read grandiosely] to the closet and said

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**magniloquent** meaning "grandiose" but not in reference to language: Stage 1

**maharaja; *maharajah.** This historical term, meaning "an Indian prince who rules over a province," has been predominantly spelled maharaja since the mid-20th century—first in BrE and then in AmE. The spelling *maharajah* is obsolescent.

Current ratio: 2:1

**maharani; *maharanee.** This term, meaning "the wife of a maharaja," is predominantly spelled maharani—*maharanee* being an obsolescent variant.

Current ratio: 4:1

**Mahican; *Mohican; Mohegan.** Although James Fenimore Cooper's Last of the Mohicans (1826) popularized the -o- spelling, the preferred and predominant spelling of the name of the American Indian confederacy is Mahican. The Mohegans were one tribe within that Algonquian confederacy.

**Mahomet.** See Muhammad.

*maihem. See mayhem (c).

**mail carrier.** See sexism (c).

**maim.** See mayhem (b).

**main, adj.** See ADJECTIVES (b).

**mainstream, v.t., is a jargonistic vogue word.** It originated in the mid-1970s when Congress mandated that handicapped children be accommodated in regular classrooms. The following use is typical—e.g.: "Adrienne Lissner of St. Louis advocates mainstreaming autistic children in school." Joan Little, "Dealing with the Myths and Reality of Autism," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 12 Jan. 1997, at C12. (A possible revision: Adrienne Lissner of St. Louis advocates putting autistic children into regular classes. Or: Adrienne Lissner of St. Louis advocates keeping autistic children in regular schools.)

In the 1980s the word came to be used more and more to denote the integration of any subculture into the main culture—e.g.: • "It means Hispanics are mainstreaming themselves [read moving into the mainstream];" said Robin Rorapaugh, Texas director for the Clinton campaign." Sam Atlessey, "Texas Politics," *Dallas Morning News*, 22 Mar. 1992, at A46.

• "Borne up by popular culture, including the wildly successful 'Friends' sitcom, single motherhood has been mainstreamed, even romanticized." Tom Jackson, "Where, Oh Where, Is the New Virginity?" *Tampa Trib.*, 8 Dec. 2002, Pasco ed., at 1.


See FUNCTIONAL SHIFT (d).

**majority. A. For most.** When *most* will suffice, use it in place of *majority*—e.g.: "The majority [read Most] of the budget increase is due to the long-awaited expansion or replacement for city hall." Dave Nicholson, "Public Hearings Set on Budget," *Tampa Trib.*, 6 Sept. 1997, at 1. *Majority* is most helpful in discussing votes—e.g.: "And let's not forget that a majority of Michigan voters approved term limits." Joseph A. Morton, "Should Michigan Kill Term Limits?" *Detroit News*, 6 Sept. 1997, at C14.

**B. Number.** *Majority* is sometimes a collective noun that takes a singular verb, but sometimes (through synesis) it's a plural demanding a plural verb—e.g.: • "But the clear majority reach, or at least attempt to reach, that level where quality dwells." Jack Valenti, "Lights! Camera! Rhetoric!" *Wash. Post*, 4 Feb. 1996, at C4.

• "It is unwise, however, to become complacent, especially when the majority seems to have done just that." "Insider Trading," *Tulsa Trib. & Tulsa World*, 24 Aug. 1997, at E4.

Especially in the phrase a majority of (people or things)—with the of-phrase spelled out—the word *majority* is generally treated as a plural in both AmE and BrE. E.g.: "Since the majority of shops that will open tomorrow were also open last Sunday, most shoppers will be hard put to notice the difference that the law has made." Tim Jackson, "Open All Hours (Well, Almost)," *Independent*, 27 Aug. 1994, at 11. Still, the sentence could be advantageously recast: Since most shops that will open tomorrow were . . . .

**C. And plurality.** *Majority* and *plurality* are most often used in reference to elections and other types of surveys. A *majority* (sometimes termed an absolute majority, although there is no distinction) is either (1) a number of votes that is more than half the total <the referendum passed with a 53% majority>, or (2) the numerical spread by which the majority won <when Jeffords bolted, the Democrats took control of the Senate with a one-vote majority>. *Majority* is often used as an adjective to designate the bloc with the most votes or members <some committee members dissented from the majority report>.

In a contest with three or more candidates or questions, a *plurality* is either (1) the largest vote, or (2) the difference between the largest vote and the second-largest vote. It is often contrasted with a *majority* because a *plurality* may be smaller than 50% <Hirsch won a plurality in the first mayoral election, but third-party candidates drew off enough votes to deny her a majority and force a runoff>.

The terms *majority* and *plurality* are usually distinguished, so that the results of an election are announced as one or the other depending on whether one candidate or question won more than 50% of the vote. In this commonly observed distinction, a *plurality* is less than a *majority*. That can make a difference in the outcome (see the example in the paragraph above) or in the strength of the winner's mandate. For example, a *plurality* opinion by the Supreme Court (i.e., one that is signed by fewer than five justices) may
make an attempt; make an effort; make efforts. These phrases are verbos for try—e.g.:• “The association said that if a mass disaster occurs, it will make efforts [read try] to warn disaster victims that they may be approached by ‘parachute lawyers.’” “Arundel Digest,” Capital (Annapolis), 11 Jan. 1997, at C1.

make-believe (the pretense that something unreal actually exists) is the standard term—*make-belief* being a variant. Make-believe can also be an adjective meaning “pretended or imaginary” <make-believe friends>.

Current ratio: 66:1

make do (= to manage with what happens to be available, however inadequate it may be) is distressingly often written *make due*, a blunder—e.g.:
• “The state is trying to make due [read make do] by asking the State Patrol to pay particular attention in the area to driving that can cause accidents.” Kery Murakami, “When a Single Driver Can Use HOV Lane,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 13 Jan. 2003, at B1.
• “As much as I treasure Roberto and the kids, living free of the hierarchy, we’re making due [read making do] with a loose network of other runaways, outcasts, antisocials.” Cynthia Leitich Smith, Tantalize 45 (2007).

For more on this type of verb, see Phrasal Verbs.

MALAPROPISMS 577

MALAPROPISMS are words that, because they are used incorrectly, produce a humorous effect. The term derives from the character Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s play The Rivals (1775). Mrs. Malaprop loves big words, but she uses them ignorantly and creates hilarious solecisms and occasionally embarrassing double entendres. One of Mrs. Malaprop’s famous similes is as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile. Elsewhere, she refers to the geometry of contagious countries.

What most sources do not point out is that Sheridan borrowed the device from Shakespeare, who used it quite often for comic effect, always in the mouths of lower-class characters who are unsuccessfully aping the usage of their social and intellectual betters and saying something quite different (sometimes scandalously different) from what they meant to say. For example, Elbow, the incompetent constable in Measure for Measure, says of a bawdy house that it is “a respected [read suspected] house” (2.1.162). Several equally hilarious misusages—in this scene and others—have the judge standing bemused as both the accused and the accuser get their meanings tangled up.

A well-known example of a Shakespearean malapropism that skirts sacrilege is Bottom the Weaver’s garbled version of 1 Corinthians 2:9, delivered near the end of A Midsummer Night’s Dream: “The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was” (4.1.211–14).

Modern examples aren’t hard to come by. One lawyer apparently mistook meretricious (= superficially attractive but false, like a prostitute) for meritorious, with embarrassing consequences: he asked a judge to rule favorably on his client’s “meretricious claim.” See meretricious. Similarly, Senator Sam Ervin recalled a lawyer who, in arguing that his client had been provoked by name-calling (epithets), said: “I hope that in passing sentence on my client upon his conviction for assault and battery, your honor will bear in mind that he was provoked to do so by the epitaphs hurled at him by the witness.” Paul R. Clancy, Just a Country Lawyer 121 (1974). See epithet (b).

Other examples are infinitesimal (= very small) for infinite (= boundless), e.g.: across the infinitesimal universe; nefarious (= evil) for multiform (= greatly varied), e.g.: ties, shirts, shoes, belts, socks, and all the other nefarious parts of one’s wardrobe; voracity (= greediness with food) for veracity (= truthfulness), e.g.: How dare you attack my voracity!; and serial for surreal, e.g.: it was truly a serial experience.

For yet other examples, see advert; allusion (A); apposition; attain; attribute, v.t.; beggar description; behest; climactic; confess (b); deep-seated; disparaging; effrontery (A); equivalent (b); for all intents and purposes; gambit (b); guerrilla; heart-rending;
male, adj.; masculine; manly; manlike; mannish. All these terms mean "of, relating to, or involving men," but their uses can be finely distinguished. Male is the most neutral <male-pattern baldness>. Masculine shares this neutral sense <masculine traits>, but often suggests the positive qualities traditionally associated with men <his masculine confidence was no charade>. Manly carries the positive connotations of masculine <manly strength and vigor>. Manlike most often refers to nonhumans <a tribe of manlike apes>. Mannish typically has negative connotations, especially in reference to a woman <she had a mannish appearance>.

Although these terms bear interesting historical distinctions, in modern usage some of them—particularly manly and mannish—are considered politically incorrect: manly because it suggests that women don't possess the admirable qualities denoted, and mannish because it typically applies to women in a derogatory sense. Cf. female. See sexism (c).

malefaction. See malfeasance.

malefactor has four syllables: /mә-lә-fә-ktor/.

*malefeasance. See malfeasance.

malevolent; maleficient. Whereas the former means "desirous of evil to others," the latter means positively "hurtful or criminal to others." Hence malevolent has to do with malicious desires and maleficient with malicious actions. Cf. beneficient.

Maleficient is pronounced /mә-lә-fә-sәnt/—not /mә-lә-fә-sәnt/. Cf. beneficient.

malfeasance; *maleazance; *malefeasance; misfeasance; malefaction. Because the words malfeasance and misfeasance are imprecise in AmE, we begin with the clear-cut BrE distinctions. In BrE, malfeasance refers to an unlawful or intentionally wrongful act, whereas misfeasance refers to an otherwise lawful act performed in a wrongful manner. *Maleazance and *malefeasance are obsolete spellings of malfeasance.

In AmE, malfeasance has traditionally been associated with misconduct by a public official. But more and more it is used to denote wrongdoing by anyone in a position of trust—e.g.: "Lawyers, accountants, corporate consultants, executive recruiters and retired chief executives are selling themselves as experts on the federal law passed last year to crack down on corporate malfeasance." Ameet Sachdev, "Corporate Governance Becomes Go-To Field," Chicago Trib., 20 Jan. 2003, Bus. §, at 1. See malfeasant.

Misfeasance is a more general word meaning "transgression, trespass"—e.g.:

- "As stated above, most of those who do not receive a high-quality education are members of minority groups or come from low-income families. No nation in the 21st century will be able to sustain this type of educational misfeasance and expect to remain a leader among nations." Mary H. Futrell et al., "Teaching the Children of a New America: The Challenge of Diversity," Phi Delta Kappan, 1 Jan. 2003, at 381.

Misusage of misfeasance, as by referring to something of great seriousness, is relatively common—e.g.: "The death of children while under the supposed protection of the state is not only tragic but evidence of misfeasance." Editorial, "Child Deaths Expose Systemic Failures," Indianapolis News, 20 Feb. 2003, at A14. A child's death goes beyond being a mere transgression or trespass, even if it is the result of a public official's or agency's neglect in performing duties. The writer probably meant malfeasance.

Malefaction (= crime, offense) has become an archaism.

malfeazant, adj., corresponds to the noun malfeasance. See malfeasance.

*maleazance. See malfeasance.

Malformations. See morphological deformities.

malignancy; malignity. Malignancy = a cancerous tumor. The word is well known. Malignity = wicked or deep-rooted ill will or hatred; malignant feelings or actions. E.g.: "[Tom] Paulin is also famous for having led the attack on T.S. Eliot for his anti-Semitism—he argued in a passionate review of a book on the subject that you can't separate the poetry from the poet's malignity." Judith Shulevitz, "Senescent Prejudices," N.Y. Times, 12 Jan. 2003, § 7, at 23.

malignant. See benign.

mall. See maul.

malodorous. See odorous.

malpractice (= the failure of a usu. licensed professional to render competent services) is preferably pronounced /mal-prak-tis/—not /mal-prak-tis/.

maltreat. See mistreat.

mammilla /mә-mә-lә/ (= a female mammal's nipple) has been the standard spelling in AmE since about 1830. It was long the standard spelling in BrE as well, but beginning in the mid-1960s the variant spelling mammilla took hold in BrE. One might predict that this anomaly, based on a Latin diminutive spelling, won't last—given all the etymologically related words that double the -m- (mamma, mammiferous, mammilate, mammography, etc.). But a resolution in favor of mammilla in BrE may well take decades. The plural is mammillae /ma-mә-illә/.
Mand. See sexism (c).

**man.** See sexism (c).

**man and wife.** Since the 1960s, this phrase has been steadily decreasing in frequency. The reason, presumably, is that it does not accord the woman an equal status—i.e., she is referred to only by her marital status. A more balanced phrasing is husband and wife. See sexism (e). Interestingly, the collocation husband and wife has predominated over man and wife in print sources since the mid-18th century.

**mandatory; mandatory.** Mandatory is the usual word, meaning “obligatory, compulsory.” Mandatory is much rarer; it’s either a noun meaning “a person or entity holding a mandate; an agent” or an adjective meaning “of, relating to, or involving an agency relationship.” For purposes of differentiation, mandatory should not be used as a noun where mandatory can work in its place.

**mandolin.** The stringed instrument is so spelled—not mandoline. A mandoline is a food-slicing device.

**maneuver** has been the predominant AmE spelling since the 1930s. Manoeuvre has always predominated in BrE.

**mango.** Pl. mangoes. See plurals (d).


**manic depression** (dating from 1911), known also as manic-depressive illness (dating from 1951), denotes a mental disorder characterized by alternating episodes of depression and mania. By the late 20th century, the terms were seen by mental-health professionals as dysphemisms, perhaps because they had entered the popular consciousness and had begun appearing in nonclinical senses. Hence a new term was created in the late 1970s: bipolar disorder, in reference to the alternating extremes in mood. Today bipolar disorder is by far the most common term for the illness—so much so that it has entered everyday speech <he’s so bipolar!>. A new clinical term may one day be required if the term becomes widely abused.

**manicure; pedicure.** **A. Sense.** Manicure (1) a cosmetic treatment or care for hands, esp. the fingernails; or (2) a person who provides such treatments or care. The second sense has been almost wholly replaced by manicurist.

**B. As Verb.** Manicure = (1) to give cosmetic treatments to another’s hands, esp. trimming, polishing, and grooming the fingernails; or (2) to trim closely and neatly; to make neat and attractive. In its second, extended sense, golf-course fairways, hedges, and the like are manicured.

**C. And pedicure.** As a noun, pedicure = (1) a cosmetic treatment or care for the feet, esp. the toenails; (2) the care or cosmetic treatment of an animal’s claws or hooves; (3) medical treatment of the feet for minor problems such as corns or bunions; or (4) a person who provides medical or cosmetic treatments for feet. It also has a verb sense (= to treat the feet cosmetically or surgically) and may be transitive or intransitive. It has been used since 1896, although it has never been as common as manicure.

Because mani- denotes something related to the hand, and pedi- to the foot, these terms are restricted to those specific body parts. Some writers misunderstand this. Hence:

**Noun:**

**Verb:**
- “Female workers were subject to the sexual and other whims of the owner, who forced them to clip and manicure [read pedicure] his toenails, and watched them shower and lie in their cots.” Malia Zimmerman, “U.S. Probes American Samoan Firm,” Wash. Times, 30 Mar. 2001, at A14.

**Past-participial adjective:**

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曼妮奇谬 for pedestal: Stage 2 manifest, adj. See adjectives (b).

**manifesto.** Pl. manifestos—not *manifestes. See plurals (d).

Current ratio: 3:1

**manifold; manyfold.** Manifold (/mәn-o-f子弟/) means “many and varied” <the reasons are manifold>, or (as a noun) a multichannel air chamber such as the one in an automotive engine <exhaust manifold>. Manyfold (/mәn-ee-f子弟/) applies to something multiplied many times <a manyfold increase>.
Manifold is occasionally misspelled with a -y—e.g.: “Concept cars, or dream cars, as they were once known, are wondrous and magical creations. The reason for their existence is manifold [read manyfold].” Arv Voss, “Chrysler’s Concept Cars Depict Real Intent,” Wash. Times, 19 Feb. 1999, at E4. (Given the automotive context, however, even the correct spelling would look odd there.)

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Manifold misused for manifold: Stage 1

manikin; *mannikin; mannequin. The first and third forms, though etymologically the same, have undergone Differntiation. Manikin = (1) a little man; a dwarf; or (2) a model showing the anatomical parts of the human body, used in medical training, art classes, and the like. (*Mannikin is a variant spelling of the word.) Mannequin = a human-like model for displaying clothes and the like. Although sense 2 of manikin seems close to the sense of mannequin, the manikin is typically more anatomically correct—while mannequins often have exaggerated (or, sometimes, missing) features. Current ratio (manikin vs. *mannikin): 3:1

Mankind. See humankind, womankind & sexism (c).

Manly; manlike; mannish. See male.

Manned flights. See sexism (c).

Mannequin. See manikin.

Manner, in a ——. This phrase typifies a sluggish style. In a professional manner should be professionally; in a rigid manner should be rigidly; in a childish manner should be childishly. Good editors do not leave such phrases untouched.

Still, some phrases cannot be made into -ly adverbs: in a Rambo-like manner; in a determined manner (few editors would choose determinedly—see -edly); in a hit-them-over-the-head manner. In many such cases, though, the word way would be an improvement over manner. See adverbs. Cf. nature.

Manner born, to the. This Shakespearean phrase—meaning “acustomed from birth to a certain habit or custom”—first occurred in Hamlet (1603), when the melancholy protagonist bemoans the king’s drunken revelry: “Though I am a native here / And to the manner born, it is a custom / More honored in the breach than the observance.” 1.4.16–18. The phrase is sometimes misunderstood as *to the manner born. This confused view of the text was persuasively refuted by the Evanses in 1957 (DCAU at 290). But confusion in the popular mind was aggrated by a clever pun in the title of the BBC television series To the Manor Born (1979–1981), which ran frequently on American PBS stations. The actress Penelope Keith played an heiress who, having lived her entire life on an English manor that has been in the family for generations, is forced, through financial straits, to sell the manor to a supermarket magnate. After she moves into a smaller house on the manor, the heiress and the businessman gradually fall in love and eventually marry.

Yet as one linguist has observed in reference to similar phrases, “what one generation says in game the next generation takes in earnest.” John Algeo, “Editor’s Note,” 54 Am. Speech 240 (1979). What begins as a pun can spread into genuine linguistic confusion—e.g.: • “A few players seem to the English manor [read manner] born, and the rest at least have the general idea.” Richard Christiansen, “Wordplay a Little Wobbly in Challenging ‘Superman,’” Chicago Trib., 16 Jan. 2001, at 2.

• “Many of the more than 100 designers who showcased their collections at the Bryant Park tents shared an affinity for military-themed outfits or upper-crust clothes cut to exude the aura of one clearly to the manor [read manner] born.” Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan, “Fashion Week Finishes in Style,” Baltimore Sun, 17 Feb. 2001, at E1.

• “If you were not to the manor [read manner] born, consider staying at a hotel where a guest can feel like a country squire.” Barrett J. Brunsman, “Virginia’s Vintages,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 18 Mar. 2001, at T3.

Sometimes it’s not clear whether the phrase is a pun or simply a blunder—e.g.: “She is landed gentry, so to speak; to the manor born, some would say.” Lynne Duke, “On the Inside Looking Out,” Wash. Post, 23 Apr. 2001, at C1. And sometimes it’s a lame pun at best—e.g.: “As befits a privy to the manor born, Bernard’s stucco outhouse has a louvered cupola and plaster walls.” Marty Crisp, “Privy Preview,” Lancaster New Era, 1 Apr. 2001, at B1. In the last example just quoted, the phrase to the manner born wouldn’t really work, since the reference is obviously to real estate (in fact, a toilet)—not to human behavior or experience.

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*to the manor born for to the manner born: Stage 1

Manner in which is often unnecessarily verbose for how or way—e.g.: “Those larger issues—the foreign money contributions, the conduit money, the virtual merging of Clinton campaign and Democratic Party coffers and the generally reckless manner in which [read way] the Democrats raised funds for the 1996 presidential campaign—continue to demand vigorous investigation and prosecution.” An Independent Counsel?” Wash. Post, 26 Nov. 1997, at A18.

*Mannikin. See manikin.

Manoeuvre. See maneuver.

*Manor born, to the. See manner born.

Manpower. See sexism (c).

Mantle; mantel. Mantle means, among other things, “a loose robe.” It is frequently used in figurative senses <mantle of leadership> <mantle of greatness>. E.g.: “The tributes flowing in suggest a mantle of modern sainthood falling upon her.” Polly Toynbee, “Will Diana’s Ghost Haunt the Monarchy?” San Diego Union-Trib., 7 Sept. 1997, at G6. The word frequently appears in the phrase take on the mantle of or take up...
the mantle of (a predecessor, etc.). You can also just take the mantle, but the phrasal verbs take on and take up appear more frequently.

Mantle is a very different word, meaning "a structure of wood or marble above or around a fireplace; a shelf." E.g.: "Display some of your prized possessions on a shelf or on top of a mantle or windowsill." Chris Casson Madden, "Wake Up a Drowsy Bedroom," San Diego Union-Trib., 7 Sept. 1997, at H19.

Each word is sometimes confused with the other—e.g.:

- "That's where he hopes to get that intercepted pass that will finally go on his mantle [read mantel]." Jonathan Jones, "Undrafted Rookie Dean Marlowe Trying to Latch on with Carolina Panthers," Charlotte Observer (N.C.), 30 Aug. 2015, Sports §.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. mantle misused for mantel: Stage 1
2. mantel misused for mantle: Stage 1

**manuscript.** Although the etymology of this term refers to a handwritten document [L. manus - hand + script "written"], today the term most frequently refers to a word-processed (or typewritten) document. Eric Partridge urged a bright-line distinction between a manuscript and a typescript (U&A at 179), but scholars and antiquarian booksellers are the only people who observe it, and today typescript is probably obsolete.

The abbreviation ms. shouldn't be written Ms.; nor should it be italicized. Pl. mss.

many; much. Many is used with count nouns (i.e., those that denote a number of discrete or separable entities). Much is used with mass nouns (i.e., those that refer to amounts as distinguished from numbers). Hence, many people but much salt. Here much is used incorrectly: "We do not have much [read many] facts here." (Cf. less for fewer, noting that less is the correlative of much, whereas fewer is the correlative of many.) See COUNT NOUNS and MASS NOUNS. See also less (a).

Sometimes the writer must decide whether a word such as data is a count noun (as it traditionally has been) or a mass noun (as it has come to be). E.g.: "But much [read many?] of the data in present personnel files is highly subjective." William O. Douglas, Points of Rebellion 21 (1970). Of course, the choice of the singular verb is shows that Justice Douglas considered data a mass noun—so much was the appropriate word. See data.

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much misused for many: Stage 3

many a. This idiom requires a singular verb <many a new father has fretted about whether he is helping enough in caring for the newborn>. Essentially, because the idiom is distributive rather than aggregate in sense, the verb is singular.

But as H.W. Fowler pointed out in 1926 (FMEU1 at 343), writers sometimes incorrectly make the verb plural when using an inverted construction with there. The trouble is still with us—e.g.:

- "There are [read is] many a person I have met and worked with who simply deride themselves into taking some action." Michael Dirda, "An Unnerving Tale of Spirit Visitations. Uncertainty, Dread and Premonitions of Regret," Wash. Post, 31 Mar. 2002, Book World §, at 15. (A possible revision: Many people I have met and worked with have simply derided themselves into taking some action.)
- "I'm sure there are [read is] many a trader/producer who will feel relieved to see the meat futures close April 12." Sue Martin, "Emotional Week in the Meat Futures Market," Grand Forks Herald, 15 Apr. 2002, at A13.
- "There have [read has] been many a night on the Naples Naval Support Activity base that postal clerk chief John Mowry just can't sleep." Marc J. Spears, "Military Personnel Abroad Try to Keep Score," Denver Post, 21 May 2002, at D1.

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*there are many a person for there is many a person: Stage 1

maraschino is pronounced either /ma-ra-skheh-noh/ or /ma-ra-skheh-noh/. Although the first of those is more technically correct and is preferred by pronunciation authorities, the second predominates in AmE and must be accepted as standard.

mariage de convenance. See marriage of convenience.

marijuana; *marihuana. The former spelling now overwhelmingly predominates and should be preferred. Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell, speaking in 1986 at a luncheon, stated: "The big problem we had in the Court this past Term was how to spell marijuana. We were about equally divided between a 'j' and an 'h' and since I was supposed to be the swing vote on the court, and just to show my impartiality, I added a footnote in a case . . . in which I spelled marihuana with a 'j' once and an 'h' in the same sentence." Quoted in ABA J., 1 Oct. 1986, at 34.

**Current ratio:** 40:1

Current ratio: 40:1

marinade, n. & vb.; marinate, vb. Although marinade has been recorded as a verb as well as a noun, it’s predominantly a noun <he soaked the steak in a pineapple-sauce marinade>. When a verb is needed, marinate is better: it’s older and much more common <he marinaded the steak overnight>.

**marinade** 581

 Current ratio: 40:1

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
marked is pronounced /markt/, as one syllable. The pronunciation /mar-kad/, in two syllables, is a vestige of the correct adverbial pronunciation /mar-kad-lee/.

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marked mispronounced /mar-kad/ instead of /markt/: Stage 2

marriage; wedding. Although dictionaries such as the OED and W2 suggest that one sense of marriage is “entry into wedlock,” in general usage today the word is gradually growing narrower in sense to refer exclusively to the ongoing relationship. The wedding is the ceremony that solemnizes the relationship. Hence using marriage in the older, broader sense can result in confusion. For example, the following sentence suggests that fewer than 300,000 married couples lived in Great Britain in 1993—an unlikely state of affairs for a country with more than 50 million people: “There were less [read fewer] than 300,000 marriages [read weddings] in 1993, the lowest level since the second world war, leaving clerics with little to do on Saturday mornings but twiddle their thumbs.” Nick Gardner, “Secure Your Future by Tying the Knot,” Sunday Times (London), 6 Aug. 1995, § 5, at 5. Although using marriage in this way is defensible, it is ill-advised. See wed.

marriage of convenience; *mariage de convenance. Since the 18th century, the anglicized version has always predominated over the gallicism. But it should be understood rightly: marriage of convenience is not “an ill-considered marriage that happens to be convenient to the parties involved,” but instead “a marriage contracted for social or financial advantages rather than out of mutual love.” Current ratio: 23:1

married spouse. See spouse.

marshal, n. A. And martial, adj. Marshal = (1) a military officer; (2) a person performing duties, as a person in charge of ceremonies or an officer for a court; or (3) a law-enforcement officer. Martial = (1) of, relating to, or involving warfare; or (2) warlike.

These words are often confused in three contexts.

The first is martial arts, which is wrongly written *marshal arts—e.g.:

- “Mestre Cafuringa has been hired to teach children how to express themselves through capoeira, a marshal art [read martial art] from Brazil.” Betty L. Martin, “Kids Learn Life Skills Through Art,” Houston Chron., 20 June 2002, This Week §, at 1.
- “Artist Phyllis Parun will conduct a workshop in Taoist ink painting and poetry from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Sunday at the Shaolin Do marshal arts [read martial-arts] studio.” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 27 Sept. 2002, Lagniappe §, at 20.

The second is court marshal (= a judicial officer) for court-martial (= a military court)—e.g.: “We should be engaged in saving our at-risk young people, not rounding them up for court-marshal [read court-martial].” Arthur A. Jones & Robin Wiseman, “How Does the Chief Really Intend to Fight the Gang War?” Daily News (L.A.), 12 Jan. 2003, at V1. When the subject is a court officer rather than a military court, court marshal (with no hyphen) may be correct—e.g.: “They’re very thin,” she confided to a court marshal as she filed out of the courtroom during the lunch break. “You can see the filling in them.” Kim Martineau, “New Venue for Tombstone Feud,” Hartford Courant, 20 Nov. 2002, at B1. In other words, marshal as a noun is always a person. So in court marshal, marshal is the noun and court is adjectival. In court-martial, court is the noun and martial is a POSTPOSITIVE ADJECTIVE. See court-martial (b).

The third is martial law (= military rule imposed by a country’s government under an asserted claim of necessity), which is incorrectly made *marshal law, especially in loose uses of the term—e.g.: “Fourteen months later, the control board’s imposed system of martial [read martial] law hasn’t made a marked difference.” Adrienne T. Washington, “Finally, a Court Puts Limits on D.C. Board,” Wash. Times, 9 Jan. 1998, at C2. This error was spread when a made-for-TV movie entitled Marshal Law was released in 1996: it was about a marshal who was ruthless with violent criminals. How many viewers caught the pun?

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*marshal law for martial law: Stage 1 Current ratio (martial law vs. *marshal law): 208:1

B. Spelling. Marshal is frequently misspelled *marshall—e.g.: “Spokane Valley firefighters helped save 30 tons of the hay, but the loss still reached about $12,000, said Kevin Miller, deputy fire marshall [read marshal] for Valley Fire.” “Haystack Fire Deemed Suspicious,” Spokesman-Rev. (Spokane), 16 Jan. 2003, at V11. The error is undoubtedly encouraged by the frequency of the proper name Marshall.

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marshal as noun misspelled *marshall: Stage 1 Current ratio (fire marshal vs. *fire marshall): 14:1

marshal, v.t. (= to arrange in order), makes the past-tense and participle forms marshaled and marshalling in AmE, marshalled and marshalling in BrE. (See SPELLING (b).) But misspellings with the doubled -l-frequently occur in AmE—e.g.: “The picture did feature an intelligently marshalled [read marshaled] series of ’50s, ’60s and ’70s decor.” Henry Sheehan, ‘The Other’ Awards,” Orange County Register, 26 Mar. 1995, at F14.

Although the inflected form is marshalled in BrE, the uninflected form is still marshal, as in AmE. But this, too, is subject to error—e.g.: “That means two large and one smaller country combining together can marshall [read marshal] the 23 votes needed to block

Like the noun, the verb *marshal* is often misspelled *marshalling*—e.g.: “Many in the crowds seemed undeterred—even invigorated—by the steady and seemingly inexorable march toward a possible war, perhaps in a few weeks, as the United States and a few allies *marshalled* [read marshalling] troops, naval flotillas and air wings in a rapidly escalating mobilization in the Persian Gulf region,” Lynette Clemetson, “Thousands Converge in Capital to Protest Plans for War,” N.Y. Times, 19 Jan. 2003, § 1, at 12.

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.marshall as verb misspelled *marshalling*: Stage 1

*marshal law.* See marshal, n. (A).

*marshmallow* is so spelled—not *marshmallows* (under the influence of the adjective *mellow*). But the misspelling is fairly common—e.g.: “Everything hinged on the marshmallow-throwing [read marshmallow-throwing] left arm of Brian Anderson, the Diamondbacks starter.” Lisa Olson, “D-Backs’ Shot Rests on Low-Throwing Hinged on the marshmallow-throwing” Daily News (N.Y.), 31 Oct. 2001, at 70.

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.marshmallow misspelled *marshmallows*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 422:1

*marten; martin.* A *marten* is an arboreal weasel-like mammal found in North American and Eurasia; it is hunted for its fur in many northern countries. A *martin* is a songbird of the swallow family, but it has a less strongly forked tail than most swallows.

*martial,* adj. See marshal, n.

*martial law.* See marshal, n. (A).

*marvel,* vb., makes marveled and marveling in AmE, marvelled and marvelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

*marvelous; marvellous.* The first is the AmE spelling (standard since about 1915); the second is BrE (standard since the 17th century).

*masculine.* See male.

**Masculine and Feminine Pronouns.** See sexism (b).

*massacre,* v.t., makes massacring (not *massacring*)—e.g.: “If I were massacring English, he would grimace at my linguistic butchery, wouldn’t he?” “Interview with Czech Defector Ivo Moravec,” Ottawa Citizen, 16 Apr. 1997, at A17.

**Mass Nouns.** See count nouns and mass nouns.

**master.** Traditionally, *master* was used in reference to a boy up to the age of 12—especially in addressing an envelope. Today the practice has largely fallen into disuse, except in formal circumstances. The custom thrives chiefly in the southern United States, as this sampling illustrates:

- “I have loved receiving mail since I was a boy sitting on the front porch waiting for mailman Mike Houser. . . . I wondered why they [my correspondents] addressed me as ‘master’; and it must have been when I was in college that I learned that this is a term used for a boy too young to be called ‘mister.’” Harold Julian, “Hail to the Mail,” Knoxville News-Sentinel, 21 May 2000, at E9.
- “Pages were Master Michael Owen Barry Jr., son of Mr. and Mrs. Barry; and Master John Villars Baus III, son of Mr. and Mrs. Baus Jr. “Proteus Takes Trip to the Bayou to Inventory ‘Flora and Fauna,’” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 12 Feb. 2002, Living §, at 2.

**masterful; masterly.** Traditionally, *masterful* has described a powerful, even bullying, superior; *masterly* has described the skill of a master of a profession or trade. A master craftsman is *masterly;* a boorish tyrant is *masterful.* Which is the correct term in the following sentence? “Though Britain’s Derek Jacob looks about as much like Adolph Hitler as Archie Bunker, he evokes the Fuhrer with masterful verve.” Harry F. Waters, “Hitler, Göring, Speer and Co.,” Newsweek, 10 May 1982, at 65. (The actor is masterly; Hitler was masterful.)

Perhaps one reason the two words are so frequently confused is that when an adverb for *masterly* is needed, *masterfully* seems more natural than *masterly.* (See adverbs (b).) “He writes masterfully” strikes one as much less stilted than “He writes masterly.” This problem with the adverbial form threatens to destroy a useful distinction between the two adjectival forms. So if an adverb is needed, try *in a masterly way.*

Oddly enough, though many today think of *masterly* as an unusual word, it was much more common than *masterful* until the mid-1980s, when it mysteriously fell into disfavor. The slide had begun in the 1970s. Masterly writers continue to like *masterly.*

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.marsteful misused for masterly*: Stage 4

1920 ratio (masterful performance vs. masterly performance): 16:1

Current ratio (masterly performance vs. masterful performance): 1:1.2

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
master's degree

master’s degree. So written.

Matching Parts. See parallelism.

materfamilias (= the mother of a family; a woman who heads a household) is pronounced /maɪ-tər-fə-mil-ee-əs/. Pl. matresfamilias, the form *materfamilias is being virtually unknown. Both forms are rare. See plurals (a), (b).

material, n.; matériel. Material is the general word meaning “constituent substance or element” <raw materials>. Matériel (sometimes written the French way, matériel) means “the equipment and supplies used by an organization, esp. the military”; the term is often distinguished from personnel. Matériel is preferably pronounced /mɔː-tɜːr-ee-əl/.

dmall = (1) to assume a physical form <the ghost suddenly materialized>; (2) to come into existence <a new style of architecture materialized in the 19th century>; or (3) to appear suddenly <the waiter had been mauling the trainer for 15 minutes before anyone noticed>. Mall = (1) the game of pall-mall (pronounced /ˈpɛl-mɛl/), or the mall used in that game; (2) a lane used for playing pall-mall; (3) any shaded walkway or promenade; or (4) a shopping center, usu. enclosed.

Although the first meanings listed for each term are related to each other, the two words have grown in radically different directions. Today the primary confusion—an outright mistake—is to use mall where the verb maul is intended. The error occurs especially in figurative uses—e.g.: “In girls Division 4, Ashley Harrison, Nichelle McRorie and Lacey Erickson scored as the Stingers malled [read mauled] the Tustin Cheetahs, 3–1.” Jason Thornbury, “Hat Trick Not Enough for United Sweetness,” Orange County Register, 19 Sept. 1996, Community §, at 14.

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mall misused for maul: Stage 1

mausoleum (= a building containing a tomb or tombs) predominantly forms the plural mausoleums in all varieties of World English—though the variant *mausolea appears from time to time in BrE.

Current ratio: 4:1

mauve (= a pale bluish purple color) is preferably pronounced /məʊv/—not /mɔːwv/.

maxilla (the jaw or jawbone) predominantly makes the Latinate plural maxillae (/mæk-si-lə/)—not *maxillas.

Current ratio: 27:1

maximum, n. & adj; maximal, adj. More and more frequently, maximum (like minimum) acts as its own adjective. E.g.:


Maximal usually means “the greatest possible” rather than merely “of, relating to, or constituting a maximum.” E.g.:


See minimal.

The plural of the noun maximum is either maxima or maxims, increasingly the former in AmE—e.g.:

- “These optional cash payments range from minimums of $10–$100 to annual maximums of $100,000 or more in many cases.” Charles Carlson, “No-Fuss Investing,” Barron’s, 1 Dec. 1997, at 24.
- “The district has the region’s largest class sizes and is pressing up against state maximums in many grades.” “Many Changes in Store for New School Year,” Wash. Post, 31 Aug. 2015, at B2.

Yet maxima vastly predominates in AmE and BrE alike. See minimal & plurals (b).

Current ratio (maxima vs. maximums in World English): 10:1

may; might. These words occupy different places on a continuum of possibility. May expresses likelihood <we may go to the party>, while might expresses a stronger sense of doubt <we might be able to go if our appointment is canceled> or a contrary-to-fact hypothetical <we might have been able to go if George hadn’t gotten held up>.
Some sentences present close calls—e.g.: “If one of his coaches did something wrong, he says, he may [or might] be able to forgive.” Debra E. Blum, “Coaches as Role Models,” Chron. of Higher Education, 2 June 1995, at A35, A36. If that statement comes on the heels of alleged wrongdoing by a coach, then may is the better word. But if it’s a purely hypothetical question, might is preferable.

Difficulties are especially common in negative forms, in which may not can be misread as meaning “do not have permission” <you may not come with me>. If the writer is using a negative in supposing or hypothesizing or talking about future possibilities, the phrase should probably be might not—e.g.: “This myth assumes that the softness of the breasts in the very early postpartum period will last for three days; it may [read might] not.” Kathleen G. Auerbach, “Myths vs. Reality,” Mothering, 22 Dec. 1997, at 68.

Misusing might for may runs contrary to the tendency to suppress subjunctives in modern English. But it does occur—e.g.: • “An American Eagle flight that crashed Tuesday killing 15 people apparently had an engine ‘flame-out’ and might [read may] have stalled in the minutes before it approached the Raleigh-Durham airport, the National Transportation Safety Board said late Wednesday” Don Phillips, “Plane Might [read May] Have Stalled Before Crashing,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 15 Dec. 1994, at A1. (Might erroneously suggests that the stall didn’t happen; the probability is that it did.)

• “Power surges might [read may] have triggered outages for up to 2 million people.” Richard Cole, “Western Cities in the Dark After 8-State Mystery Blackout,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 15 Dec. 1994, at A6. (Might suggests that the outages didn’t occur; they did.)

For the distinction between may and can, see can (a).

*may can. See double modals.

mayhem. A. Senses. Mayhem = (1) malicious injury to or maiming of a person, orig. so as to impair or destroy the victim’s capacity for self-defense; (2) violent and damaging action, violent destruction; or (3) rowdy confusion, disruption, chaos. Sense 3 is inappropriately attenuated because the word, strictly speaking, should involve some type of serious injury or damage—e.g.: “Dash Rip Rock calls New Orleans home, but band members don’t call their root-rock mayhem [read clamor? rumpus? ruckus? tumult?] anything other than rock ‘n’ roll.” Kenn Rodriguez, “Hard-to-Describe Sound of Country, Punk,” Albuquerque J., 1 Dec. 1995, Venue §, at F22.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX mayhem misused for ruckus: Stage 2

B. And *maim. n. Though etymologically identical, mayhem and maim have undergone differentiation. In the best usage, mayhem refers to the crime (sense 1 above) and maim to the type of injury required for the crime.

C. And *maihem. This spelling amounts to nothing more than a needless variant. It has been so since the 18th century.

mayonnaise (the thick white sauce) is so spelled. See spelling (a). The word is preferably pronounced in three distinct syllables: either /may-a-nayz/ or /mə-ə-nayz/ —not /mə-nayz/ or /man-ayz/.

mayoralty (= a mayor’s office or term of office) is sometimes wrongly made *mayorality—e.g.: “He recalled that early in his mayoralty [read mayorality], he spoke of New York as the financial capital of the world.” Beth Piskora, “Rudy Says, ‘Ask the Pope,’” N.Y. Post, 1 July 2001, at 63.

When pronouncing the word, make it four syllables (not three), with stress on the first: /mə-or-al-tee/. The corresponding adjective is mayoral /mə-or-al/, not /mə-or-al/.

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*mayoralty for mayorality: Stage 1 Current ratio (mayoralty vs. mayorality): 112:1

*may should. See double modals.

*may supposed to. See double modals.

*may used to. See double modals.

*may will. See double modals.

Mcintosh. See mackintosh.

me; I. See first person & pronouns (a), (b).

meager; meagre. The first has been the AmE spelling since about 1915; the second has been standard in BrE since the 17th century. See -er (b).

mealy-mouthed, adj., is so written, with a hyphen. In less than one-third of the instances in modern print sources, the word is written solid: *mealymouthed. This solid spelling has been pretty steadily on the rise since about 1800.

mean, adj., = (1) small; (2) cruel; (3) ignoble; (4) stingy; or (5) average. Readers today often misunderstand sense 1, believing that a mean-spirited person is malevolent, evil, or malicious—e.g.: “His stunts ranged from sophomoric—punching holes in Styrofoam coffee cups—to mean-spirited [read malicious]—calling up the wives of fellow cops and in an uncannily realistic feminine voice pretending to be their husband’s mistress.” Todd Lighty, “Former Cop Crossed Line, Destroyed It,” Chicago Trib., 19 Jan. 2003, News §, at 18. Actually, a mean-spirited person merely has a small spirit, a petty mind—e.g.: “Yet, more and more, voyeuristic, fundamentally mean-spirited shows like..."
meaningful has followed the way of its semantic cousin, significant, and become a vogue word—e.g.:

- “To a significant extent, a meaningful childhood requires meaningful time with parents and other caring adults.”
  “Childhood Cherished,” Christian Science Monitor, 21 Dec. 2000, at 10. (Notice the significant that opens this sentence.)

Because of this indiscriminate overuse, meaningful is fast becoming meaningless.

meantime; meanwhile. People use in the meantime and meanwhile to perform essentially the same adverbial function. *In the meanwhile is unidiomatic. Because meanwhile saves two words, professional editors often prefer it—e.g.:

- “Three other Palestinians were killed as they tried to cross the Gaza border with Israel. Meanwhile, the Israeli army said attacks have declined since Arafat’s cease-fire call two weeks ago.” “What’s News,” Wall Street J., 31 Dec. 2001, at A1.

Both meanwhile and meantime can be used alone, though the former more naturally so. Meanwhile, they saw Jan approaching the 18th green.

Meanwhile, meantime at the head of a sentence is nontraditional and not fully idiomatic—e.g.: “The bonds are no longer traded and the stock is delisted. Meanwhile [read Meanwhile], Ross and Zell learned a tough lesson.” Kerry A. Dolan & Luisa Kroll, “Sweet and Sour,” Forbes, 7 Jan. 2002, at 1.

measles is sometimes misspelled *measels—e.g.: “Proximity to children also exposes teachers to the gamut of childhood illnesses, including chicken pox and measles [read measles]. And then there is head lice.” Gary White, “A Virus for the Teacher,” Ledger (Lakeland, Fla.), 16 Oct. 2002, at D1.

meat out. See mete out.

medal, vb. Although the OED records medal as a verb in a transitive sense—“to decorate or honour with a medal; to confer a medal upon”—the modern trend is to use the word intransitively, as by saying that an athlete medaled in an event. In this sense, it is roughly equivalent to place. A headline: “Golfer Gonzales Medals at Ivy Championships,” Harvard Univ. Gaz., 30 Apr. 1998, at 7.

Medal, vb., makes medaled and medaling in AmE, medalled and medalling in BrE. See SPELLING (b).

media; medium. Strictly speaking, the first is the plural of the second <the media were overreacting>. But media—as a shortened form of communications media—is increasingly used as a mass noun <the media was overreacting>—especially in a collocation such as social media <social media is an especially important aspect of medium marketing>. While that usage still makes some squeamish, it must be accepted as standard. In modern print sources, the phrasing the media is is somewhat more prevalent than the media are. See COUNT NOUNS and MASS NOUNS & SOCIAL MEDIA. Cf. CRITERION & PHENOMENON.

But it’s still possible (and preferable) to draw the line at *medias, a double plural that has recently raised its ugly head—e.g.:
• “He is one of just a few actors to appear in the same role in all three medias [read media]—stage, TV and screen.” Crosby Day, “Stewart Delights in ‘Harvey’,” Orlando Sentinel, 31 Mar. 1996, at 49.

• “LinkedIn is one of the best but least understood social medias in today’s business marketplace.” “Local Business Calendar,” Worcester Telegram & Gaz., 30 Aug. 2015, News §, at 2. (A possible revision: LinkedIn is one of the most useful but least understood social-media platforms in today’s business marketplace.)

Mediums is the correct plural when the sense of medium is “a clairvoyant or spiritualist”—e.g.:

• “Contact is initiated by the deceased, and no psychics, mediums or devices are involved.” Kim Gilmore, “Workshop Discusses Messages from the Dead,” St. Petersburg Times, 14 Oct. 1996, Citrus Times §, at 1.

• “Now, with us as witnesses, Carol was about to perform what is known as ‘channeling’—a technique commonly used by many psychics and mediums.” Chris Morton & Ceri Louise Thomas, “Secret of the Crystal Skulls: Day Two,” Daily Mail, 4 Nov. 1997, at 28.

It is also normal in a collocation such as happy mediums. E.g.: “This no doubt is the case with almost all happy mediums.” Charles Macomb Flandrau, Prejudices 167 (1911).

Otherwise, the form should be avoided in favor of media—e.g.:


• “The message of the Mona Lisa is transmitted through all three mediums [read media].” Sean Hall, This Means This This Means That: A User’s Guide to Semiotics 40 (2d ed. 2012).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. medii as a mass noun: Stage 5
2. *medias as a plural for media: Stage 1
3. mediums in reference to spiritualists: Stage 5
4. mediums misused for media: Stage 3

Median; medium. These words occasionally get confounded in two ways. First, median (= mid-range) sometimes displaces median (= midpoint) in set phrases such as median income—e.g.: “The gap between the medium [read median] incomes of white families versus black families is wide.” Les Payne, “What Would King Say?” Newsday (N.Y.), 19 Jan. 2003, at A28. Second, medium is sometimes substituted for median in its physical manifestation as a roadway divider—e.g.: “Angela carries the greatest guilt, seeing this truck driver’s face as he flew over the highway medium [read median], and the faces of the drivers in the oncoming cars. If he had not swerved to miss her, she would be the one in the obituary.” Adair Lara, “Fellow Drivers Are Not Your Enemies,” S.F. Chron., 19 Mar. 1996, at E8. For more on median, see mean, n.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
medium misused for median: Stage 1
Current ratio (median income vs. *medium income): 21:1

*medias. See media.

Mediation. See arbitration (n).

Medicable (= treatable, curable) is the correct form—not *medicatable. See -able (a) & -atable.

Medical; medicinal. The first applies to all aspects of a physician's practice, the second only to what is associated with medicines.

Medical marijuana; *medicinal marijuana. The former is the more common phrase for the use of the Cannabis sativa plant to ease the symptoms of some medical conditions (such as AIDS) or treatment (such as chemotherapy). It is found more than eight times as often as *medicinal marijuana in World English print sources, and three to four times as often in legal sources. Since medicinal marijuana is the plainer, simpler, and shorter phrase, *medicinal marijuana should be considered a needless variant. See marijuana.

*medicatable. See medicable.

*medicinal marijuana. See medical marijuana.

Medicine; medication; medicament. Medication has traditionally meant “the action of treating medically,” but in the mid-20th century it came to have the sense “a medicinal substance, medicament” (a sense recorded in W2 [1934] but not in the second edition of the OED [1989]). Because medicine and drug are both available, careful writers tend to avoid medication in this sense. But their refined style is lost on the great mass of speakers and writers who refer to new medications and being on medication.

Medicine and medicament are essentially synonymous in the sense today given to medication. Medicament is little used in AmE.

Medieval; *mediaeval. Medieval (= of, relating to, or involving the Middle Ages) has been the predominant spelling in AmE since the 1920s and in BrE since the 1930s. *Mediaeval, the standard until the shift occurred, is now a mere variant. Medieval is preferably pronounced /med-i-ee-val/ (three syllables), /med-i-i-ee-val/, or /med-i-i-ee-val/. The last two (four-syllable) pronunciations are arguably pedantic. Avoid /mid-/ in the first syllable.

Current ratio: 9:1

medium. See media & median.
medley (= a mixture) is sometimes confused with— and, through metathesis, pronounced like—melody (= a tune). The error is especially common with a dish that became popular in the late 20th century: fruit medley. E.g.:

• “The menu includes a Caesar salad, Jamaican jerk chicken, Caribbean pasta with shrimp sauce, tropical fruit medley [read medley], steamed vegetables, island peach crepes, tea and coffee,” Kathryn Strach, “Name Your Vehicle for Texas Victuals,” Dallas Morning News, 8 June 1997, at G7.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*fruit medley for fruit melody: Stage 1

*melt out. See mete out.

meet up with. See phrasal verbs.

*meld together is a fairly common redundancy that originated in the 1950s and has since steadily spread.

mêlée (= [1] group hand-to-hand fighting, or [2] mass confusion and struggle), a gallicism borrowed into English in the 17th century, has lost one diacritical mark but retained another: originally mêlée, it is now usually written mêlée or just mêlée. In BrE it is pronounced /mel-ay/, but in AmE it is usually either /may-lay/ or /may-lay/.

*meliorate. See ameliorate.

melody. See medley.

melt > melted > melted. Molten is now only a past-participial adjective <molten lava>. It shouldn’t be used as a verb, even within jargon-ridden specialties—e.g.: “This segregation behavior and the phase separation seem to imply that the equiaxed zone was molten [read melted] during welding and then resolidified.” Kamal K. Soni et al., “SIMS Imaging of Al-Li Alloy Welds,” Advanced Materials & Processes, 1 Apr. 1996, at 35. See irregular verbs (b).

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molten for past-participial melted: Stage 1

Current ratio (had melted vs. *had molten): 219:1

meme, n. A meme (/meem/) is a type of behavior or an idea that becomes widely mimicked or adopted by others within a culture or subculture; esp., a humorous video, phrase, illustration, or other symbol or depiction that is suddenly and widely spread by and mimicked or parodied on the Internet. The neologism arose in the 1970s, as a shortening of Greek miméme (“same, alike”).

*memento. So spelled—not *momento. The misspelling, which has lurked in the language since the 17th century, was never widely used until the late 20th century. The etymology has to do with the Latin verb meminisse “to remember.” It has nothing to do with moment. Yet in both AmE and BrE, momento outranges *momento by only a 2-to-1 margin. Pl. mementos. See plurals (d). The word is pronounced /ma-men-toh/—not /moh-men-toh/.

memorandums; memoranda. Memorandum is always the singular noun. Either memorandums or memorandum is correct as a plural. Shakespeare used memorandums (Henry IV, Part 1 3.3.158). One nice thing about memorandums is that it will help curb the tendency to misuse memorandum as a singular, as in the erroneous phrasing *This memorandum is late. But the plural memorandum has been far more common than memorandums in print sources since the early 19th century.

Current ratio (memoranda vs. memorandums): 8:1

memoriam, in. See in memoriam.

ménage; manège. Both are French loanwords, hence gallicisms. The first refers to the management of one’s household. The second refers to the care and feeding of one’s horses.

mendacity; mendicity; mendicancy. Mendacity, the most common of these terms, denotes deceptiveness or lying—e.g.: “The word classicism has connotations of formal logic and balance, and to apply it to the dog’s breakfast of impressionist clichés in this concert was an act of intellectual mendacity, a cynical willingness to play on the layman’s uninformed stereotypes.” Kyle Gann, “Gentrification: Uptown Makes a House Call,” Village Voice, 8 Apr. 1997, at 66. The corresponding adjective is mendacious (= lying, untruthful).

Mendicity is beggarliness—e.g.: “For Alexander it was just another day in the 1995 campaign, a marathon of mendicity that will do much to deter it was just another day in the 1995 campaign, a marathon of mendicity that will do much to deter

menstruation (= the monthly discharge of blood from the uterus of a fertile but nonpregnant female primate) is pronounced /men-stroo-ay-shan/—not /men-stray-shan/ (a mispronunciation resulting from syncope) or /men-i-stray-shan/ (a mispronunciation caused by ephenthesis plus syncope).

menstruum (= a solvent, esp. one used for extracting a drug from a plant) forms the plural menstrua—or sometimes menstruums. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (menstrua vs. menstruums): 5:1
mental attitude is a common redundancy that arose in the late 19th century. The phrase might have made good sense when it was common to think of a person's physical attitude (i.e., posture and carriage), but those days are no more. E.g.: "Positive mental attitude [read attitude] will be the topic addressed by former University of Tennessee basketball coach Ray Mears."


mentee (= protégé; a person who has a mentor) arose in the mid-1960s to correspond to mentor (which itself dates from the mid-1700s). The main oddity about the pair is that unlike most pairs ending in -or and -ee, these are not from a verb stem. That is, almost every other pair derives from a verb—grantor–grantee, licensor–licensee, mortgagor–mortgagee, and so on. But there is no verb *to ment, and mentor derives from the eponym Mentor, the name of a guide or adviser in Homer’s Odyssey. Yet the mentor–mentee correlatives have become established as vogue words, especially in education and business—e.g.:

- “One major candidate from a major university had an extremely distinguished sponsor who was apparently intent on emphasizing his special closeness to the mentee.”
- “But Spane has managed to fashion a flip-flop in their mentor–mentee relationship.”
- “Mentors and mentees should talk on the phone at least once a week and get together at least once a month.”

The alternative term, protégé, may sound affected, but mentee is hardly an improvement.

mentor (= an experienced person who tutors and helps a less experienced person) is preferably pronounced /men-tər/, but the overpronounced /men-tor/ is probably dominant today in AmE.

meow; *miaow; *miau; *meau. According to a solid majority of dictionaries, the standard word for a cat’s sound is meow. Some cats, presumably ill trained, use variant pronunciations. See mewl.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 295:33:3:2:1

Mephistophelean; Mephistophelian. The first, which is not quite as common (but nearly!), should be preferred for the same reasons that Shakespearean is preferred. It is pronounced /ma-fis-to-fee-lən/ or /mɛf-ɪz-tə-fee-lən/. See Euclidean & Shakespearean.

Current ratio (Mephistophelian vs. Mephistophelean): 1:2:1

mercantile (= involving trade and commerce) is most traditionally pronounced /mәr-kәn-til/ in BrE and /mәr-kәn-til/ in AmE—but since the early 20th century /mәr-kәn-teəl/ has become the standard AmE pronunciation.

Mercedes-Benz. The plural is Mercedes-Benzes, but some writers wrongly leave off the -es—e.g.: “And last week that élite group of electors arrived at the Hong Kong Convention Center in a procession of Rolls-Royces and Mercedes-Benz [read Mercedes-Benzes] to cast their ballots for a winner anointed long before.”


But what if the name is shortened, as it so frequently is, to Mercedes? The plural is then Mercedeses—e.g.: “He is so wild about his car, Young says, that sometimes when he stops other Mercedeses along the highway, ‘I check the interiors, the dash.’”

Laura Blumenfeld, “Gentlemen, Start Your Imaginations,” Wash. Post, 30 Dec. 1996, at D1. Although it is true that many people say梅cedes as a plural, this usage flouts the age-old rule for pluralizing names. See plurals (f).

merchandise; *merchandize. The first is standard. The second is a misbegotten verb and noun. *Merchandize emerged as a variant of merchandise in both the noun and verb senses during the 17th century and flourished until the mid-19th century. Today, it’s an anomaly as either part of speech—e.g.: “The goal should be to make it harder for criminals to pay or receive money for stolen merchandise [read merchandize],” he said.”


Current ratio: 41:1

mercifully. See sentence adverbs.

mercilessly. See *unmercilessly.

mercy killing. See euthanasia (A).

meretricious (= alluring by false show) has not lost its strong etymological connection with the Latin word for "prostitute" (meretrix). A meretricious marriage is one that involves either unlawful sexual connection or lack of capacity on the part of one party. Outside law, though, the word is typically figurative, meaning "tawdry and showy without substance or merit"—e.g.: “Of course, there’s also another reason to spurn some of these costly new mansions. . . . They look like starter homes on steroids, like Disney cartoons, like health clubs and encyclopedias of kitsch. We’re talking bad taste. Tacky, gross, ostentatious, meretricious, vulgar, fake, phony, dreadful.”


merge together, a redundancy dating from the early 19th century, is a blemish. See together.

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
meridiem; meridian. See a.m.

meringue. So spelled. See spelling (A).

Meritage. “Some people find the word ‘Meritage’ meritorious. Others find it meretricious. But most people have no idea what it means.” John Kessler, “Drinkers Confused over ‘Meritage’ Label,” Denver Post, 8 June 1994, at E1. Dictionaries provide little help: as of late 2015, few major dictionaries had an entry on the term—which has an interesting history.

In 1987, California winemakers sponsored an international contest to create an upscale term for a table wine blended from two or more Bordeaux varietals grown in the United States. A California grocery-store wine buyer won the contest with Meritage, a portmanteau word formed by combining merit with heritage. The word rhymes with heritage; it’s pronounced /mer-ә-ti/. Yet many wine enthusiasts mistakenly give it a Frenchified pronunciation (/mer-i-tahz/), which has become lamentably widespread. The term isn’t a gallicism at all.

The wine producers trademarked the term, which is now available only to members of the Meritage Association. To qualify as a Meritage under current guidelines, a wine must:

• Be a blend of two or more U.S.-grown Bordeaux grape varieties (meaning, for red wines, cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, carmenere, gros verdot, malbec, merlot, petit verdot, and St. Macaire; and for white wines, sauvignon blanc, sauvignon vert, and semillion). No variety can make up more than 90% of the final combination.
• Be bottled and produced by a U.S. winery from grapes that carry a U.S. appellation.
• Be the winery’s best wine of its type.
• Be limited to 25,000 cases per vintage.

What’s the reason for all this? Under U.S. law, a varietal such as cabernet sauvignon must have at least 75% of that one grape. Blended table wines, a fine tradition in Bordeaux, have traditionally been snubbed by American wine-lovers, like mutts at dog shows. Hence the idea to fabricate a fancy new name for good blends. It was a clever stroke to choose a linguistic blend (another term for a portmanteau word). The marketing ploy has worked: since 1988, Meritage wines have grown more and more successful (and more and more expensive). The market—be it for wines or portmanteau words—keeps expanding.

metaphor for mettle (= nature temper; courage) is a blunder—e.g.: “We have yet to test the metal [read mettle] of our response capabilities.” “Coordinators Rank Top Challenging Issues,” Emergency Mgmt. Update (Va. Dep’t of Emergency Servs.), Jan. 1995, at 1.

Metaphors. A Generally. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is called by the name of something else, or is said to be that other thing. Unlike similes, which use like or as, metaphorical comparisons are implicit—not explicit. Skillful use of metaphor is one of the highest attainments of writing; graceless and even aesthetically offensive use of metaphors is one of the commonest scourges of writing.

Although a graphic phrase often lends both force and compactness to writing, it must seem contextually agreeable. That is, speaking technically, the vehicle of the metaphor (i.e., the literal sense of the metaphorical language) must accord with the tenor of the metaphor (i.e., the ultimate, metaphorical sense), which is to say that the means must fit the end. To illustrate the distinction between the vehicle and the tenor of a metaphor, in the statement that essay is a patchwork quilt without discernible design, the makeup of the essay is the tenor, and the quilt is the vehicle. It is the comparison of the tenor with the vehicle that makes or breaks a metaphor.

A writer would be ill-advised, for example, to use rustic metaphors in a discussion of the problems of air pollution, which is essentially a problem of the bigger cities and outlying areas. Doing that mismatches the vehicle with the tenor.

B. Mixed Metaphors. The most embarrassing problem with metaphors occurs when one metaphor crowds another. It can happen with clichés—e.g.:

• “It’s on a day like this that the cream really rises to the crop.” (This mingles the cream rises to the top with the cream of the crop.)
• “He’s really got his hands cut out for him.” (This mingles he’s got his hands full with he’s got his work cut out for him.)
• “This will separate the men from the chaff.” (This mingles separate the men from the boys with separate the wheat from the chaff.)
• “It will take someone willing to pick up the gauntlet and run with it.” (This mingles pick up the gauntlet with pick up the ball and run with it.)
• “From now on, I am watching everything you do with a fine-toothed comb.” (Watching everything you do isn’t something that can occur with a fine-toothed comb.)

The purpose of an image is to fix the idea in the reader’s or hearer’s mind. If jarringly disparate images appear together, the audience is left confused or sometimes laughing, at the writer’s expense.

The following classic example comes from a speech by Boyle Roche in the Irish Parliament, delivered in about 1790: “Mr. Speaker, I smell a rat. I see him floating...
in the air. But mark me, sir, I will nip him in the bud.” Perhaps the supreme example of the comic misuse of metaphor occurred in the speech of a scientist who referred to “a virgin field pregnant with possibilities.”

**C. Dormant Metaphors.** Dormant metaphors sometimes come alive in contexts in which the user had no intention of reviving them. In the following examples, progeny, outpouring, and behind their backs are dormant metaphors that, in most contexts, don’t suggest their literal meanings. But when they’re used with certain concrete terms, the results can be jarring—e.g.:


- “The slayings also have generated an outpouring of hand wringing from Canada’s commentators.” Anne Swardson, “In Canada, It Takes Only Two Deaths,” Wash. Post (Nat’l Weekly ed.), 18–24 Apr. 1994, at 17. (Hand-wringing can’t be poured.)

- “But managers at Hyland Hills have found that, for whatever reasons, more and more young skiers are smoking behind their backs. And they are worried that others are setting a bad example.” Barbara Lloyd, “Ski Area Cracks Down on Smoking,” N.Y. Times, 25 Jan. 1996, at B13. (It’s a fire hazard to smoke behind your back.)

Yet another pitfall for the unwary is the cliché-metaphor that the writer renders incorrectly, as by writing *taxed to the breaking point* instead of *stretched to the breaking point*. See set phrases.

**Metathesis.** This term refers to the transposition of letters or sounds in a word or phrase. Historical examples abound (e.g., the modern words *bird* and *third* from Old English *bridd* and *thridda*). But modern examples—such as *ax* for *ask* (typical of modern dialect, but with historical antecedents), *irrelevant* for *irrelevant*, *prodigy* for *prodigy*, and the like—are to be avoided in Standard English. For entries discussing various modern examples, see *anemone*, *calvary*, *chaise longue*, *diminution*, *irrelevant*, *jodhpur*, *medley*, *nuclear* & *relevant*. See also quick (b).

**meteor.** See meteoroid.

**meteoric rise.** This phrase is another example of how idiom trumps logic. Meteors always fall toward the earth. They never actually rise, and even their apparent path is as likely to be falling toward the horizon as rising away from it. Still, the idiom meteoric rise is about 30 times as common in print as meteoric fall. In fact, it’s so much more common that meteoric standing alone is now understood to signify quick success—e.g.: “The last time the IRL produced a meteoric star of Hornish’s caliber, the driver was Tony Stewart.” Ed Hinton, “Driver Dust-ups Good Box Office,” Chicago Trib., 30 Mar. 2002, Sports §, at 11. A word-frequency graph for the phrase from 1900 to 2000 shows an almost straight-line upward trend—in other words, the very thing commonly denoted by the phrase.

**meteoroid; meteor; meteorite.** The headwords are listed in astronomical order. That is, a meteoroid (a piece of rock or metal traveling through space) becomes a meteor if it enters the earth’s atmosphere and a meteorite when it hits the earth’s surface.

The adjective meteoric means not only “of, relating to, or involving meteors” but also “resembling a meteor in speed or sudden brilliance” <a meteoric rise to stardom>. meteorologist (= a professional student of weather), a nonexist equivalent to the old-fashioned term weatherman, is pronounced /mee-tee-ә-rol-ә-jist/, in six syllables—not /mee-ә-rol-ә-jist/. Meteorologists often mispronounce the word themselves—as daily newscasts throughout the United States will bear out.

**mete out, v.t.** *(mete from an Old English word for “measure”), is the correct phrase, not *meet out or *mete out—e.g.:


- “Given this standard, no international court would mete out [read mete out] justice any Westerner would recognize as such.” Donald Devine, “All for a World Court?” Wash. Times, 7 Dec. 1999, at A16.

- “If indeed it turns out that Enron’s managers were engaged in shabby financial practices then shame on them and let the law mete out [read mete out] its punishments.” Terrence L. Barnich, “Free Markets and the Fall of Enron,” Chicago Trib., 2 Dec. 2001, Commentary §, at 21.

This phrase is also sometimes incorrectly written *meter out—e.g.: “The coach has metered out [read meted out] discipline with all the predictable consistency of spilled mercury, having no hard-and-fast punishment standards.” Nick Horvath Jr., “Don’t Turn That Page,” Patriot-News (Harrisburg), 25 Oct. 2000, at C1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *meet out for mete out: Stage 1
2. *meet out for mete out: Stage 1
3. *meter out for mete out: Stage 1

methinks (= it seems to me) is an ever-popular archaism, thanks to Shakespeare. “The lady doth protest too much, methinks” (Hamlet 3.2.230). Note, however, that Shakespeare put methinks at the end of the line, not at the beginning. The following, then, is something of a misquotation—and there are countless others like it: “Methinks Scott Hicks protests too much about the ‘Shine’ backlash.” Paul Willistein, “Oscars Declare Their ‘Independents,’” Morning Call (Allen-town, Pa.), 23 Mar. 1997, at F1.

**Methinks** also appears frequently without the accompanying “protest too much” language—e.g.:

- “The problem—methinks it obvious—was in Foxborough.”

Michael Madden, “Olson Couldn’t Get Out of Spotlight,
methodology, strictly speaking, means "the science or study of method." But it is now widely used as an equivalent of method or methods—e.g.: "Defenders of scientific methodology [read either scientific methods or the scientific method] were urged to counter-attack against faith healing, astrology, religious fundamentalism and paranormal charlatanism." Malcolm W. Browne, "Scientists Deplore Flight from Reason," N.Y. Times, 6 June 1995, at C1.

"Some Fulton commissioners, guided by the grumbling of employees who did not get raises, complained about the study's methodology [read method or methods] and results." Carlos Campos, "County Medical Examiner Plans to Retire," Atlanta J.-Const., 5 June 1997, at E12.

"This means that if this survey were repeated using the same questions and the same methodology [read methods], 19 times out of 20, the findings would not vary from the percentages shown here by more than plus or minus 4.9 percentage points." Jennifer Jacobs, "Many Endorse Roundup Plan," Des Moines Register, 2 Sept. 2015, at A1.

Prefer method or methods whenever you can.

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metropole(s) /mi-tro-pə-ləz/. Current ratio: 3:1

metrio sexual, n. & adj., is a portmanteau word made by combining metropolitan with heterosexual. The term refers to a probably heterosexual man who takes pains to present an upscale dapper appearance through fastidious clothing selections and impeccable grooming as evidenced, for example, by eyebrow-plucking, waxing of the trunk, and highlighting of the hair. A metrosexual is thought to have many of the habits and sensibilities of a sophisticated urban gay man. Coined in 1991, the term has risen steadily in use in AmE and BrE alike.

mettle. See metal.

mewl; mew; meow. Mewl, a verb only, means "to cry like a baby; whimper." Mew and meow each mean (1) n., "the sound a cat makes," or (2) vb., "to make this sound." But because mew also has other, unrelated meanings—and because meow is more popularly associated with cats—meow might be the better spelling for these senses. (For some variant spellings of meow, see meow.)

Unless you want to emphasize the crying sound in a cat's voice, mewl should yield to meow in feline contexts. In these sentences, however, mewl seems right:


Mexican-American. See Hispanic.

*miaow; *miaou; *miaul. See meow & mewl.

miasma. Pl. miasmata—preferably not *miasmata (the Greek plural that predominated in English-language contexts till about 1900). See plurals (b).

mic. See mike.

type. This jargon refers to the fine print in an advertisement, warranty, or other document, specifically copy that takes away what the big headline promises—e.g.:

- "Fine print cost Jeffrey Vigneault $500. Vigneault . . . shelled out $3,500 in December 2000 for a Power Mac computer, attracted by its prowess for video and promise of a $500 rebate from Apple. He sent in his paperwork three weeks later, and faster than you can say 'Steve Jobs,' it was rejected: He'd missed the deadline, a relative speck at the bottom of the form, buried amid 20 lines of what advertisers, regulators, and consumer advocates call "mice type."" "Buyer Beware," Consumer Reports, Jan. 2002, at 15.
- "Whenever I get these solicitations, I immediately turn to the 'mice type'. That's where you find the 'gotchas,' the information the companies don't want to tell you." Clark Howard, "Zero-Percent Cards Hide the 'Gotchas'," Atlanta J.-Const., 17 June 2006, at E5.

Michigander; Michiganian; *Michiganite. By popular consensus, Michigander is the predominant form, appearing more than three times as often in print as Michiganian (the form once decreed by state statute). *Michiganite is a rare variant used by the U.S. Government Printing Office. See denizens labels.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 20:6:1

microbrewery; craft brewery. Microbrewery is the predominant term for a small, usually local brewer, appearing in print about 60 times as often as the more upscale term craft brewery. Oddly, though, in 2015 the Associated Press preferred craft brewery in its influential Stylebook, explaining that it's more descriptive. Whether this stylistic endorsement will have much impact on actual usage remains to be seen.

mid; midst. See amid.

Middle West; Middle Western. See Midwest.
midnight. See a.m. (c).

Midwest; Midwestern; Middle West; Middle Western. The one-word forms, which have eclipsed the two-word forms in popularity, should now be considered standard. Of course, a difficulty with geographic terms such as these is where to draw their boundaries: in Wichita Falls, Texas, there’s a school called “Midwestern University.” This despite the ordinary understanding that the Midwest’s most southwestern state is Kansas.

midwife, v.t.; *midwive. The first is the standard form for the verb as well as the noun—e.g.:


• “Welles midwived [read midwifed] the notion that you do not have to know much about the film process to make a good, even a great film.” Neil Norma, “What If . . .?” Evening Standard, 14 Apr. 1997, at 23.

**Language-Change Index**

*midwifed for midwived; Stage 1
Current ratio (midwifed vs. *midwived): 5:1

midwifery (= the skill or work of a specially trained nurse who helps in childbirth) is predominantly pronounced /-wif-ә-re/ or /-wif-re/ in BrE, but /-wif-ә-re/ or /-wif-re/ in AmE. Yet as Elster notes, the most traditional 18th- and 19th-century pronunciations had an initial syllable stress: /-wif-re/ or /-wif-ә-re/. BBBM at 314.

mien (= demeanor, appearance, bearing) often carries connotations of formidableness (= his imposing mien). The word is pronounced /meen/.

**might.** See may & subjunctives.

*might can.** See double modals.

*might could.** See double modals.

*might had better.** See double modals.

*might ought.** See double modals.

*might should have.** A dialectal subjunctive, is much less common than the equally poor *might could. But it occasionally appears in print—e.g.: “He might should have [read might have or should have] considered it, given the ‘Tigers’ meek at-bats during the first seven innings, despite finishing with 12 hits.” Kirk Bohls, “Redman Strikes Down Auburn,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 5 June 1994, at E8. See double modals.

**Language-Change Index**

*might should have for might have or should have; Stage 1

*might supposed to.** See double modals.

*might’ve used to.** See double modals.

*might would. See double modals.

mighty. In AmE, this word can function as (1) an attributive noun <the meek and the mighty alike>; (2) an adjective <the mighty river overswelled its banks>; or (3) an adverbial intensifier <she felt mighty proud>. Sense 3 is largely confined to the South and Southwest.

mike; mic. As a shortened form of microphone, both mike and mic are used in AmE and BrE alike—but mike in this sense has traditionally predominated. The standard form in dictionaries such as AHD, W11, and WNWCD is *mike*. But whereas *mike* more immediately suggests the pronunciation, *mic* more immediately suggests the longer form. Still, *mic* looks as if it’s pronounced “mick” and therefore probably leads to misreadings of its own. Newsweek, like many other publications, uses the standard form—e.g.:


• “And he needs to establish some distance between himself and the ever-present *mike*, as well as himself and the ever-present crowd.” Meg Greenfield, “Dole’s Problem,” Newsweek, 3 June 1996, at 82.

The spelling *mic*, endorsed in 2010 by the Associated Press but not yet listed in most dictionaries, is also common—e.g.:

• “The sound of the *mic* [read *mike*] is warm, not the tinny, junky sound you’d expect from an inexpensive *mic* [read *mike*].” "Videotests," Video Mag., Apr. 1994, at 22.

• “He’s hosting the weekly open-mic [read -mike] shows, 8 p.m. Tuesday at the Grey Eagle Tavern and Music Hall.” Tony Kiss, “Entertainment This Week,” Asheville Citizen-Times (N.C.), 1 Jan. 1995, at L1.

• “Every night has a theme, from killer reggae on Sundays to open *mic* [read *mike*] on Thursdays.” Kristine Eco & Melissa Bauer, “Java Talk,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 18 Sept. 1996, at 12.

This spelling (*mic*) seems to be a holdover from port labels on old stereos and tape players. Yet people had long since decided that the pronunciation spelling *mike*, which dates from the 1920s, was more sensible and convenient. After all, the verb uses *miced* and *micking present serious problems; miked and miking have no such problems.

Current ratio (open mike vs. open mic): 1:1

mileage is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike.

*Milage* is a variant.

Current ratio: 237:1

milieu (/mil-yuu/ or /mil-yu/) is sometimes misspelled *mileau*—e.g.: “Morton was a pianist, composer and band leader who emerged from the New Orleans jazz *mileau* [read milieu] to become one of the most famous musicians in America during the 1920s.” Iris Fanger, “Actor’s Right at Home in ‘Jelly”
Role,” Boston Herald, 23 Feb. 1996, at S12. The plural milieus is preferable to milieus. See plurals (b).

**Language-Change Index**

milieu misspelled *milieu*: Stage 1
Current ratio: 1,757:1

**milite**. See mitigate.

*milktoast*. See milquetoast.

**Millenarian** (= someone who believes in a thousand-year age of blessedness beginning with the second coming of Christ) is so spelled despite the nn in millennium. The difference in spelling relates to etymology: like the adjective millenary, the term millenarian derives from the Latin term milleni “a thousand each.” An arcane synonym for millenarian is chiliast (/kɪl-ē-ast/), from the Greek term chiloi “a thousand.” Hence a thousand-year period is known not only as a millennium (fr. L. mille “a thousand”) but also as a chiliad (/kɪl-ē-ad/). These are words for only the heartiest vocabularians.

**Millennium** [L. mille “thousand” + annus “year”] forms two plurals: millennia and millenniums. The predominant plural is millennium in AmE and BrE alike. See plurals (b). Although millenniums was the predominant plural in print sources from about 1850 to 1935, a major reversal of fortune occurred in the 1930s and 1940s: the Latinate plural millennia gained ascendancy in both AmE and BrE. Today it predominates in World English by a 19-to-1 ratio (17-to-1 in AmE).

A few major AmE publications continue to use -iums. E.g.:

• “For decades, La Selva, a lush, dripping jungle filled with towering trees and swaying vines, has served as the quintessential example of the pristine rain forest, untouched and unchanged for millenniums.” Carol K. Yoon, “Rain Forests Seen as Shaped by Human Hand,” N.Y. Times, 27 July 1993, at B5.

• “Abruptly, the two sexes—who had gone for millenniums without exchanging any more than the few grunts required for courtship—were expected to entertain each other with witty repartee over dinner.” Barbara Ehrenreich, “Burt, Loni and Our Way of Life,” Time, 20 Sept. 1993, at 92.

• “I reminded him that for millenniums, Europe has brimmed with white people who have hated and fought each other.” Dawn M. Turner, “White Separatist Echoes of ‘The Timid Soul,’ in which the character is named Caspar Milquetoast, the word has been so fully assimilated that the m- shouldn’t be capitalized. *Milktoast* is a variant spelling, not recommended.

Current ratio: 27:1

**mimic**, v.t., makes mimicked and mimicking. Cf. panic & picnic.

**Mineable** is the standard spelling in AmE, mineable in BrE. See mute e.

Current ratio (mineable vs. mineable in World English): 1:3:1

**Mineralogy** (= the scientific study of minerals) is pronounced /ˈmɪnələ-ɹɛl-ə-jeɪ/—not /ˈmal-ə-jeɪ/. Cf. genealogy.

*Minify*. See minimize (b).

**Minima**. See minimum.

**Minimal; minimum**, adj. Both words are used adjectively. Minimal is always an adjective, and minimum is used as an attributive adjective in phrases such as minimum wage. The words mostly overlap, but in one sense there is a distinction: minimal may or may not be absolute, but minimum always is. Minimum = the least possible, practical, legal, etc. <the minimum age to serve as President is 35>. Minimal = (1) the least; or
(2) few, little <win with minimal effort> <enact over minimal opposition>. Some authorities object to the use of minimal in a nonabsolute sense; presumably if they had their way a minimalist musical composition would consist of one note played one time on one instrument. Cf. maximum.

Language-Change Index
minim[al] in reference to a small amount (e.g., a minimal amount of salt): Stage 5

*minimalize. See minimize (c).

minimize. A. Meanings. In best usage, minimize means "to keep (something) to a minimum"—e.g.: "To minimize its exposure to the failings of any one technology, the agency has long relied on a 'layered' system of diverse detectors, from software for spotting anomalies in shipping manifests to X-ray scanners." David Stipp, "Detecting the Danger Within," Fortune, 17 Feb. 2003, at 104.

But the word is also used to mean "to misrepresent (something) as less significant than it really is; to belittle or degrade"—e.g.: "Mr. Kelly sought to minimize differences between Mr. Roh and the administration on North Korea and other issues, suggesting that those differences might have been unfairly magnified during the heat of the campaign." Howard W. French, "Seoul May Loosen Its Ties to U.S.,” N.Y. Times, 20 Dec. 2002, at A1. Some authorities have criticized use of minimize in the latter sense. Among them is Theodore Bernstein, who was an assistant managing editor of The New York Times. But as this citation from the same newspaper suggests, the new sense is thoroughly ingrained in our usage today. It has become standard.

Language-Change Index
minimize in the sense "to play down" (as in In the news conference, the officials minimized their role in the decision): Stage 5

B. And *minify. Both H.W. Fowler and Eric Partridge considered *minify a needless variant of minimize (FMEU1 at 355–56; U&E-A at 186). But Theodore Bernstein liked the term as an alternative to minimize in the second sense discussed in (A): "The word is not used as much as it should be, but let us not minify it." Bernstein, The Careful Writer 278 (1965). Too late. Current ratio: 1,945:1

C. And *minimalize. *Minimalize is a nonword bearing an extra syllable—e.g.:

- "Paperwork has been minimalized [read minimized]," David Fettig, "Drive to Improve Cash Flow Yields Productivity Gains," Fedgazette, Apr. 1995, at 1.

Language-Change Index
*minimalize for minimize: Stage 1

Current ratio (minimized vs. *minimalized): 302:1

minimum, n. The predominant plural is minima, but few aside from scientists use it—e.g.: "The maxima of one fringe pattern will be superimposed on the minima of the other, and vice versa." Andreas Maurer, "Cardboard Double-Star Interferometer," Sky & Telescope, Mar. 1997, at 91. The form minimums, though not recorded in many dictionaries, has been on the rise since the 1940s and ought to be accepted as standard. It's now fairly common—e.g.: • "New Jersey's requirements were already higher than the new minimums." Karen W. Arenson, "Standard for Equivalency Degree Is Raised," N.Y. Times, 9 Apr. 1997, at B10.
- "Although credit card companies might scream loudest for their money, they can wait—although paying the minimums on the cards is far preferable to not paying at all." Gregory Karp, "How to Survive Job Loss," Chicago Trib., 31 Aug. 2015, Bus. §, at 1.

Cf. maximum. See plurals (b).

Language-Change Index
minimums as a plural: Stage 5

Current ratio (minima vs. minimums): 4:1

miniscule. See minuscule.

minister, vb. See administer.

minor, adj. See adjectives (b).

*minor woman—an odd combination of euphemism, misce[use, and oxy[monor—displaces a more natural wording such as girl, female minor, or, if the sex of the person is obvious, minor. E.g.: "His reference to a 'mature' woman means he does not favor the right of a minor woman [read minor] to choose to have an abortion without parental or judicial consent." Susan Yoachum, "Wilson Campaign Sticks to Familiar Topics," S.F. Chron., 2 Nov. 1990, at A21.

minuscule. So spelled, not *miniscule. The word derives from the word minus; it has nothing to do with the prefix mini-. But the misspelling has spread since about 1950—e.g.:

- "Mouth hanging open, Harry saw that the little square for June thirteenth seemed to have turned into a minuscule television screen." J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets 242 (Am. ed. 1999).
- "Even as some people questioned the practical effect of saving such a minuscule [read minuscule] portion of the
Mirandize, vb. Since the 1970s, Mirandize (= to read an arrestee’s rights under Miranda v. Arizona, 384 U.S. 436 [1966]) has become common as police-officer slang in the United States. It’s therefore becoming common generally—e.g.: “They are read their rights (‘mirandized’) and interrogated.” Robin T. Lakoff, *Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives* 87 (1990). The word has even started taking on extended senses—e.g.: “So since I would be popping antibiotics from hours before the operation until one a week or more after, everyone Mirandized me about the, oh by the way, if you happen to, be sure to, etc.” Samantha Bennett, “Toothless Wisdom,” *Pitt. Post-Gaz.*, 29 July 1997, at C2.

Some believe this neologism to be a blemish in place of another phrasing, such as to read (an arrestee) his Miranda rights. Only 23% of the usage panelists gave its precipitate rise in popularity since about 1985, the word seems destined to lose its objectionableness as long as Miranda remains good law.

**minutia** (= a trivial detail; a trifling matter) is the singular of the plural minutiae. Though much less common than the plural, minutia is hardly unknown. Unfortunately, it is almost always misused for the plural—e.g.: “But his first response when asked about vulnerabilities is I won’t bore you with the minutia (read minutiae) of his days since 1974.” George F. Will, “A Cassandra Candidacy?” *Wash. Post*, 12 Jan. 2003, at B7.

“‘I won’t bore you with the minutia (read minutiae), but I will say that as our ‘to do’ list has grown longer our tempers have grown shorter.” Winda Bennett, “Leap of a Lifetime,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 13 Jan. 2003, at C1.


The phrases should be lost in the minutiae, statistical minutiae, and day-to-day minutiae—never minutia. But occasionally minutia is the right word—e.g.: “With audio commentary by Tsiaras . . . , no minutia is left unexamined (body donor Jernigan is a near perfect specimen, save one missing testicle).” Ty Burr & Kipp Cheng, “The Week,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 21 Mar. 1997, at 78.

The plural is often mispronounced as if it were the singular word (/mi-n[y]oo-see-ә/ or, less good, /mi-n[y]oo-sha/). But the traditional and most proper pronunciation of minutia is /mi-n[y]oo-see-әl/.

**Language-Change Index**

*minutia* mispronounced *minuscule*. Current ratio: 2:1

The counterpart—a rarity—is majuscule. Today that term is used only in printing, to denote a capital letter.

In both AmE and BrE, *minuscule* is now pronounced /mɪnˈsʌkəl/—though before the 1960s the standard pronunciation stressed the second syllable: /mi-nʌsk-yool/. Avoid /mɪn-ya-skoʊl/.

**Language-Change Index**

*minuscule* misspelled *miscellaneus*. Current ratio: 383:1

**miscellaneous** must be followed by a plural count noun; it does not work with an abstract mass noun. Though one might refer to miscellaneous languages (and thereby include Chinese, English, French, Thai, and Vietnamese), it makes no sense to write miscellaneous contract language, as in Mark M. Grossman, *The Question of Arbitrability* 57 (1984) (section title). Exceptions are set phrases such as miscellaneous shower and miscellaneous income.

**mischievous** is an impishly common misspelling and mispronunciation /misˈkɪvɪəs/—e.g.: “I could not imagine them driving, getting mouthy, moody or mischievous [read mischievous], let alone going to drinking parties at the homes of friends whose parents were out of town.” Eleanor Mallet, “The Tranquility of School Age,” *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 25 Feb. 1995, at E1.


See pronunciation (b). Cf. grievous.

**miscellaneous** mispronounced or misspelled /mɪsˈkɪvɪəs/. Current ratio: 383:1

**mischievous** is an impishly common misspelling and mispronunciation /mɪsˈkɪvɪəs/—e.g.: “I could not imagine them driving, getting mouthy, moody or mischievous [read mischievous], let alone going to drinking parties at the homes of friends whose parents were out of town.” Eleanor Mallet, “The Tranquility of School Age,” *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 25 Feb. 1995, at E1.


See pronunciation (b). Cf. grievous.

**Language-Change Index**

*miscellaneous* mispronounced or misspelled *mischievous*. Current ratio: 383:1

**Miscues.** A miscue is an inadvertent misdirection that causes the reader to proceed momentarily with an incorrect assumption about how—in mechanics or in sense—a sentence or passage will end. The misdirection is not serious enough to cause a true ambiguity because, on reflection, the reader can figure out the meaning. Thus:

...
The court decided the question did not need to be addressed.

The mere omission of that after the verb decided induces the reader to believe that the question is the direct object—that is, to believe (if only for an immeasurably short moment) that the court decided the question. In fact, of course, the court decided not to decide the question. See (f).

Misuses are of innumerable varieties; the only consistent cure is for the editor or self-editor to develop a keen empathy for the reader. Part of what the editor or self-editor must do, then, is to approach the text as a stranger might. Further, though, a good edit must involve the kind of skeptical reading in which one imagines how one reader in ten might misread the sentence.

Following are discussions of six of the most common causes of misuses.

A. Unintended Word Association. Sometimes two words in a passage seem to go together—because they frequently do go together—but in the particular instance aren’t intended to. This commonly occurs in two ways.

First, a word appearing late in a passage sometimes seems to echo an earlier word to which it really has no relation. For example, in the final clause of the following passage, barred suggests some relation to disbarred in the opening sentence: “In 1948 he was found guilty of unprofessional conduct and disbarred for three years by a federal judge. The decision was appealed and reversed three years later. In 1958 Fisher, a thin-faced, thinning-haired socialite, was censured by the Illinois Supreme Court for actions against clients—but the Chicago Bar Association had asked that he be barred from practice for five years.” Murray T. Bloom, The Trouble with Lawyers 158 (1970).

Second, readers can be misled into word-swapping. For example, the phrase visual imagery suggests picturesqueness (as opposed to picaresqueness) in the following sentence: “Given the rich visual imagery of Cervantes’s picaresque romance, this is certainly a production that can appeal to both deaf and hearing audiences.” Graham Hassell, “New Tilt at Old Tale with Signs of Enchantment,” Evening Standard, 12 Oct. 1995, at 46. (To eliminate the misuse, replace picaresque with some other word such as comic or panoramic. See picaresque.) Similarly, the phrase army regimen suggests regiment (= a military unit): “She shows Rabin, full of grandfatherly pride at the family’s third generation of warriors for Israel, his prime ministerial curiosity about how the army regimen had changed since his day.” Judith Dunford, “Good-Bye, Grandpa,” Chicago Sun-Times, 5 May 1996, at 14. Cf. calvary.

In the following examples, some interesting things occur on first reading. Clothes are laid down, flattery induces a woman to have sex, fans are kept from going, and somebody engages in murderous attacks:

- “The Tudor justices enforced laws against Roman Catholic recusants, regulations laying down the clothes people might wear and the price they should pay for them.” Alan Harding, A Social History of English Law 72 (1966).
- “Flattery induced a woman to submit to intercourse by pretending to perform a surgical operation. He was convicted of rape.” Glanville Williams, Textbook of Criminal Law 514 (1978). (A man named Flattery committed a crime, but his name suggests the wile he might have used in committing it. The misuse might be removed by referring to Mr. Flattery instead of Flattery.)
- “Flattery induced a woman to have sex, fans are kept from going to Dallas.” Arnold Hamilton, “Moving of Game Is Urged,” Dallas Morning News, 12 Aug. 1993, at A1. (Keep means “retain” in that sentence, but the proximity of from makes it read as if it meant “prevent.”)
- “Small-minded, episodic murder attacks the basis of our taken-for-granted values so fundamentally that it generates anxiety.” David Canter, “Anxious, Appalled . . . but Still Drawn to Horror,” Sunday Times (London), 13 Mar. 1994, at 4–6. (It looks on first reading as if the noun phrase murder attacks is the subject, but murder is the subject and attacks is the verb.)

B. Misplaced Modifiers. When modifying words are separated from the words they modify, readers have a hard time processing the information. Indeed, they are likely to attach the modifying language first to a nearby word or phrase—e.g.:
- “The 39-year-old San Francisco artist has beaten the odds against him by living—no, thriving—with the virus that causes AIDS for 14 years.” Christine Gorman, “Are Some People Immune to AIDS?” Time, 22 Mar. 1993, at 49. (Does the virus cause AIDS for 14 years?)
- “Both died in an apartment Dr. Kevorkian was leasing after inhaling carbon monoxide.” “Kevorkian Victory: 3d Judge Says Suicide Law Is Unconstitutional,” N.Y. Times, 28 Jan. 1994, at A9. (This word order has Dr. Kevorkian inhaling carbon monoxide and then leasing an apartment.)
- “On November 6, 1908, most historians agree that either a company of Bolivian cavalry, or four local police officers from el pueblo de la San Vicente, . . . shot Butch [Cassidy] and the [Sundance] Kid to death when they were discovered to be in possession of a stolen mule.” J. Lee Butts, Texas Bad Girls 112 (2001). (This seems to say that the historians reached an agreement on November 6, 1908, not that they agree about the events of that date. A possible rewrite: Most historians agree that on November 6, 1908 . . . )

C. Clear Referents. When a word such as a pronoun points back to an antecedent or some other referent, the true referent should generally be the closest appropriate word—e.g.:
- “Until recently, the inns showed themselves particularly ill-equipped to handle the overseas students, including many Africans and such future statesmen as Mr. Nehru, who by 1960 made up two thirds of all those called to the
English bar." Alan Harding, *A Social History of English Law* 389 (1966). (This sentence involves a remote relative that makes Mr. Nehru sound like a very big man indeed.)

- “There are various reasons that juries hang, some better than others." Robin T. Lakoff, *Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives* 126 (1990). (The writer means some reasons, not some juries, but some readers will not see this immediately.)

- “They [judicial appointments] are often given to those with political connections, which may handicap women." "A Woman's Place Is in the Law," *Globe & Mail* (Toronto), 24 Aug. 1993, at A14. (Political connections may handicap women? No: The fact that judicial appointments are often given to those with political connections may handicap women. The *which* has a vague referent in the quoted sentence.)

Proximity isn’t the only signal of what referent a word is pointing to, though. Number and gender are often clear signals <my briefcase and my friends were right at the door when I left, but I still forgot to bring it with me>. Case may also matter, but it can’t sort out a hopeless sentence: in "the boys were rude to the girls because they didn’t like them," the fact that boys and *they* are nominative while girls and *them* are objective does not mean the making of the sentence clear. The syntactic strength of the referent also bears on clarity. Subjects and objects of main verbs make the strongest referents, while objects of prepositions, even if closer to the referring word, are usually weaker.

The only way to avoid these ambiguities is to read copy carefully and repeatedly. Reading aloud is also helpful.

D. Failure to Hyphenate Phrasal Adjectives. Forgetting to put hyphens in phrasal adjectives frequently leads to miscues. For example, does the phrase *popular music critic* refer to a critic in popular music or to a sociable music critic? If it’s a critic of popular music, the phrase should be *popular music critic*. See punctuation (i).

E. Misleading Phraseology. *Emigrate from* and *immigrate to* are the idioms, and sometimes the blunder *emigrate into* or *immigrate from* appears. Here, there is no blunder, but the phrase beginning with *emigrate* might at first appear to be one: “International agreements signed by virtually every state have recognized the right to emigrate as a fundamental right on which limitations can be imposed only under exceptional circumstances. These agreements have woven the right to *emigrate into* the fabric of international law.” Jeffrey Barist et al., “Who May Leave: A Review of Soviet Practice,” 15 *Hofstra L. Rev.* 381, 394 (1987). See *immigrate*.

Some writers omit a needed object, leaving readers to deduce an incorrect one. For example, according to the following sentence, with whom did Nicole Simpson talk? “Nicole Simpson talked about her troubles with O.J. only ‘when she was having a really bad day.’” Christine Spolar & Lloyd Grove, “Nicole and O.J.: Scenes from a Volatile Relationship,” *Wash. Post*, 24 June 1994, at A1, A23. The writer means to say, “Nicole Simpson talked to friends about her troubles with O.J.,” but as written the sentence looks as if it might be, “Nicole Simpson talked with O.J. about her troubles.” The original might have been improved merely by inserting *to friends* after *talked*.

Sometimes, as in the following example, the confusing syntax results from a preposition—e.g.:

- “Here there is no problem in using blanks for which of several payment plans the borrower wants to use.” Barbara Child, *Drafting Legal Documents* 138 (2d ed. 1992). (For appears to have a single-word object [*which*], as opposed to a phrasal object [*which of several payment plans*].)

- “An FBI agent, Douglas Deedrick, said hairs resembling Simpson’s were present at the crime scene—on the bloodied shirt of victim Ronald Goldman and on a knit cap found by Goldman’s feet.” Larry Reibstein, “The Simpson Strategy,” *Newsweek*, 10 July 1995, at 47. (The phrase found by suggests we’re about to learn who [Goldman’s feet?] found the knit cap. To prevent the miscue, the writer should have said *near* or *beside* instead of by.)


F. Ill-Advisedly Deleted *that*. The widespread but largely unfounded prejudice against *that* leads many writers to omit it when it is necessary—e.g.:


- “Commissioner Karen Sonleitner pointed out any policy changes approved after Sept. 1 could be subject to the state’s Property Rights Act.” Tara Trower, “Travis Debates Regulations for Flood Plain,” *Austin Am.-Statesman*, 30 July 1997, at B2. (Insert that after pointed out.)


See that (a).

*mis doubt*, vb., is an archaic variant—and now a needless variant—of the verb *doubt*. *Mis doubt* can also mean “to fear, suspect,” but this sense too should be avoided because it can lead to some awkward double negatives—e.g.: “I mis doubt the ladies won’t like it” (SOED). See negatives (a). The word has steadily waned since 1900.

misfeasance. See malfeasance.

mishap should refer to a minor accident, not one in which people are killed. Yet this error is common—e.g.:


- “On a single Sunday afternoon last August, three people died as a result of Jet Ski mishaps [read accidents] in
misinformation. See disinformation.

mislead > misled > misled. As with the verb lead, the past forms of mislead are sometimes mistakenly rendered—e.g.:


• “Hay said many small business customers have complained that they were mislead [read mislead] by telemarketers for NOS,” “Hay Plans to Contest Company’s Actions,” Las Vegas Rev.-J., 11 July 2002, at D2.

Cf. lead.

misnomer. Speakers and writers frequently misuse this word, meaning “an inappropriate name,” to mean “a popular misconception”—e.g. “The last I remember, only 7 percent of Division I programs operate in the black. The common misnomer [read misunderstanding] is that people see this as a multi-million-dollar business.” “College Arena a Marketplace,” Times Union (Albany), 24 Dec. 2000, at C1 (quoting Syracuse assistant athletic director Michael Veley). Oddly enough, this mistake is itself a kind of misnomer based on a misconception.

Although the error is less common in edited text, it does surface—e.g.:


• “The old theory that was heard at UW for years is that the school needs a big-name coach. That’s really a misnomer [read misconception] because UW usually has succeeded in developing its own big-name coach,” Larry Birleffi, “Choosing Coach Requires Work,” Wyo. Trib.-Eagle (Cheyenne), 21 Nov. 2002, at B2.

Typically, when the term is used correctly it will accompany a misleading word or title, often in quotation marks—e.g.: “Old countries are sometimes world-weary and cynical, urging a ‘realism’ that is sometimes a misnomer for the moral corruption they know so very well.” Richard Cohen, “Nobel Winners and Losers,” Wash. Post, 15 Oct. 2002, at A19.

.language-change-index misnomer misused for misconception or misunderstanding: Stage 1

Misplaced Modifiers. See danglers, illogic (c) & miscues (b).

misquote. See quote.

misremember means “to remember incorrectly,” not “to forget.” E.g.: “In the first group, children affirmed about 15 percent of the false allegations of wrongdoing—bad enough for those who think that children never lie, misremember or make things up.” Carol Tavris, “Day-Care Witch Hunt Tests Massachusetts Justice,” Tulsa Trib. & Tulsa World, 24 Apr. 1997, at A15. As the following quotation suggests, misremember is often a euphemism for lie—e.g.: “Despite the fact many of our respondents had a tendency to, let us say, misremember, other poll questions suggest some are more likely to have voted than others.” John Ibbotson, “Election Polls Bring Out the ‘Best’ in Some People,” Ottawa Citizen, 1 Oct. 1994, at B2.

missing, to go. See go missing.

*missis. See missus.

*Missouran. See Missourian.

Missouri. The pronunciation of this state name has provoked much strife. Although most Americans say /mi-zuur-eel/, many Missourians say /mi-zuur-a/. In and around St. Louis, many say /eeel/, but /a/ has traditionally predominated in other parts of the state. Both pronunciations are standard. Yet it is a telling point that politicians running for statewide office are careful to say /a/—to seem folksy and avoid sounding like an auslander. (Cf. Nevada.) But interestingly, the final-syllable /a/ pronunciation seems to be for
insiders only—all non-Missourians being expected to say /ee/.

The information in the preceding paragraph is the result of my frequent travel during two decades through different parts of the state, in the course of which I have routinely quizzed locals and polled lawyer-audiences in seminars that I have taught—including all 180+ lawyers in the state attorney generals office and all the state appellate judges. The results, strongly favoring /mi-zuur-/ for native Missourians outside St. Louis, are essentially the same as those in Allen Walker Read’s study, “The Pronunciation of the Word ‘Missouri,’” 8 Am. Speech 22–36 (Winter 1933). For a very different view, insisting that /mi- zuur-ee-ee/ is preferred throughout the state, see Charles Harrington Elster, BBBM at 319–22.

An early commentator, the noted linguist E.H. Sturtevant, attributed the final-syllable /-a/ to hyper-correction. It’s a surprising but quite plausible argument: “In the dialect of Missouri and the neighboring states, final a in such words as ‘America,’ ‘Arizona,’ ‘Nevada,’ becomes y—‘Americy,’ ‘Arizony,’ ‘Nevady.’ All educated people in that region correctly correct this vulgarism out of their speech; and many of them carry the correction too far and say ‘Missouara,’ ‘praiera,’ etc.” E.H. Sturtevant, Linguistic Change 79 (1917).

Missourian; *Missouran. The newspaper in Columbia, Missouri, is called The Missourian. And interestingly, even though most people in Columbia pronounce the name of their state /mi- zuur-/, they pronounce the name of their newspaper /mi-zuur-ee-/. In fact, Missourian informants say that the four-syllable pronunciation is universal within the state. See denizen labels.

Current ratio: 3,062:1

missselling, believe it or not, is often misspelled
*missselling. See spelling (A).

Current ratio: 159:1

missus (from Mrs.) has been the standard spelling since the 17th century. *Missis is a variant.

Current ratio: 4:1

mistake > mistook > mistaken. Mercifully, the correct forms are seldom mistaken, though indeed they sometimes are—e.g.: "Finally, Fly almost mistaked [read mistook] El Sid Fernandez for a bat when he showed up in Sarasota at 225, down 40 from fightin' weight. "Caught on the Fly," Phoenix Gaz., 15 Apr. 1995, at D2. See irregular verbs.

Language-Change Index
*mistaked for mistook: Stage 1
Current ratio (mistook vs. *mistaked): 3,496:1

mistreat; maltreat. Most usage critics have differentiated between these terms. "To mistreat," say the Evanses, "is to treat badly or wrongly. The word suggests a deviation from some accepted norm of treatment and a deviation always towards the bad. To maltreat, to abuse, to handle roughly or cruelly, is to mistreat in a special way. The words are often used interchangeably (Horwill believes that Americans prefer mistreat and English maltreat, but maltreat is usually restricted to the rougher forms of mistreating" (DCAU at 302). From 1700 to about 1960, maltreat was the more common term in all varieties of English. But mistreat overtook it in frequency about 1960.

mistrustful. See distrustful.


Language-Change Index
misusage misused for misuse: Stage 2

miter; mitre. The first is the AmE spelling; the second is BrE. See -er (b).

mitigate. So formed—not *mitigatable. See -atable. Current ratio: 14:1

mitigate; militate. Mitigate = to make less severe or intense <the new drug mitigates the patient’s discomfort. Militate = to exert a strong influence <Harry’s conflicting schedule militates against an October 17 meeting>.

*Mitigate against for militate against is an error that emerged about 1900 and spread precipitately from 1950. Edmund Wilson called it “William Faulkner’s favorite error.” The Bit Between My Teeth 570 (1965). Faulkner’s failings aside, the error is surprisingly common—e.g.:

- “Together we will surely arrive at the means to end the many obstacles that appear to mitigate [read militate] against our success.” Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Darker Jewels 295 (1993).

Today, mitigate is almost invariably transitive, a synonym of alleviate. (The OED recognizes an intransitive sense, meaning “to grow milder or less severe,” but labels it rare. Even that label is generous.) Using it with against is nonstandard—e.g.: “The show’s excellent 57-page guide mitigates against [read mitigates] its density, as does the curators’ healthy respect for the impact of real things.” Roberta Smith, “Icy Genius with a Taste for Order,” N.Y. Times, 29 Nov. 2002, at E37.

Militate against—as well as its antonym militate in favor of or militate for—is perfectly acceptable. E.g.
But *militate toward is unidiomatic.

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*militate against for militate against: Stage 3
Current ratio (militate against vs. *militate against): 3:1

mitre. See miter.

mnemonic; pneumatic. Mnemonic (= [1] of, relating to, or involving memory; or [2] esp., designed to assist memorization) is the more common word, often in the phrase mnemonic device or an equivalent—e.g.:

"Heck, use the book to create a lesson and ask kids to come up with rhymes or alliterative phrases for all their vocabulary words. Poetry and song are the best mnemonic tools." David Ross, "Some Odds and Ends, Mostly Ends," Press-Telegram (Long Beach), 25 Nov. 2000, Lifestyle §, at 4. The word derives from the Greek term mnemon (= memory). As more than one wit has pointed out, the word’s spelling should be easier to memorize.

Pneumatic (= [1] of, relating to, or involving pneumonia; or [2] of, relating to, or involving the lungs)—e.g.: 


The word derives from the Greek term pneumon (= lung).

The two words are similarly pronounced, with only the vowel sound in the first syllable differing. Mnemonic is pronounced /ni-mahn-ik/ (not /mi-nahn-ik/); pneumatic is pronounced /noo-mahn-ik/.

Perhaps because the pronunciations are so close, pneumatic occasionally displaces mnemonic—e.g.:

- "When I grew up in Minneapolis, the weather ball was quite a deal, [Ethan P.] Seltzer says. There was this little jingle that went with it and that you could use like a pneumatic [read mnemonic] device to figure out what the weather ball was telling you." Spencer Heinz, "‘When I grew up in Minneapolis, the weather ball was telling you. ’" Planet Portland: A Simple Pleasure Blinks On in Tricolor," Oregonian (Portland), 14 Dec. 2006, Metro §, at 7.
- "Eric Jensen, a San Diego-based advocate whose work has been adopted across the country, thinks of it as ‘ESP’—pneumatic [read mnemonic] devices are key in brain-based teaching—or ‘engagement of strategies that are based on principles of brain research.’ " Erika Hobbs, "How Was School Engaging?" Orlando Sentinel, 7 Jan. 2007, at B1.
- "Use pneumonic [read mnemonics]: Tuesday is trash day; Wednesday is watering day." Amanda Willey, "Fresh Start," Courier News (Bridgewater, N.J.), 1 Apr. 2007, Features §, at 2.

An even stranger error is confusing pneumonic and pneumatic (= of, relating to, or involving gas, esp. air pressure)—e.g.: "They purchased casters with eight large pneumatic [read pneumatic] tires. Meyer said the air-filled tires did the trick and made Santa’s ride better." Karla Breister, "Club Lends Santa a Hand," Reporter (Fond du Lac, Wis.), 31 Dec. 2006, at C3.

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1. pneumatic misused for mnemonic: Stage 1
Current ratio (mnemonic device vs. *pneumatic device): 125:1

2. pneumatic misused for mnemonic: Stage 1

M.O. See modus operandi.

mobile, adj. & n.; Mobile. As an adjective, mobile means “movable” and is pronounced /moh-bal/ in AmE—BrE and Canadian speakers preferring /moh-bil/. As a noun referring to a sculpture or decoration consisting of small objects tied to wires or strings and hung up so that the objects can be set into motion by air currents, mobile is pronounced /moh-beel/ in AmE but /moh-bil/ in BrE (as with the adjective). The proper noun denoting the city in Alabama (Mobile) is pronounced /moh-beel/ (as locals say it)—not /moh-beel/.

moccasin. So spelled. See spelling (A).

mode; module. There must be something in the root: these words, like modality, are inflated VOGUE words.


President Bush says he is about to enter “campaign mode.” Does this mean America will then have president à la mode? Absolutely not. Do you think the President is a slice of pie?

This is the same answer I had from Mr. Bush’s mode handler . . . The mode Mr. Bush will enter is not a dessert, but a new technological product of the space program. Space-news fans will have noticed that multitudes of modes pour out of NASA press releases.

There is launch mode, re-entry mode, recap-ture-the-lost-satellite mode, two-hour-snooze mode, expense-account-dinner mode and dozens more, including
The phrase is sometimes misrendered \textit{modi operandi} (method.

\textbf{Joanne Anderson, “Jonesborough, Tenn., Is the Town, “}
\textit{Idaho Statesman, 19 Apr. 1995, at A9.}

\textbf{Russell Baker, “In the Mode Mood,” \textit{N.Y. Times,}
15 Aug. 1992, at 15.}

\textbf{model, vb., makes \textit{modeled} and \textit{modeling} in AmE, \textit{modelled} and \textit{modelling} in BrE. See SPELLING (b).}

\textbf{*mode of operandi. See \textit{modus operandi}.}

\textbf{modern-day, a phrase that spread dramatically after 1950, is invariably inferior to \textit{modern}—e.g.:}
\begin{itemize}
\item “[\textit{In}] Walt Disney’s syndicated kid show ‘Gargoyles,’ \ldots animated 1,000-year-old stone creatures are transplanted to \textit{modern-day} [read \textit{modern}] Manhattan to ward off evildoers.” Cathy Hainer, \textit{“Good-Guy Gargoyles Ringing Up Big Sales,” \textit{USA Today}, 17 Mar. 1995, at D1.}
\item “These \textit{modern-day} [read \textit{modern}] pioneers are the home-school parents.” Joe Rohner, \textit{“Free-Market Principles Should Apply to Education as Well,” \textit{Idaho Statesman}, 19 Apr. 1995, at A9.}
\end{itemize}

\textbf{modernity (= the quality of being modern) is preferably pronounced /\textit{ma-dar}-ni-tee/ or /\textit{mah-dar}-ni-tee/*—but not /dair/ in the second syllable.}

\textbf{modernity (= in modern times), formerly common as a sentence adverb, is accurately described by the \textit{OED} as being “now rare.” \textit{Today} (not to say \textit{modernly}, it can usually be replaced by \textit{today or now}—e.g.: “Brick sidewalks line the legendary Great Stage Road, \textit{modernity} [read \textit{now}] known as Main Street.” Joanne Anderson, \textit{“Jonesborough, Tenn., Is the Town,” \textit{Roanoke Times}, 25 Sept. 1994, at F8.}

\textbf{moderately. Strictly speaking, this word means “for a moment,” not “in a moment.” But the latter sense is now widespread, and the word has therefore become occasionally ambiguous—e.g.: “I’ll be able to talk with you \textit{momentarily}.” When the latter sense is meant, it is much clearer to say, “I’ll be able to talk with you in a moment.” \textit{ Cf. presently.}

\textbf{momentarily. See \textit{momentum}.}

\textbf{molecule. See \textit{mole}.}

\textbf{momenta. See \textit{momentum}.}

\textbf{momentarily. See \textit{momentum}.}

\textbf{momentarily. See \textit{momentum}.}

\textbf{monarchical; *monarchic; *monarchical; \textit{monarchical}. \textit{Monarchical} (= of, relating to, or characteristic of a monarchy) is the standard form. It predominates
in modern usage by a 6-to-1 ratio over *monarchic,
and by a 17-to-1 ratio over *monarchial. Both of those
terms are needless variants. But *monarchial (= of,
relating to, or characteristic of a monarch), the least
frequent of these words, is different because it relates
to the person and not to the institution.

**Mondegreens.** A mondegreen is a misheard lyric,
saying, catchphrase, or slogan. The word was coined
by the Scottish writer Sylvia Wright in a 1954 article in
*Harper's Magazine.* There she wrote that, as a child,
she had misinterpreted the lyrics of a Scottish ballad
called "The Bonny Earl of Moray." One of the lines in
the song is this: "They hae slain the Earl o' Moray
and laid him on the green." She had thought it went, "They
hae slain the Earl o' Moray and Lady Mondegreen."

Indeed, many mondegreens are essentially chil-
dren's misinterpretations. Consider the examples
just from the Christmas season. A child sings "Silent
Night" in this way: "Holy imbecile, tender and mild." Of
course, the actual words are "Holy infant, so tender
and mild." In the same song, "Christ the sailor is born"
is a mangled version of "Christ, the Savior, is born." And
"round yon Virgin" can mistakenly become "round John Virgin." In "The Twelve Days of Christ-
mas," some have interpreted the true love's gift of the
first day as being "a part-red gingerbread tree" instead
of "a partridge in a pear tree." In "Jingle Bells": "Bells
on cocktails ring, making spareribs bright"—a meta-
morphosis of "Bells on bobtail ring, making spirits
bright." And in "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer,"
some have thought that there's a tenth reindeer: "Olive,
the other reindeer" (for "All of the other reindeer").

Many mondegreens occur in transcribed speech.
A secretary or court reporter doesn't quite hear the
words and comes up with a plausible guess. "Attorn-
ey and notary public" becomes "attorney and not a
republic." "County surveyor" becomes "Countess of
Ayr." "Juxtaposition" becomes "jock strap position."

Perhaps the most interesting of all, though, are those
that result from listening to songs. Often the lyr-
ics aren't readily available to listeners, and often the
lyrics are sung a little indistinctly. So listeners create
their own plausible versions, some of which in sheer
creativity rival the originals—e.g.:

- "A girl with kaleidoscope eyes." (Beatles)
  "A girl with colitis goes by."
- "A Merry Conceit." (Folk tune)
  "American Seat."
- "Don't it make my brown eyes blue." (Crystal Gayle)
  "Donuts make my brown eyes blue."
- "Gladly, the Cross I'd Bear." (Name of hymn)
  "Gladly, the Cross-Eyed Bear."
- "Lead On, O King Eternal." (Hymn title)
  "Lead On, O Kinky Turtle."
- "Livin' is easy with eyes closed." (Beatles)
  "Livin' is easy with nice clothes."
- "Revved up like a deuce, another runner in the night."
  (Manfred Mann adapting Bruce Springsteen)
- "Wrapped up like a douche in the middle of the night."
- "'Scuse me while I kiss the sky." (Jimi Hendrix)
- "'Scuse me while I kiss this guy."
- "Secret Agent Man." (Johnny Rivers)
  "Secret Asian Man."
- "She's got a ticket to ride." (Beatles)
  "She's got a tick in her eye."
- "Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high."
  ("Somewhere Over the Rainbow")
- "Somewhere over the rainbow, weigh a pie."
- "The answer, my friends, is blowin' in the wind." (Bob
  Dylan)
- "The ants are my friends, it's blowin' in the wind."
- "There's a bad moon on the rise." (Creedence Clearwater
  Revival)
- "There's a bathroom on the right."

Sometimes a misheard phrase does more than just
confuse the listening public. In 1979, Bonnie Raitt
recorded Jackson Browne's lovelorn song "Sleep's Dark
and Silent Gate." As Browne composed the song, one
line goes: "I found my love too late." But Raitt sang
this line differently: "I found my love today." So Raitt's
version is (unwittingly?) less forlorn than Browne's.

There are websites and books devoted to collect-
ing interesting and humorous mondegreens (many
of which, unfortunately, are implausible attempts at
humor rather than actual misunderstandings). The
leading books on the subject are by Gavin Edwards
(including 'Scuse Me While I Kiss This Guy [1995],
He's Got the Whole World in His Pants [1996], When
A Man Loves a Walnut [1997], and Deck the Halls with
Buddy Holly [1998]), Martin Toseland (The Ants Are
My Friends: Misheard Lyrics, Malapropisms, Eggcorns,
and Other Linguistic Gaffes [2007]), and J. A. Wines
(Mondegreens: A Book of Mishearings [2007]). There
are also websites that list mondegreens and make
musical lyrics widely available. It is easier than ever
to verify a lyric that one might be unsure of.

Although mondegreens were much written about
in the late 20th century, only two major dictionaries
as of 2015 had recorded the word mondegreen. This
is an indication not of the word's feebleness, but of lexi-
cographic oversight. Many journalists had discussed
mondegreens at length, often season after season: for
example, Margie Boulé in the *Oregonian* (Portland);
Jon Carroll in the *San Francisco Chronicle*; Philip
Howard in *The Times* (London); Richard Lederer in the
*Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, Mass.); William Safire
and Jack Rosenthal in *The New York Times*; Elizabeth
Weise in *USA Today*. By the turn of the 21st century,
there were hundreds of published references to mon-
degreens. There's no doubting the utility and wide-
spread currency of the word—or its legitimacy.

Some of the bungles collected in this book are essen-
tially mondegreens: *beckon call for beck and

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
call; *for all intensive purposes for for all intents and purposes; *home in for home in; and *to the manner born for to the manner born.

**Monegasque.** See Monocan.

*monetize; *monetarize. *Monetize = (1) to put (coins or currency) into circulation as money; (2) to give fixed value as currency; or (3) to purchase (debt), thereby freeing up moneys that would otherwise be used to service the debt. *Monetarize is a needless variant that occurs most commonly in senses 2 and 3—e.g.:  
  
- Sense 2: "A new approach will enable us to take into account social values without forcing ourselves to monetarize [read monetize] values [that] intrinsically cannot be evaluated in dollar or peso terms." Larry R. Kohler, "Introduction to the Issues," *Ecumencial Rev.*, 1 July 1996, at 279.  

**Language-Change Index**  
*monetarize for moneys: Stage 1  
Current ratio (moneys vs. *monetarize): 26:1

*monied. See *moneys.

*monies. See *moneys.

*moniker; *monicker. Moniker outnumbers the variant *monicker by a huge margin. If either form can be called etymologically superior, it's *moniker, since the word seems to derive from the Irish term *munnik.

**Language-Change Index**  
*monicker for monies: Stage 1  
Current ratio (moneys vs. *monicker): 56:1

**monition.** See admonition (A).

**monitory; monatorial.** See *adyminitory.

**monologue (= a speech or skit delivered by a single performer) is a variant spelling. **Monolog is a variant. The agent noun is monologist /mә-nә-lә-gist/; preferably not *monologist /mә-nә-lә-jist/, the former being slightly more common—e.g.: "Then in 1986, a friend took him to see a performance by monologist Spalding Gray, and it turned out to be a revelation." Jan Breslauer, "It All Adds Up Now," *L.A. Times*, 17 Aug. 1997, at 49.

**monotonous; monotonic.** Although these terms have an overlapping sense—"having little or no variation in tone"—they have undergone substantial differentiation. *Monotonous* is now predominantly figurative, meaning "tediously lacking in variety; uninteresting because unvarying." *Monotonic* should be reserved for the literal sense "of, relating to, or consisting of a single tone."

**Monseigneur (= a French title given to someone of high birth or rank, or an important church office-holder) forms the plural *Messeigneurs—preferably not *Monseigneurs. The term is used before a title of office or rank "Monseigneur the Prince," never before a personal name. It is pronounced /mahn-sen-yuur/.

**Language-Change Index**  
*Monseigneurs vs. Messeigneurs: Stage 1  
Current ratio: 13:1

**monsieur /ma-syuu/ (the French equivalent of Mr. or Sir) forms the plural messieurs (/mes- [y]arz or may-syuu/). The term is abbreviated M. (singular) or MM. (plural).

**Monsigner /mon-seen-yәrz (= a title given to certain dignitaries within the Roman Catholic Church) forms the plural Monsignori or (less frequently) Monsignors.

**Language-Change Index**  
*Monsignori vs. Monsignors: Stage 1  
Current ratio: 2:1

**mooch (= [1] to beg, cadge; or [2] to steal, filch) is the standard spelling <he mooched off me for two years!>. *Mouch is a variant form prone to miscues.

**Language-Change Index**  
*Mouch vs. mooch: Stage 1  
Current ratio: 25:1
moot. A. As an Adjective. The OED lists only the sense “that can be argued; debatable; not decided, doubtful.” Hence a moot point was classically seen as one that is arguable. A moot case was a hypothetical case proposed for discussion in a “moot” of law students (i.e., the word was once a noun). In U.S. law schools, students practice arguing hypothetical cases before appellate courts in moot court.

From that sense of moot derived the extended sense “of no practical importance; hypothetical; academic.” This shift in meaning occurred about 1900 because the question has already become moot, we need not decide it. Today, in AmE, that is the predominant sense of moot. Theodore M. Bernstein and other writers have called this sense of the word incorrect, but it is now a fait accompli, especially in the set phrase moot point. To use moot in the sense “open to argument” in modern AmE is to create an ambiguity and to confuse readers. In BrE, the transformation in sense has been slower, and moot in its older sense retains vitality.

Language-Change Index
moot in the sense “of no significance”: Stage 5
B. As a Verb. Historically, the verb moot meant “to raise or bring forward (a point, question, candidate, etc.) for discussion.” That sense was formerly common in AmE but today is current mostly in BrE—e.g.: • “Air New Zealand and Brierley Investments, a significant shareholder in Air NZ, have been mooted as potential buyers.” Nikki Tait, “News Chief Plans Talks on Future of Ansett,” Fin. Times, 5 Apr. 1995, at 33.

• “Swansong was created by Rambert’s current artistic director Christopher Bruce back in the 1980s, long before he was mooted as saviour of the ailing company.” Jenny Gilbert, “Russell and Guillam Slug It Out,” Independent, 30 Mar. 1997, at 13.


C. Confused with mute. Sometimes the phrase *moot point is used as a not-so-clever pun—e.g.: • “If money talks, then gender equity is becoming a moot point among Idaho high school basketball coaches.” Stephen Dodge, “Boys, Girls Coaches Receive Equal Pay,” Idaho Statesman, 9 Jan. 1995, at C2.

• “A moot point: Big question at practice Monday was whether Michael Jordan is happy. It’s not known because he’s still not talking.” Sam Smith, “Ankle Better, Longley Hopes to Play in Game 5,” Chicago Trib., 16 May 1995, at N10.

• “Whether he was going to talk to the media has turned from a moot point to a moot one, at least in Vancouver.” Gary Kingston, “No National Debt Owed by Caps,” Vancouver Sun, 25 Aug. 2015, at F1.

But in many other instances, no pun is in sight. It’s simply a malapropism that spread in the late 20th century—e.g.: • “In a separate development that could make the dispute a mute [read moot] point, the Canon building and nearby properties have been sold to Federated Department Stores, which plans to erect Bloomingdale’s West Coast flagship store on the Canon block.” Don Shirley, “Shakespeare’s Vows to Remain at Canon,” L.A. Times, 18 Feb. 1995, at F16.

• “Authority members agreed that the penalty for a corporation that purchases open market securities after entering into a Slugs subscription—a sixth-month ban on purchasing Slugs—is a mute [read moot] point since the corporation that issued the bonds is defunct as well.” Angela Shah, “Texas Public Finance Agency Close to Defeasing Super Collider Debt,” Bond Buyer, 18 May 1995, at 24.


Even the verb moot is susceptible to this confusion—e.g.: “But Gramley believes such a range would mute [read moot] the point of having a numerical target.” “Congress May Redefine Fed’s Job to New Focus on ‘Price Stability,’” Investor’s Bus. Daily, 22 Sept. 1995, at B1.

Language-Change Index
*moot point for moot point: Stage 1
more; most. See COMPARATIVES and SUPERLATIVES & all (c).
more difficult than necessary. For an odd error, see possible (b).
more honored in the breach. See breach, more honored in the.
more important (ly). As an introductory phrase, more important as a sentence-starter has historically been considered an elliptical form of “What is more important . . .,” and hence the -ly form is sometimes thought to be the less desirable. From 1850 to 1950, more important appeared frequently in print sources.
as a sentence-starter. Beginning in 1950, *more importantly* also began appearing frequently—and by 2000 it was rivaling the *-ly* form. For now, the two coexist in literary language, but momentum seems to be on the side of the *-ly* form—which now predominates by a 2-to-1 ratio in BrE (it’s 1-to-1 in AmE).

Three points militate against the position that the *-ly* form is undesirable. First, if we may begin a sentence “Important, the production appeared first off Broadway . . . ,” we ought to be able to begin it, “*More importantly,* . . . .” See *sentence adverbs*.

Second, theellipsis does not work with analogous phrases, such as *more notable* and *more interesting*. Both of those phrases require an *-ly* adverb—e.g.:

- “More interestingly, the robot’s untimely end touched all sorts of people with no involvement in the project.” "Strange Kindness and Familiar Robots,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 6 Aug. 2015, at A10.

And third, if the position is changed from the beginning of the sentence in any significant way, the usual ellipsis becomes undiomatic and *-ly* is quite acceptable—e.g.: “Shrage believes that the strategy should not be to reverse the intermarriage rate, as some activists argue, but to make sure that intermarried couples embrace Judaism and, *more importantly*, commit to raising their children as Jews.” Diego Ribadeneira, “Jewish Community Flourishing, New Report Says,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 6 Sept. 1997, at 32.

The criticism of *more importantly* and *most importantly* has always been rather muted and obscure, and today it has dwindled to something less than muted and obscure. So writers needn’t fear any criticism for using the *-ly* forms; if they encounter any, it’s easily dismissed as picayune pedantry. See *importantly*. 

**Language-Change Index**

*more perfect* This phrase appears in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union.” Some critics object that *perfect*, as an absolute quality, should not take a comparative adjective. The answer to those critics is an old one: “It is pedantic to object to the colloquial use of such expressions as ‘more universal’ [and] ‘*more perfect*’ . . . . Of course, superficially viewed, these expressions are incorrect, as there cannot be degrees of universality or of perfection . . . ; yet what is really meant by ‘more perfect,’ for example, is ‘*more nearly perfect*’.” Harry T. Peck, “*What Is Good English?*” in *What Is Good English? and Other Essays* 3, 16–17 (1899). See *adjectives (b)*.

Although we tend to think of the phrase as having been coined for the Constitution, in fact it was in general currency during the 17th century. Its idiomatic standing was never questioned until the 19th century.

*more possible*. See *adjectives (b)*.

*more preferable*. See *adjectives (b) & preferable*.  

*more . . . rather than*. See *rather (c)*.  

*mores* (= the customs, social behaviors, and moral values of a given society or subset of it) is preferably pronounced /mor-ayz/ or /maaw-ayz/—not /moh-rays/ or /morz/.

more so. Two words, not one.

more than. See *over (a) & subject–verb agreement (i)*.

*more . . . than*. A Parallel Constructions. To maintain parallel phrasing with this construction, it’s often important to repeat the preposition. Here, for example, the second *by* is necessary to clarity: “What saddens Ms. Showalter is her conviction that the Allbucks and thousands like them would stand a better chance of obtaining cures if they could accept that their symptoms would be treated *more effectively* by psychotherapy *than by* endless inconclusive medical tests [that] encourage paranoia while obfuscating science.” John Carlin, “It’s All in the Mind, Bud,” Independent, 27 Apr. 1997, at 18. See *parallelism*.  

B. *More . . . than all*. See *all (d)*.

*more unique*. See *adjectives (b)*.  

*moribund* (= dying) does not mean “dead.” Yet many writers misuse the word in this way—e.g.: “If Brian O’Neill’s controversial proposal to end the fight over the Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness isn’t *totally moribund* [read a dead letter or quite dead], it’s clearly in deep trouble.” Dean Rebuffoni, “Embellished BWCA Plan Has Led to More Proposals,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 4 Dec. 1996, at B1.

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*moribund* used to mean “dead” instead of “dying”. Stage 2

*morning dove*. See *mourning dove*.

Morphological Deformities are words derived from other languages, usually Latin or Greek, whose morphemes are so put together as to clash with the lending or borrowing language’s principles of word-formation. In some philologists’ view, one does not combine the inseparable particle *-ly* with nouns to form English verbs (e.g., *dismember*) because it is impermissible by Latin morphology. In Latin, *-ly* was joined only with verbs to form privative verbs (e.g., *disentitle, disregard*).

But all this is irrelevant. What is permissible in another language has no bearing on what is permissible in ours (splitting infinitives, for example, or ending sentences with prepositions)—and there’s no tenable reason why it should. It’s preposterous to contend that Latin morphology should govern English morphology—as preposterous as suggesting that modern law should conform to Roman law.

Modern English contains any number of examples of putatively ill-formed words made up of classical morphemes:
Our playfulness and inventiveness with morphemes like these are what makes English such a vital language. Gone are the days when H.W. Fowler’s words had any hope of resonating: “Word-making, like other manufactures, should be done by those who know how to do it; others should neither attempt it for themselves, nor assist the deplorable activities of amateurs by giving currency to fresh coinages before there has been time to test them” (FMEU1 at 241). No doubt the apathy that even most educated Americans feel about this issue results largely from the stubborn monolingualism rampant in the United States. Cf. HYBRIDS.

mortgage; *mortgager. Mortgage has always been the standard spelling. *Mortgager is a variant. See -er (A).

Current ratio: 69:1

mortise (= a hole or groove put into wood or stone for making a joint) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Mortice is a variant.

Current ratio: 7:1

Moslem. See Muslim.

mosquito. Pl. mosquitoes. See plurals (d).

most—in the sense “quite, very”—is an established casualism. Today it is standard English, though less formal than quite—e.g.:


• “The shredded lamb, encased in a flaky crust, was seasoned deliciously and was most enjoyable,” Pat Bruno, “A Field Day,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 21 Nov. 1997, at 32.

See very (A). See also comparatives and superlatives & all (c).

*most especially* is redundant for especially—e.g.: “Stendhal’s imaginative relation to his protagonists, most especially [read especially] to Julien, . . . is inseparable from a consideration of the kind of narrator or dramatized persona he invents to serve as his intermediary.” Robert Alter, *A Lion for Love* 191 (1979) (biography of Stendhal).

No doubt part of the blame goes to Smokey Robinson and the Miracles for the 1967 hit “I Second That Emotion.”

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*most number of*. This phrasing is incorrect for most things or (more verbosely) greatest number of things or highest number of things—e.g.:


• “There’s surely a place for them in the record books for most number of [read most] past members,” John Meagher, “In the Court of King Richard, Folk Royal,” *Irish Independent*, 29 Aug. 2015, at 16.

Grammatically, most does not properly modify a singular count noun such as number. In fact, the incorrectness of the phrasing is highlighted when the comparative is substituted for the superlative: you can’t say *more number of things*, etc.

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*most number of for greatest number of*: Stage 1 Current ratio (greatest number of vs. *most number of*): 19:1

mother lode. See load.

motion. See resolution.

motion seconded. This parliamentary idiom has recently become mangled, through sound association, into the phrase *notion seconded*. Perhaps the phrase needed is notion confirmed—e.g.:


• “Hamister says he believes in fan-friendly ownership, that he’ll be out and about, attentive and accountable. Berman, who has the majority financial stake, seconded the notion who has the majority financial stake, *seconded the notion* [read agreed]:” Todd Berman, “Sabres Deal Brings Out Kid in Berman,” *Buffalo News*, 22 Nov. 2002, at B1.

• “Teresinski said Scott’s location and small user base have always made the town’s participation in the authority problematic—a *notion seconded* [read notion confirmed] by others close to the project.” Peter Rebhahn, “Scott May Leave Water Authority,” *Green Bay Press-Gaz.*, 14 Jan. 2003, at B1.

No doubt part of the blame goes to Smokey Robinson and the Miracles for the 1967 hit “I Second That Emotion.”

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*notion seconded for notion confirmed*: Stage 1 Current ratio (notion confirmed vs. *notion seconded*): 8:1

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motto. Pl. mottoes. See plurals (d).

*mouch. See mouch.

mould. See mold.

mourning dove; mourning warbler. The mourning dove, a grayish-brown medium-sized bird common throughout North and Central America, is said to be so called because its plaintive sound suggests grieving. The mourning warbler, a small species of songbird found in eastern and central North American forests, is said to be so called because its dark breast suggests one in mourning (the OED quotes the Atlantic Monthly from 1866 to say that ornithologists were evoking the dark breast). In neither name does the etymology have anything to do with the AM (hence it’s not *morning dove or *morning warbler)—e.g.:


• “He’s constantly revising his routines, and is quite proud of his white morning [read mourning] doves (part of a classic appearing-disappearing trick that has become a staple in his show).” Miriam Di Nunzio, “Berwyn Teen Makes TV Magic,” Chicago Sun-Times, 16 Mar. 2001, Weekend Plus §, at 10.

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*morning dove for mourning dove: Stage 1
  Current ratio (mourning dove vs. *morning dove): 11:1

mouse. The plural of this word, in reference to small rodents, is (of course) mice. In reference to computer gadgets, usage has changed rapidly. Many usagists in the late 1990s recommended mouses over mice (on the analogy of louse, which forms louses in reference to cads but lice in reference to insects). As recently as 2007, the Associated Press Stylebook, which most newspapers follow, was silent on the issue, and mouses prevailed—e.g.: “[Mark] Bolger said Microsoft has found that surface computing is more intuitive than computer mouses, which require training.” Howard Wolinsky, “At Your Fingertips; Finally, a Real Hands-on Computer,” Chicago Sun-Times, 25 Oct. 2007, Fin. §, at 49. But in 2008, the AP Stylebook recommended the form mice, which had already become standard in commerce—e.g.: “In March, the EPA fined a Southern California company, IOGEAR, $208,000 for making unsubstantiated antimicrobial claims about its nanosilver-coated computer mice and keyboards.” Margaret Woodbury, “The Allure of Nanosilver,” L.A. Times, 4 Aug. 2008, Health §, at F3. See plurals (h). Any real debate seems now at an end: the collocation computer mice is eight times more common in print than *computer mouses. Those who advocated mouses analogized valiantly, but they should concede their editorial loss and move on. See snoot.

*mousey. See mousy.

moustache. See mustache.

mousy (= [1] of, like, or involving a mouse or mice, or [2] timorous, meek, nervous, and drab) has been the predominant spelling in AmE and BrE alike since about 1900—*mousey being a variant.

Current ratio: 6:1

mouthful. Pl. mouthfuls. See plurals (g).

movable has been predominantly so spelled in AmE since about 1840 and in BrE since about 1870. Moveable is a variant spelling. See mute e.

Current ratio: 3:1

mow > mowed > mowed. The past-participle mown is best reserved for adjective uses—e.g.: “You can practically smell the mown outfield grass and taste the dirty-water hot dogs.” Don Mayhew, “Opening Day Hits,” Fresno Bee, 1 Apr. 1997, at E1. See irregular verbs (b).

Current ratio (has mowed vs. *has mown): 2:1

Mr.; Mrs.; Ms. In AmE, the first two terms are considered abbreviations, so they have a period at the end. Ms. originated in the 1950s as a blend of Mrs. and Miss. American dictionaries do not define Ms. as an abbreviation or contraction, but it is written with a period anyway to conform to the style of Mr. and Mrs.

Because contracted abbreviations (with letters deleted from the middle of the word) don’t take a period in BrE, British writers use these three forms without a period <Mr Whitaker> <Mrs Kerr> <Ms Denning>.

ms. See manuscript.

Ms. See sexism (e) & Mr.

much. See many.

much less. This phrase requires the writer to put the less rigorous word first, the more rigorous last. But here they’re reversed: “Recent history amply illustrates the difficulties in adapting, much less surviving [read surviving, much less adapting].” Shelley von Strunckel, “What the Stars Say About Them,” Sunday Times (London), 18 June 1995, Style §, at 36. Surviving is easier than surviving and adapting. Therefore, the phrasing in the original is illogical. Fowler recommends let alone as a less troublesome substitute. See illogic.

*muchly is nowadays considered a jocular nonword—though several centuries ago it was not so stigmatized. Much is the preferred form in all adverbial contexts. But *muchly occasionally finds its way into print—e.g.:

• “More of this would have been muchly [read much] appreciated,” Jennifer Barrs, “Roy Clark Still Strong on Strings,” Tampa Trib., 1 Mar. 1996, Florida/Metro §, at 4.

• “Thanks muchly [read Thank you] to Rafael Palmeiro, whom the Cubs traded because he showed little power potential.” Bob Verdi, “Ah, a Ballpark with Warmth—and
Mohammed predominate from 1600 till about 1880, when English-speaking world. The retransliterated Mahomet.

How do you spell the name of the founder of Islam Muhammad; Mohammed; Mahomet; Muhammad.

In medical literature, might be to find a euphemism. Chest associated with Tracheal Mucoid Accumulation [etc.], "et al., "Respiratory Failure and Cor Pulmonale Asso-
his level of dyspnea, or edema. " Edward M. Harrow there has been no further problem with mucus balls
attributive sense—e.g.: "Over the ensuing six months, or gaps that need to be filled—e.g.: “He said the four division chairmen will fill a much-needed gap that occurs when a committee chairman takes the floor to push a certain bill.” Frank Phillips, “Finneran Plans Bigger Bonuses for Four Allies,” Boston Globe, 27 Mar. 1997, at A1. If the gap is much needed, then the division chairs will spoil things by filling it. See illogic.

mucus, n.; mucus, adj. These two ought to be kept separate, mucus for the slimy substance and mucous for the adjective describing whatever contains or secretes mucus. So *mucus membrane is a mistake—e.g.: “If a person already has herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhea, or syphilis and is exposed to HIV, he or she is more likely to contract the virus because of openings in the mucus [read mucous] membranes and skin.” "Increased Research Leads to Dramatic Declines in Sexually Transmitted Diseases," USA Today (Mag.), Feb. 1995, at 11.

In medical literature, mucous ball and mucus ball are about equally common. This is a closer case than mucous membrane, however, because mucus ball is a ball of mucus, and the noun is justifiably used in an attributive sense—e.g.: “Over the ensuing six months, there has been no further problem with mucus balls, his level of dyspnea, or edema.” Edward M. Harrow et al., “Respiratory Failure and Cor Pulmonale Associated with Tracheal Mucoid Accumulation [etc.],” Chest, Feb. 1992, at 580. But the best course, outside medical literature, might be to find a euphemism.

muck, n., muck, v. These two ought to be kept separate, muck for the slimy substance and mucic for the adjective describing whatever contains or secretes mucus. So *muck membrane is a mistake—e.g.: "Over the ensuing six months, there has been no further problem with muck balls, his level of dyspnea, or edema.” Edward M. Harrow et al., “Respiratory Failure and Cor Pulmonale Associated with Tracheal Mucoid Accumulation [etc.],” Chest, Feb. 1992, at 580. But the best course, outside medical literature, might be to find a euphemism.

Muhammad; Mohammed; Mahomet; Muhammad. How do you spell the name of the founder of Islam (who lived from 570 to 632)? The spelling Mahomet predominated from 1600 till about 1880, when Mohammed became predominant throughout the English-speaking world. The retransliterated Muhammad overtook all rivals about 1945 and is now standard.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 25:11:2:1

multiply is an adverb /mul-ti-ple/ as well as a verb /mul-ti-pl/. Because the word is ordinarily a verb, the adverbial use can give rise to miscues—e.g.: “The St. Christopher-Ottillie Residential Treatment Center [is] a home for multiply handicapped children.” Joe Krupinski & Mike Candel, “High School Notebook,” Newsday (N.Y.), 30 Nov. 1994, at A66. But writers can arrange the sentence parts to ensure that the word is read correctly—e.g.: “Buying toys for a severely or multiply handicapped child can be difficult.” Andale Gross, “Learning to Fit the Toys to the Child,” Kansas City Star, 10 Dec. 1994, Olathe §, at 3. Putting multiply on a parallel course with severely minimizes the possibility of a reader miscue.

muder. A. And homicide; manslaughter; man-killing. Homicide is the killing of another human being; it is the general legal term. (See homicide.) Murder is the unlawful killing of a human being with malice aforethought. It is the most heinous kind of criminal homicide. At common law, murder was not subdivided; but in most American jurisdictions statutes have created first-degree murder, second-degree murder, and third-degree murder (in descending order of reprehensibility). Indeed, second-degree murder is the same as common-law murder, as defined above. First-degree murder, a statutory crime, is the common-law crime of murder with an added element (such as arson, rape, robbery, burglary, larceny, or kidnapping) that aggravates the crime.

Manslaughter, which has a lower degree than murder, is homicide committed without malice aforethought. Man-killing is a nonlegal synonym for homicide, used sometimes of nonhuman killers <man-killing isn’t something tigers do unless they’re physically provoked or very hungry>. But it’s a sexist term: see sexism (c).

B. Unintentional murder. This phrase may strike some readers as an oxymoron, but it has been fairly widespread since the late 18th century. E.g.: “On Tuesday, the [California Supreme Court], in a major break with a 4-year-old precedent, ruled that a killer can be executed for an unintentional murder.” Calif. Death Sentence Upheld,” L.A. Times, 15 Oct. 1987, § 1, at 1.

“One of McDonaghi’s gifts is knowing that the darker the subtext, the more outrageous the lines can be, because what would ordinarily seem offensive becomes significant in light of a true disaster: the unintentional murder of a child.” John Anderson, “Bumbling Hit Men Score Bulls-Eye in Darkly Droll ‘Bruges,’” Wash. Post, 8 Feb. 2008, at C6.

And it is entirely proper to speak of an unintentional murder, as when someone, for no good reason, shoots a gun into an occupied room and kills somebody inside. But traditionally, intent is the very distinction between murder and manslaughter, so unless this is a legal term of art you are stuck with, use unintentional killing instead.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
murex (= a flesh-eating snail abounding in tropical seas) traditionally formed the plural *mureces*. But since the late 1940s in AmE and the early 1970s in BrE, *murexes* has become predominant in English-language print sources.

**murf**, n.; **murry**, adj. These are preferably so spelled. *Mirk* and *murry* are variant spellings.

Current ratio (*murf* vs. *mirk*): 7:1

Current ratio (*murry* vs. *mirky*): 577:1

**Muslim; Moslem.** Both terms mean “a follower of Islam” and appear in English-language works from the 15th century on. *Moslem* was the standard spelling until the 1940s, when *Muslim* became predominant in World English. Curiously, BrE and AmE lagged behind the shift. *Muslim* became predominant in BrE about ten years later. *Muslim* overtook *Moslem* in AmE in 1963, possibly influenced by the prominence of the *Black Muslims*, an alternative name for the Nation of Islam, during the civil-rights movement. Worldwide, *Muslim* is now 20 times as common as *Moslem*.

**mustache; moustache; mustachio.** A latent differentiation has begun to take hold. *Mustachio*, tinged with archaism, has come to suggest a large, bushy mustache. E.g.: “In Italian *baffi* means handlebar mustache; George's own substantial *mustachio* is insured by Lloyd's of London.” Don Freeman, “If Only George Could Give Those Cigars Away,” *San Diego Union-Trib.*, 20 Jan. 1995, at E2.

Sometimes, too, *mustachio* has come to mean “one side of a big mustache.” Though the dictionaries have been slow to recognize this sense, it is fairly common—e.g.:

- “A villain named Hurwitz Murkowski (hiss) ties Smokey Bear to the tracks, twirls his waxed *mustachios* and then, with a snarl, yelps, 'Curses, foiled again!' (huzzah).” White Hats to the Rescue,” *S.F. Examiner*, 7 Oct. 1996, at A16.
- “I can picture Monsieur Henny, twirling his *mustachios* and flashing his cleaver as he gestures to his display of lapin, before helping Mme. Wells select the best one.” Tucker Shaw, “The Fixer,” *Denver Post*, 19 Jan. 2011, at D1.

The corresponding adjectives are *mustached* (generic) and *mustachioed* (for the big ones). Although *mustachioed* is most commonly mentioned as the adjective, *mustached* is common and entirely respectable—e.g.: “Handsome, *mustached*, expensively suited, he can't move without conjuring up images of Johnnie Cochran.” Lloyd Rose, “‘Chicago': Going Gangbusters Again,” *Wash. Post*, 18 Apr. 1997, at C1.

*Moustache* is the BrE spelling of *mustache*, predominant there since about 1830. *Mustache* has predominated in AmE since about 1940.

**must.** See *double modals.*

**mutatis mutandis** (= the necessary changes having been made; taking into consideration or allowing for the changes that must be made) might seem a useful Latinism in some literary contexts, since the English equivalents are wordier. But in most actual uses of the phrase, it can be simplified. The phrase is hardly needed for a straightforward comparison in which readers are sure to know that two things aren't identical—e.g.:

- “Hughes's Harlem has pimps and number-runners and illegitimate babies and alcohol and marijuana—but none of these things, *mutatis mutandis*, is unknown in 'polite society,' as both Hughes and his readers are well aware.” Helen Vendler, “The Unweary Blues,” *New Republic*, 6 Mar. 1995, at 37. (A possible revision: *but all these things have their equivalents in 'polite society'. . . . *)
- “If 'Pink Flamingos' offered a geeky, low-rent version of 'The Godfather', the movie's narrative structure is, *mutatis mutandis*, the same as 'Star Wars.'” J. Hoberman, “The Naked & the Dead,” *Village Voice*, 15 Apr. 1997, at 47. (A possible revision: *is similar to that of 'Star Wars'.*)

Sometimes the phrase is entirely superfluous. In the following sentence, its purpose seems to be to impress, and the writer (ironically) becomes less intelligible with its use: “So, if one can use 'yellow' and 'good' intelligently and intelligibly—if others can understand what one means by them—then, for practical purposes, both words, *mutatis mutandis*, are meaningful.” John Hill, “Can We Talk About Ethics Anymore?” *J. Bus. Ethics*, Aug. 1995, at 585. Cf. *ceteris paribus*. See sesquipedality.

**mute.** See *moot* (c).

**MUTE**. In English, a verb's unsounded final -ee is ordinarily dropped before the -ing and -ed inflections: *create*, creating, created; *rate*, rating, rated; *share*, sharing, shared. Exceptions to this rule are verbs ending in -ee, -ye, and -oe; these do not drop the -ee before -ing, but they do drop it before -ed: *agree*, agreeing, agreed; *dye*, dyeing, dyed; *hateable*, nameable, rateable, ropeable, saleable, sizeable, unshackleable). See -able (e). Oddly, though, the spellings *livable* and *movable* predominate in BrE. For all these -able adjectives—apart from *hateable*, *nameable*, and *ropeable*—AmE drops the medial -ee.

Although the general rule in AmE is to drop the -ee before a vowel, the almost universal exception to this rule is to keep the -ee if needed to indicate the soft sound of a preceding -g- or -c-, as in *change*, *changeable*; *hinge*, *hingeing*; *trace*, *traceable*. Yet even
this exception to the rule is not uniform: lunge yields lunging, and impinge yields impinging. A less common exception retains the mute -e to distinguish a word from another with a like spelling, as in dye, dyeing. Because the given form of a word when inflected is easily forgotten and often the subject of disagreement even among lexicographers, the best course is to keep an up-to-date and reliable dictionary at hand.

One other difference between AmE and BrE is noteworthy: in AmE, the mute -e is dropped after -dg- in words such as acknowledged, fledgling, and judgment, whereas the -e is typically retained in BrE (acknowledgement, fledgling, and judgement). Even so, British legal writers usually prefer the spelling judgment. See Judgment (A).

*mute point. See moot.

**mutual. A. And common.** It's possible to refer to a couple's mutual devotion, but not their mutual devotion to their children. The reason is that whatever is mutual is reciprocal—it's directed by each toward the other. E.g.: “So consider the matter a quid pro quo, a mutual exchange of affection between Zereoue and Mountaineer fandom.” Michael Dobie, “More-Famous Amos,” Newsday (N.Y.), 14 Nov. 1997, at A103.

But when the sense is "shared by two or more," then the word is common—not mutual. Friend in common has traditionally been thought preferable to mutual friend, although the latter has stuck because of Dickens's novel (the title to which, it is sometimes observed, comes from a sentence mouthed by an illiterate character). Some careful writers continue to use friend in common. But mutual friend has in fact predominated since the 18th century—today by a 60-to-1 ratio.

**mutual friend for friend in common.** Stage 5


Redundancies are especially common when mutual appears with both—e.g.: “And Hongkong, he adds, will be there to serve China to the mutual benefit of both parties involved [read mutual benefit of the parties or benefit of both parties].” Rahita Elias, “A Tough Act to Follow for HK’s New Port Development Board Chief,” Bus. Times, 17 Oct. 1996, Shipping Times §, at 1.

The phrasing *mutual . . . each other is a fairly common redundancy—e.g.:

- “They have a deep, mutual respect for each other [read mutual respect] even when they bump heads over draft picks.” Mike Preston, “Savage Finds Diamonds in the Rough,” Baltimore Sun, 18 Jan. 2001, at D1.
- “My father was a Roman Catholic and my mother a Protestant and . . . . they had a mutual respect for each other’s religion [read respected each other’s religion].” Dale Turner, “The Simple Favor of an Introduction Can Change a Life,” Seattle Times, 20 Jan. 2001, at A11.

See reciprocity & redundancy.

my and your house. See possessives (e).

Myanmarese; Myanamar. See Burmese.

my bad. This low colloquialism gained popularity in the mid-1980s, apparently growing out of American sports slang and meaning “Sorry, my mistake.” It was well enough established by 1986 to be listed in a collection of campus slang published by the University of North Carolina, and it soon became a staple in pop culture. The phrase now seems to be on the wane.

**myriad** is more concise as an adjective <myriad drugs> than as a noun <a myriad of drugs>. Here the shorter use is illustrated:

- “Back when we still thought America was a melting pot instead of a collection of hyphens, the crux of combining myriad nationalities into one was in that oath.” Pat Truly, “The Choice All Immigrants Must Make,” Baltimore Sun, 14 Jan. 1997, at A9.
- “That color change prompted some to erroneously fear the rocket exploded, when they were actually witnessing a second-stage ignition of additional boosters, according to myriad media reports.” Adam Linhardt, “Early Risers Catch Glimpse of Rocket,” Key West Citizen, 3 Sept. 2015, at A1.

But the mere fact that the adjective is handier than the noun doesn’t mean the latter is substandard. The noun (ca. 1555) has been with us more than 200 years longer than the adjective (ca. 1791), and the choice is a question of style, not correctness. Yet in print sources since 1850, the shorter adjectival use has been much more frequent.

Current ratio (myriad reasons vs. a myriad of reasons): 1.2:1

**myself** is best used either reflexively <I have decided to exclude myself from consideration> or intensively <I myself have seen that> <I’ve done that myself>. The word shouldn’t appear as a substitute for I or me <my wife and myself were delighted to see you>. Using it that way, as an “untriggered reflexive,” is

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-ii)**


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (✳). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
thought somehow to be modest, as if the reference were less direct. Yet it’s no less direct, and the user may unconsciously cause the reader or listener to assume an intended jocularity, or that the user is somewhat dolish. E.g.:

- “Those ins and outs are largely a self-learning process, though knowing the experience of someone like myself [read me] might make the learning shorter, easier, and a lot less painful.” Mark H. McCormack, What They Don’t Teach You at Harvard Business School xii (1984).

- “The exclusion of women and women’s concerns is self-defeating. For instance, myself and other women in Hollywood [read many women in Hollywood, including me] would deliver millions of dollars of profit to the film industry if we could make films and television shows about the lives of real women.” Rita Mae Brown, “In Flight from the Female,” L.A. Times, 22 Oct. 1989, Book Rev. §, at 4.

- “A number of readers, like myself [read me], will doubtless feel that this exposure has given them a clear professional sense of Rogers.” Michael Patrick Gillespie, “A Composition of Place,” Irish Lit. Supp., Fall 2015, at 27.

See pronouns (e) & first person. Cf. I personally.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. myself for me <He was an avid golfer like myself>: Stage 3
2. myself for me in a compound predicate <Give it to John or myself>: Stage 2

mystical; mystic, adj. These words, about equally common, have long been regarded as more or less interchangeable. Margaret Nicholson suggested that “mystical, not mystic, is now used in reference to theological mysticism” (DAEU at 356). But that doesn’t appear to be true: in 1992, for example, David S. Ariel published a book entitled The Mystic Quest: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism. Further, mystical appears predominantly in nontheologically contexts.

Perhaps the best thing that might be said is that euphony should govern the choice of term—e.g.:

- “A maverick, however, he hewed to a poetic surrealism despite the polemics of abstraction that surrounded him, using figurative elements to evoke the mythic and the mystical.” Grace Glueck, “Art in Review,” N.Y. Times, 6 June 1997, at C22.


- “They are awestruck to finally enter this mystic fraternity.” Bryan Hendricks, “Fowl Ball!” Ark. Democrat-Gaz., 16 Aug. 2015, Sports §, at 32.

- “Her recent poetry is more political, but also more mystical, and less interested in women’s issues.” Sarah Berry, “Medbh McGuckian’s Ex-Centric Obscurity,” Irish Lit. Supp., Fall 2015, at 19.

Since 1600 or so, mystical has prevailed over mystic in frequency of use in English-language print sources—with the exception of the period from 1870 to 1930 (a mystic period).

N

Nabokov, Vladimir (1899–1977). How do you pronounce the writer’s name? It’s /vl-a-dë-m-a-r/ (rhyming with redeemer) /nab-ah-kawf/ (rhyming with have a cough). According to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who studied closely with Nabokov as her teacher at Cornell, that’s how the man pronounces his own name. See Bryan A. Garner, Interview with Justice Ginsburg, 10 Scribes J. Legal Writing 133, 135 (2010).

naiad (/nay-adj/ or /ni-adj/) = a river nymph. This permmissibly forms the Greek plural naiades /nay-a-deez/—even in English-language contexts—but naiads (/nay-adz/ or /ni-adz/) has always predominated. For the principles governing foreign plurals, see plurals (b).

Current ratio (naiads vs. naiades): 21:1

naive; * naïve; naf; *naf. The standard adjective is naive (without a diaeresis), the standard noun naïf (again, no diaeresis). The others are variant forms. Naive (= amusingly ingenuous) is sometimes misused for the noun naïf (= a naive person). E.g.: “But you are not a political naive [read naïf].” A.M. Rothschild, “Arianna, Go Home!” N.Y. Times, 20 June 1995, at A15 (addressing Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington). Maybe the author thought that, because he was addressing a woman, he should feminize the form. But in English, naïf is not considered sex-specific.

The adjective is pronounced /nah-eev/, the noun /nah-eef/.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

naïveté; * naïve; *naïveté; naivity; *naïveness. The first of these—a half-galllicism that keeps the accent but loses the diaeresis—is the standard form in AmE. Avoid the variants. The word is pronounced /nah-ee-vay/ or /nah-e-vay-tay/.

Naivity, which is chiefly BrE, is pronounced /nah-ee-vay-te/ or /nah-ee-vay-tee/.

*Naiveness is an artless anglicization created by simple, unaffected people deficient in worldly wisdom and informed judgment.

nameable. So spelled in both AmE and BrE—not *namable. See mute e.

Current ratio: 4:1

named for; named after; named from. Named for means “to be named in honor of (someone or something)” <the Nobel Prize was named for Swedish scientist Alfred Nobel>—e.g.: “Saturday’s ceremony preceded the Albany Alligators–Fort Worth Cats game at the Paul Eames Sports Complex, named for Paul in honor of his decades of work on behalf

Named after means that a person’s or thing’s name was given to another person or a place after the name-sake was born or achieved fame. It does not necessarily connote an honor, but it may—e.g.: “Bradlee seemed to be betting Mrs. Graham’s newspaper on the reporting of a couple of then obscure, young city-desk reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who were in turn relying on anonymous sources, chiefly one named after a porn movie, ‘Deep Throat.’” Evan Thomas, “An American Original; Katharine Graham 1917–2001,” Newsweek, 30 July 2001, at 42.

Named from (the least prevalent phrasing) applies to things, not people, and means that a name was inspired by something else that isn’t necessarily well known or worthy of honor. In some contexts, it signals an implicit memorialization of a predecessor that bore the same name—e.g.: “A new development called Lost Creek proposed by Don Simon Homes in Madison near the town of Blooming Grove has all of its streets named from Beatles’ song titles.” George Hesselberg, “Where the Streets Have Odd Names,” Wis. State J., 15 July 2001, at G1. See eponymous.

namely is generally preferable to viz. or to wit. But often all three expressions can be avoided—e.g.: “There’s a big, juicy, column-ready event hanging out there, namely the Microsoft CEO summit.” Kevin Maney, “Computer Spins Technology Tale,” USA Today, 15 May 1997, at B5. (A possible revision: There’s a big, juicy, column-ready event hanging out there: the Microsoft CEO summit.) See viz. & to(-)wit.

Namely is customarily followed by a comma, as are equivalent terms such as to wit, for example, and that is. But writers increasingly skip the comma after this single-word introduction—e.g.: “[Meyer] Schapiro’s understanding of Romanesque art is based on an essential belief about humankind, namely [read namely:] that individuality—the sense of it, the yearning for it, the struggle for it—is quite simply the core of the human.” Jed Perl, “The Varieties of Artistic Experience,” New Republic, 30 Oct. 2006, at 23.

This type of phrase or clause specifies, clarifies, or gives one or more examples of what preceded. Because it’s nonrestrictive, it should be set off from the sentence. Not doing so usually results in a sentence that’s tough to get through—e.g.: “That’s tricky when some signals namely equity markets [read signals, namely, equity markets,] hitting new highs are bullish.” Jon Birger, “Can the Economy Survive the Housing Bust?” Fortune, 13 Nov. 2006, at 189 (namely, equity markets might also be set off by em-dashes or parentheses).

Names. A. Capitalization. Many complex rules govern the capitalization of names—too many to cover here. But a few especially important ones merit mention. First, names that are proper nouns—such as names of people, places, books, articles, and the like—are capitalized <President Ronald Reagan> <Atlanta, Georgia> <Gone with the Wind>. That’s the rule that everybody knows. Second, when a name such as Hockaday School is reduced to a shortened form (the School) after the first reference, even the common noun school may be capitalized because it’s a short-form proper noun. This practice is common for in-house publications such as annual reports. And in legal writing, a statute is commonly referred to as the Act after the first reference, and the court one is addressing is always the Court. Keep in mind, though, that in most prose the practice can get out of hand: “[D]on’t capitalize a short form unless it clearly warrants the importance, distinction, or emphasis that capitalization conveys.” Gregg Reference Manual Rule 310 (10th ed. 2004). And third, when a name for some idiosyncratic reason isn’t usually capitalized <k.d. lang>, the first letter must be capitalized when it begins a sentence <K.d. lang sang a few of her hit songs>. (Some editors would write her name K.D. Lang regardless of her preference for lowercase. Cf. Cummings.) For a full coverage of the many complexities of capitalizing names, see The Chicago Manual of Style. See capitalization (a).

B. Jr.; Sr.; III; etc. There are four traditional rules about the use of these labels—most of them forgotten in modern usage though scattered throughout etiquette books.

First, a father should not adopt the Sr. label, nor should others refer to him that way without good reason. That’s what the etiquette mavens have long said—e.g.:

- “A gentleman who represents the head of the senior branch of his family is privileged to use a card engraved simply, ‘Mr. Brown.’” 1 Correct Social Usage 212 (1907) (suggesting that ‘Mr. Henry A. Brown Sr.’ does not properly exist).
- “Senior cannot be used with a man’s name. No matter how famous the son, he is junior to his father as long as his father is alive.” Millicent Fenwick, Vogue’s Book of Etiquette 557 (1948).
- “‘Senior’ is never used after a man’s name.” Nancy Loughridge, Dictionary of Etiquette 105 (1955).
- “A man never uses ‘Sr.,’ though on occasion it is correct for others to add ‘senior’ to the name of the older man when referring to him (though not when addressing a letter to him) if confusion with his son would otherwise result.” Llewellyn Miller, The Encyclopedia of Etiquette 393 (1967).

Second, a son drops Jr. when his father dies (with exceptions noted below). Again, that’s what the experts have consistently said—e.g.:

- “At the death of his father, he is no longer junior.” Margery Wilson, Pocket Book of Etiquette 105 (1937).
- “A man is ‘Mark Strand Jr. only while his father is alive and, of course, he bears his father’s exact name.” Nancy Loughridge, Dictionary of Etiquette 105 (1955).
• “Names are traditionally numbered only among the living,” Judith Martin, Miss Manners’ Guide for the Turn-of-the-Millennium 60 (1990).


This rule was once widely followed. There were, for example, father-and-son Oliver Wendell Holmeses. As soon as the father (the poet) died in 1894, the son (the jurist) dropped Jr. despite his father’s great renown. (And, of course, during his lifetime the poet never used Sr. on his name.) As a more modern example, the actor Jason Robards dropped Jr. after his father, a stage actor, died in 1963.

There are two exceptions to the second rule: (1) If the deceased father was quite famous, the son may retain Jr.: “The rule that a man does not continue to use ‘Jr.’ after the death of his father is correctly disregarded if the older man was extremely prominent and continues to be mentioned frequently in the press and elsewhere after his death. In such case, the son properly continues to use ‘Jr.’ to avoid confusion.” Llwelwyn Miller, The Encyclopedia of Etiquette 393 (1967). There are good examples, such as Frank Sinatra Jr. and Hank Williams Jr. (they rightly kept their labels). (2) Some authorities have suggested that a son who earns a title should not use Jr., presumably because the differentiating label that Jr. represents then becomes unnecessary: “A son who acquires a title (‘Dr., ‘ ‘Colonel, ‘ ‘Rabbi,’ for example) drops ‘Jr.’ unless his father also has the same title as well as the same name.” Llwelwyn Miller, The Encyclopedia of Etiquette 393 (1967).

Today, these first two rules are frequently ignored. Many men seem to become Jr. for life (e.g., William F. Buckley Jr.). And some fathers do adopt Sr. Perhaps the niceties are lost as fewer and fewer sons are named after their fathers; the convention is certainly much rarer than it was in the early 20th century. In 2000, the advice columnist Abigail Van Buren repeated the customary guidance about dropping Jr. on the father’s death but added that “if you desire, there is nothing illegal or improper about retaining the ‘Jr.’” Abigail Van Buren, “Dear Abby,” Charleston Gaz., 22 June 2000, at D3. One etiquette book adds that a son’s retaining the Jr. after his father dies “helps to differentiate between his wife and his mother if the latter is still living and does not wish to be known as ‘Mrs. Jones, Sr.’” Elizabeth L. Post, Emily Post’s Etiquette 26 (1992). This approach certainly makes good sense. Perhaps the new convention is to keep Jr. to honor the father.

Even if a “Jr.” drops the label, there’s some evidence that others won’t—e.g.: “Edwin Llwyd Ecclestone was a ‘Jr.’ for most of his life, but he dropped the ‘Jr.’ from his name after his father’s death in 1981 and can’t understand why people and the press don’t honor that.” “The Power Hitter E. Llwyd Ecclestone Born March 8, 1936,” Palm Beach Post, 19 Dec. 1999, Special §, at 98.

Third, Jr. and Sr. aren’t used unless the names are identical—forename, middle name, and surname. So the second Bush president (George W. Bush) is not a junior, the father’s name being George Herbert Walker Bush. But some journalists, especially in Great Britain, use Jr. and Sr. as a kind of loose shorthand—e.g.: “George Bush Sr [said it] in his campaign for the US presidency in 1988.” Philip Howard, “Who Said That?” *Times* (London), 23 Mar. 2001, § 2, at 5. (Of course, the British, as in that example, omit any period after Sr. because it is a contracted abbreviation. See Mr.)

Many American writers use Sr. to distinguish an older man, especially a father, with the same name, even if the younger man does not use Jr.—e.g.: “Stacy Keach Sr., a character actor, director and producer who was also the father of actor Stacy Keach and director James Keach, died Thursday at Providence-St. Joseph Medical Center in Burbank, Calif.” *Stacy Keach Sr.* (obit.), Dallas Morning News, 15 Feb. 2003, at A39.

Fourth, when a male shares a name with both his living father and his living grandfather, he is called “3rd” or “III.” (The Arabic numeral appears less pretentious.) If the grandfather dies first among the three, the grandson becomes “Jr.” If the father dies before the grandfather, the grandson stays “3rd.” When both the father and grandfather have died, the grandson drops all distinguishing labels. So getting into “5th,” “6th,” and so on isn’t yet possible—though medical breakthroughs may one day result in such longevity. Kings and queens, by the way, aren’t subject to this rule.

Finally, there’s the question of punctuation. Jr. and Sr., which are increasingly used restrictively, may appear with no comma—e.g.: “Louis V. Gerstner Jr., the new chairman of I.B.M., began his campaign yesterday to revive the world’s largest computer maker by announcing an $8.9 billion program to cut the company’s costs sharply.” Steve Lohr, “I.B.M. Chief Making Drastic New Cuts; 60,000 Jobs to Go,” *N. Y. Times,* 28 July 1993, at A1. Journalistic stylebooks—such as the AP’s and the UPI’s—prefer this approach, probably because newspapers generally disfavor optional commas.

And the comma-less Jr. has logic on its side. That’s why E.B. White was persuaded to change the text of *The Elements of Style.* The first and second editions had said: “The abbreviations etc. and Jr. are parenthetic and are always to be so regarded.” *James Wright, Jr.* Elements of Style at 3 (1959; 2d ed. 1972). The text changed in the third edition, however, after Thomas B. Lemann of New Orleans prompted White: “Although Junior, with its abbreviation Jr., has commonly been regarded as parenthetic, logic suggests that it is, in fact, restrictive and therefore not in need of a comma.” *James Wright Jr.* Elements of Style at 3 (3d ed. 1979).

But in the mid-1990s, the president of the American Law Institute, Charles Alan Wright, canvassed the views of 25 eminent lawyers and judges who bore the abbreviation at the ends of their names. They
unanimously stated a preference for the comma. That’s the traditional approach.

Both forms are correct. Besides logic, the comma-less form probably has the future on its side; for one thing, it makes possessives possible (John Jones Jr’s book). The with-comma form has recent (not ancient) tradition on its side. Posteriority will be eager to discover, no doubt, how this earth-shattering dilemma is resolved in the decades ahead. One consideration that militates in favor of the comma-less form is that, in a sentence, one comma begets another: “John Jones, Jr. was elected” seems to be telling Jones that Jr. was elected. With a comma before Jr., another is needed after: “John Jones, Jr., was elected.”

C. Pronunciation of Foreign Names. As the international lingua franca, English has achieved a greater degree of eclecticism than any other language in history. It has borrowed words from most other major languages, often copiously. It has almost universally anglicized its borrowings—using English phonemes (speech sounds) to approximate the sound of a word in the language of the word’s origin. The English word ketchup, for example, derives from the Cantonese term k’ē chap, which is not authentically pronounceable with English phonemes. No sensible speaker of Cantonese, when visiting the United States, would object that Thais, when speaking Thai, say something like /kham-pyoo-tuu/ [əː] for computer or /a-pan/ for apple (both of which are Thai borrowings from English).

A borrowing language, in other words, makes loan-words more native—more pronounceable—by using the closest available phonemes. What results, when the usage becomes widespread, is a “correct” pronunciation in the borrowing language. A speaker striving to be correct shouldn’t reach for an affected pronunciation using foreign phonemes unavailable to other speakers of the borrowing language.

Four major principles follow from this line of reasoning.

(1) If a name is well known to the English-speaking world, use the pronunciation most common among speakers of English. Trying to outdo one’s neighbors with “correct” pronunciations of foreign names is a silly affectation. It may be good German to say Bach with a guttural end (/bahk/), but it isn’t good English. And when the German composer’s name appears in an English sentence, it should be a simple /bahk/.

Examples abound:

- Barcelona (/bahr-sah-loh-nah/, not /bahr-tha-loh-nah/)
- Budapest (/boh-da-pesh/, not /boh-da-pesh/)
- Caracas (/koh-rah-kah-stuh/, not /kah-da-hahk-uh-stuh/)
- Cuba (/kyoo-bah/, not /koo-bah/)
- Hawaii (/ha-wit-ee/, not /ho-vit-ee/)
- Mexico (/mek-sih-koh/, not /mek-hee-koh/)

Moscow (/mos-koh/, or /mos-kow/, not /mask-voh/)
Paris (/pair-ee/, not /pah-reh/)
Salzburg (/sahlts-borg/, not /zahlz-boorg/)
Van Gogh (/van-goh/, not /van goh/)

(2) When pronouncing foreign names that aren’t well known, use English phonemes that most nearly approximate those in the original language—and avoid un-English phonemes. It is hard for most Americans to say the name of the Czech composer Leos Janacek in a way that’s satisfactory to a native speaker of the Czech language. (It’s hard enough to get the diaritical marks right: Leos Janácek.) A simple /lay-ohs yah-nah-chek/ is as close as most English speakers will ever get. And besides, most speakers of English would put the main accent on the first syllable: /yah-nah-chek/. That’s about as close as anyone needs to get in an English-language context. Likewise, Hispanic names such as Herrera and Guatemala needn’t—and shouldn’t—be given hispanicized pronunciations with rolled r’s and guttural g’s.

On the other hand, Americans are fully capable of saying /eel/ and /i/, so we shouldn’t have the trouble that we do with the German ei (/iː/) and ie (/iː/). Perhaps the problem comes from inconsistently pronounced names such as Einstein (/i/-stem/) and Goldstein (/gohd-steen/). Chess Grandmaster Jacques Mieses liked to tell a story about an American who addressed him saying, “Are you Mister Meies? [mi-/stoe mi-zaaz/?]” “No,” came the reply, “I am Meister Mieses [mi-zee-tar mee-zaaz].”

Sometimes, though, the choices aren’t so stark. After the terrorist acts of 11 September 2001, the group al-Qaeda came to be well known. Some speakers of Arabic criticized American television commentators for saying /al-k-dah/ or /al-kay-da/, insisting that it should be /al-kah-ee-da/. But English isn’t hospitable to this separation of the middle syllables: it collapses the two into a diphthong. Hence /al-ki-da/ (the preferable pronunciation) or /al-kay-da/.

(3) Avoid chauvinistic distortions of foreign names that are fully pronounceable with English phonemes. It’s fairly common to call enemies by distorted names. But this isn’t an endearing quality of Americans or any other speakers of English. A few examples of distorted pronunciations come readily to mind (last in each list):

Arab (/ar-ahb/, not /ay-rab/)
Begin, Menahem (/mi-nahk-am beey-gin/, not /bee-gin/)
Gandhi (/gahn-dee/, not /gan-dee/)
Hiroshima (/hi-ree-shsheh-mah/, not /hi-rih-shsheh-mah/)
Hussein, Saddam (/sa-dahm heo-sayn/, not /sad-am/)
Iran (/ir-ran/, not /tey-ran/)
Iraq (/ir-rah-kah/, not /ir-rak/)
Italian (/tey-tal-yen/, not /tey-tal-yen/)
Milosevic (/mi-leh-suh-vich/, not /mi-leh-suh-vik/)
Vietnam (/vay-ayt-nam/, not /vay-ayt-nam/)
(4) Within the English-speaking world, follow local preferences for place names. This is a slightly weaker principle than the others. For example, with Hawaii it yields to #1. (See Hawaii (c.).) Many names are pronounced idiosyncratically in different locales:

- Berlin (Germany): /ber-lin/
  Berlin (New Hampshire): /ber-lan/
- Cairo (Egypt): /ki-rah/
  Cairo (Illinois): /kay-rah/
- DeKalb County (Illinois): /de-kalb/
  DeKalb County (Georgia): /de-kah/
- Edinburg (Texas): /ed-in-barg/
  Edinburgh (Scotland): /ed-in-bor-a/
- Humble (Texas): /am-bal/ (see humble)
  Lima (Peru): /lee-ma/
  Lima (Ohio): /li-ma/
- Mexia (Texas): /ma-hay-a/
- Milan (Italy): /mi-lahn/ or /mee-lahn/
  Milan (Michigan): /mi-lan/
- Palestine (historic): /pal-a-stin/
  Palestine (Texas): /pal-a-steen/
- Pedernales (Texas): /par-di-nal-as/ (see metathesis)

D. Names with Particles. Many names contain particle prefixes such as al, d’, de, della, der, du, el, la, mac, ten, ter, van, and von. If a prefix has been compounded with the remainder of the surname, the correct form takes little thought <LaFarge> <Debussy> <Vandergriff>. But things can become more complicated with proper names having separate particles. When used with a person’s full name or with a title, the particle is retained as part of the surname <Count von Zeppelin> <Princess d’Arc> <Justice van Zandt> <Professor Ahmad al-Hariq> <Mrs. La Ruiz>. When the surname is used alone, whether the particle remains depends on the name’s origin, the particle’s function (that is, whether it’s a preposition, an article, or an expression of descent), and certain customary usages.

In Romance languages (such as French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese), particles that are also prepositions meaning “of,” “from,” or “at” are never capitalized. If the main part of the surname is a single syllable, the preposition is retained when the surname is used alone—hence Charles de Gaulle becomes de Gaulle and Pierre de Weck becomes de Weck. If a surname is longer than one syllable, the preposition is usually dropped—hence Simon de Montfort becomes Montfort and Eduardo de Carvalho becomes Carvalho. When d’ is used, it is normally retained, regardless of the length of the surname—e.g., Jean d’Arc becomes d’Arc and Tullio d’Attorre becomes d’Attorre. All other particles are always capitalized and are retained in the surname—so John Dos Passos becomes Dos Passos, Jacques La Motte becomes La Motte, and Georges Des Périers becomes Des Périers. If a name contains a preposition plus another particle, the preposition remains lowercase and is dropped when the surname stands alone—e.g., Françoise de La Tour yields La Tour and Tomas de La Ruiz yields La Ruiz. The one exception to lowercasing prepositions occurs when a preposition has been compounded with the remainder of the name, as in Claude Debussy (Debussy) and Henri Darnley (Darnley).

Exceptions abound when names with Romance-language particles appear in anglicized forms. For example, la, le, and les are very rarely contracted to l’ in French, but the contraction appears frequently in anglicized French names—e.g., Philip L’Estrange (instead of le EStrange) and Charles L’Atilique (instead of le Aliche). Most particles are lowercase, and they are usually retained when the surname is used alone <della Francesca> <de la Renta> <du Maurier>. This is so even if the main surname has more than one syllable <de Havilland> <de Tonnancour>. Sometimes the prepositions are capitalized <Luca Della Robbia> <Thomas D’Avenant>, sometimes not <Cecil B. de Mille> <Juan de Las Casas>. Anglicized names may not have a space between the particle and the main surname. And the particle may or may not be capitalized, while the main name is always capitalized <LeTourneau> <DeLaRosa> <deNiverville>. See De Quincey.

In German, a particle in a surname always contains a preposition, usually von; occasionally, the Flemish preposition van appears. Sometimes an article will appear with the preposition <von dem> <von der>. Particles are never capitalized and are always dropped when the surname stands alone—hence Manfred von Richthofen becomes Richthofen, Gerhard von der Burg becomes Burg, and Ludwig van Beethoven becomes Beethoven. When anglicized, the particles in German names are ordinarily (but not always) lowercase <Klaus von Bülow> <Wernher Von Braun> and are usually retained—so Friedrich von Steuben becomes von Steuben and Erich von Stroheim becomes von Stroheim. The person’s own preference, which shouldn’t be hard to determine, is the ultimate guide.

The most common particle in Dutch and Flemish surnames is the preposition van, sometimes coupled with an article <van der> <van de>; other common particles are ten and ter. A particle is never dropped when the surname stands alone, even if the particle means “of” or “from”—so Vincent van Gogh becomes van Gogh, Jan ten Broeck becomes ten Broeck, and Roger van der Weyden becomes van der Weyden. Capitalization of particles differs depending on whether the named person is Dutch or Flemish. In a Dutch name, the particle is usually capitalized only if it follows a title and there is no intervening personal name or initial <Prof. Van Leeuwenhoek> <Prof. H. J. van Leeuwenhoek>. But in Flemish names, the first particle is always capitalized unless the person is explicitly noble; then it is lowercase <Prof. Van de Wael> <Baron van de Wael>. When anglicized, the particle van is often capitalized; a conjoined article may or may not be <Martin Van Buren> <Erik Van den Broeck> <Peter Van Der Water>. It is also common to see surnames of Dutch and Flemish derivation compounded in myriad ways—e.g., van der Bild becomes Vanderbild, van Brugh becomes Vanbrugh, and van de Kieft becomes Vande Kieft. Again, hew to the person’s preference.

Arabic surnames often have particles, such as articles or words that express a relationship; these include Abu (father of), Abd (servant of), Abdel,
Abdul (worshipper of), ad, al, an, ar, bin (son of), bint (daughter of), el, ibn (son of), and umm (mother of). Note that some Arabic prefixes are always capitalized; some require hphans. All particles are capitalized when the surname stands alone—hence Noor al Husseim becomes Al Hussein, Ahmad el-Ahmiad becomes El-Ahmiad, and Jasmine umm Kulthum becomes Umm Kulthum. As a rule, particles are retained <bin Laden>, but there are exceptions, usually in the names of well-known people—e.g., Anwar al-Sadat becomes Sadat, Hafez al-Assad becomes Assad, and Zine el-Abidine Ben-Ali becomes Ben-Ali.

Celtic names are often preceded by a, ap, Fitz, M’, Mac, Mc, or O, all of which express descent. The particle is always retained with the surname. Except for the Welsh particles ab and ap <ab Llewellyn> <ap Rhys> and the Irish particle á <á Broin>, a particle should be capitalized when the surname stands alone <Fitz Simmons> <MacHeath>. In Irish usage, a space always follows the Irish particle O or á <O Reilly> <á Colm>, but anglicized versions of O are customarily followed by an apostrophe and no space <O’Brien>. The particles Mac, Mc, and M’ are used in both Scottish and Irish surnames, traditionally with no space between the particle and the rest of the name <MacDonald> <McAlister> <M’Naughton>. There can be more than one version of a name depending on whether the particle has been absorbed <MacPherson> <Macpherson> <McPherson>. The same is true of Fitz <Fitz Patrick> <Fitzpatrick>. The Welsh particles ab and ap usually have a space separating them from the rest of the surname <ab Eynon> <ap Rhodri>, but there is a trend toward eliminating the space <apEvans> <apRoberts>.

Some surnames in English and Romance languages take the form of saints’ names <Charles St. John> <Georges Saint Sebastien> <Phillipe San Pedro> <Camille Saint-Saëns> <Carlos Santo Domingo>; the correct spelling depends on the established usage or the name holder’s preference. The saint particle is always retained and capitalized as part of the surname—e.g., Yves St. Laurent becomes St. Laurent and Camille Sainte-Beuve becomes Sainte-Beuve. But if the surname also contains a particle, that particle is dropped when the surname is used alone—e.g., José de San Martín becomes San Martín and Francesco da San Germanno becomes San Germanno. Some names were anglicized long ago and won’t be familiar if the anglicized form isn’t used. On the other hand, a name that is written other than by the name holder’s preference. The saint particle is always retained and capitalized as part of the surname—e.g., Yves St. Laurent becomes St. Laurent and Camille Sainte-Beuve becomes Sainte-Beuve. But if the surname also contains a particle, that particle is dropped when the surname is used alone—e.g., José de San Martín becomes San Martín and Francesco da San Germanno becomes San Germanno.

Some names were anglicized long ago and won’t be familiar if the anglicized form isn’t used. On the other hand, a name that is written other than by the appropriate convention can tag the writer as careless or biased. Care is required. A final note: despite the myriad conventions here discussed, every lowercase particle gets capitalized at the beginning of a sentence—e.g., Bin Laden ranted about . . . , D’Arc presented a problem . . . , De la Renta’s fashion show was . . . , De Mille’s final epic demonstrated . . . . See (A).

E. British Practices with American Place Names. British writers do a strange thing with American place names: they use the adjectival form ending in -n where Americans wouldn’t change the name at all. Hence the British might refer to Bill Clinton’s Arkansan property, as opposed to his Arkansas property. And notice what British writers do in the following examples—wrongly from the American’s perspective:


F. Proper Names as Adjectives. See ADJECTIVES (d).

G. Pluralizing Proper Names. See PLURALS (f).

H. Names for Place Residents and Natives. See DENIZEN LABELS.

I. Other Sources. For good general studies, see Justin Kaplan & Anne Bernays, The Language of Names (1997), and Elsdon C. Smith, Treasury of Name Lore (1967). For books on how proper names have become everyday words, see Eugene Ehrlich, What’s in a Name? (1999); Andrew Sholl, Wellingtons, Watts & Windsor (1997); and Rosie Boycott, Betty, Bloomers and Boycott (1983). For a source on possessive phrases made from proper names (e.g., Achilles’ heel, Adam’s rib, Halley’s comet), see Dorothy Rose Blumberg, Whose What? (1969).

nankeen (= a type of cotton cloth) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Nankin is a variant. Current ratio: 8:1

nanny (= a nurserymaid) is the standard spelling. *Nannie is a primarily BrE variant (yet uncommon even there). Current ratio: 435:1

naphtha. A. Misspelled. Naphtha /naf- the/ (= a liquid distilled from petroleum and used as a solvent or fuel) is sometimes misspelled (and mispronounced) *naphtha—e.g.:

- “The facility would produce about 20,000 barrels per day of distillates and naphtha [read naphtha] and be scheduled for startup in 2002.” “Phillips Eyes Qatar Plant,” Tulsa World, 17 July 1997, at E1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

B. Long Form: *naphthalene; *naphthaline; *naphthalin. The first is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. The others are variant forms.

**napsack.** See knapsack.

**narcissism** (= excessive interest in oneself; self-love) is the standard term. **Narcism** is a **NEEDLESS VARIANT** that appeared sporadically from about 1920 to 1960.

Current ratio: 559:1

**narcissus.** Since about 1870, the predominant plural has been the Latin **narcissi**, not the native plural **narcissuses** (which is excessively sibilant)—e.g.:  

But from 1800 to 1860, the homegrown plural was the more common of the two. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (narcissi vs. *narcissuses): 9:1

**narrator; narrator.** The first is the standard form, the second a variant to be avoided.

Current ratio: 41,805:1

**nary a** (= not a; not one; no) was long considered dialectal AmE dating from the 18th century. (= not a; not one; no) was long considered dialectal AmE dating from the 18th century.  
- “There’s **nary** a decorated interior these days that isn’t testimony to a flurry of veneer-stripping, sanding and hand-rubbing.” Stephanie Gutmann, “Rusticated,” *New Republic*, 3 Apr. 1995, at 14.
- “The settlement ended a sex discrimination suit filed in April 2002 by three female employees after a yearlong campaign by the employee union to get coverage had received **nary** a word from company officials.” *Columbia Journalism Rev.*, Mar. 2003, at 9.
- “The Canadian Museum of Civilization, after a promising start under new management in 1998, has yet to move away from the bland exhibits of a previous era, when **nary** a dark shadow was to be seen.” Victor Suthren, “A Museum of Tolerance,” *Maclean’s*, 17 Mar. 2003, at 42.

The expression grew in prevalence and stature beginning about 1850.

**national; federal.** In a nation with a federal system of government, these two terms might seem interchangeable. But the founders of the United States carefully distinguished them—particularly James Madison, who wrote:

> "The Constitution is to be founded on the assent and ratification of the people of America, given by deputies elected for the special purpose; but, on the other [hand], ... this assent and ratification is to be given by the people, not as individuals composing one entire nation, but as composing the distinct and independent States to which they respectively belong. It is to be the assent and ratification of the several States, derived from the supreme authority in each State—the authority of the people themselves. The act, therefore, establishing the Constitution will not be a national but a federal act."


So as Madison explained, the foundation of the Constitution is **federal**; the operation of governmental powers under the Constitution is **national**; and the method of introducing amendments is **mixed**. _Ibid._ at 246.

**Native American.** The term Native American proliferated in the 1970s to denote groups served by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs: American Indians as well as the Eskimos and Aleuts of Alaska. Later, the term was interpreted as including Native Hawaiians (see **Hawaiian**) and Pacific Islanders, and it fell into disfavor among some Indian and Alaskan groups, who came to prefer American Indian and Alaska Native. Yet views are unpredictable: some consider Native American more respectful than American Indian.

As an equivalent to American Indian, the phrase Native American was long thought to be a 20th-century innovation. See Second *Barnhart Dictionary of New English* 316 (1980); Sidney I. Landau, “Native American,” 69 *Am. Speech* 202 (1994). In fact, the phrase Native American—though it proliferated in the early and mid-1970s—dates back to at least 1737 in this sense. See Fred Shapiro, “Computer-Assisted Evidence for the Antiquity of the Term Native American,” 76 *Am. Speech* 109 (2001). And it made literal sense (for the most part) in 1737, since at that time most people who had been born in the New World were indigenous—not of European descent.

By the 19th century, when the term Native American was fairly common, it had become ambiguous, since it often referred to any person born in the United States, whether of indigenous or of European descent. Here, in a mid-20th-century passage, it refers to place of birth: “Dr. Flesch ... was born in Vienna, but writes more like a native American than do most Native Americans; in fact, he teaches the natives how to write like natives; it is always amazing to recall that he came to America as lately as the 1930’s.” Gorham Munson, _The Written Word_ 196 (rev. ed. 1949).

The phrase indigenous American, which is more logically and etymologically correct, does have some support—e.g.:  
- “He alleged he and other American Indians were being illegally excluded from serving as jurors in San Juan County, where more than half the residents are descended from indigenous Americans.” Dawn House, “Jury Still Out on Navajos’ Role in Utah Courts,” *Salt Lake Trib.*, 7 Feb. 2001, at D2.
- “Hundreds of high schools and colleges have dropped their Indian symbols over the past 30 years as many indigenous American groups and their members have called for sports teams to drop the names.” David McKay Wilson, “Rules Due on School Mascots,” *J. News* (Westchester Co., N.Y.), 3 June 2002, at B1.
- “Bartolome de Las Casas ... preached justice for indigenous Americans in the 16th century.” Stephanie Nichols,

Not surprisingly, the synonymous phrase *autochthonous American* has never caught on.

*native-born citizen.* This phrase, though it has been fairly common since the 19th century, reeks of redundancy—e.g.: “Some immigrants come to America as boat people, dirt poor and speaking no English, and within a decade are part of the professional class—suggesting that any poor native-born [read native] citizen has only his own sloth to blame.” Robert Kuttner, “The Delusion of a Classless America,” San Diego Union-Trib., 29 July 1997, at B7.

The modern temptation to brace the adjective native may come from two sources. First, in American law, the noun native has come to mean either (1) "a person born in the country” or (2) “a person born outside of the country of parents who are (at the time of the birth) citizens of that country and who are not permanently residing elsewhere.” Sense 2 represents a slide in meaning, but the writer quoted above could not possibly have wanted to protect against that extended meaning. Second, the phrase Native American, meaning American Indian, has recently popularized a secondary meaning of native, one having to do with heritage and not with birthplace: “one of the original or usual inhabitants of a country, as distinguished from strangers or foreigners; now esp. one belonging to a non-European race in a country in which Europeans hold political power” (OED).

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*native-born citizen* for native citizen: Stage 4 Current ratio (native citizen vs. *native-born citizen*): 1.3:1

natural child is a euphemism for bastard, illegitimate child, or nonmarital child. But the phrase is nearly meaningless, all children being natural. See illegitimate child.

depicted, of a ——. Good editors routinely revise this stilted phrase, which takes four words to do the work of one. If, for example, you can say that someone is of a generous nature, you can invariably say that the person is simply generous. Cf. manner.

naught; nought. These are different spellings of the same word, meaning “nothing.” By convention, nought—especially in BrE—has come to signify the number zero (0). Naught is conventionally used in all nonmathematical contexts in which “nothing” is meant, usually accompanied by some form of come or go—e.g.:

- “Fujimori’s dramatic bid to move the hostage impasse off dead center by seeking Cuban assistance apparently came to naught, but he deserves credit for the effort.” Heading for Havana? “Pitt. Post-Gaz., 5 Mar. 1997, at A10.

See naught (n) & dreadnought. Sometimes nought ill-advisedly appears where the conventional word would be naught—e.g.:


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*came to nought for came to naught:*

Stage 4 Current ratio (came to naught vs. *came to nought*): 5:1

nausea (= the feeling one has just before vomiting) is pronounced /naue-za/, /naue-zha/, or /naue-sha/. The corresponding verb is nauseate /naue-za-ayt/.

nauseous (= inducing nausea) for nauseated (= experiencing nausea) is becoming so common that to call it an error is to exaggerate. Even so, careful writers tend to be sickened by the slippage and to follow the traditional distinction in formal writing. That is, what is nauseous makes one feel nauseated—e.g.: “No one in Mrs. Thompson’s crew would ever be so nauseous as to try to get everybody to pray aloud or form a prayer circle, but you can still tell what they’re all doing.” David Foster Wallace, “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s”, in Consider the Lobster 140 (2006). Through 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court, in its seven uses of either word, had maintained a perfect record—e.g.: “It is made up entirely of repetitive descriptions of physical, sexual conduct, ‘clinically’ explicit and offensive to the point of being nauseous; there is only the most tenuous plot.” Kaplan v. California, 413 U.S. 115, 116–17 (1973).

But other writers have spread the peccadillo, especially since the late 20th century—e.g.:

- “At first, she didn’t worry too much when she felt nauseous [read nauseated] and had a few more headaches than usual.” Laura Bendix, “Factory Stores Workers Worry About Illnesses,” Santa Fe New Mexican, 12 May 1995, at A1.

Nauseous is pronounced /naue-shas/.

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nauseous misused for nauseated: Stage 4 1940 ratio (felt nauseous vs. felt nauseous): 9:1 Current ratio: 1:1.5
**nautilus** (the mollusk with a spiral shell) has traditionally formed the plural *nautili* /nawt-ih-lee/, but since about 1970 *nautiluses* has been strongly predominant in AmE. In BrE and in World English, the two plurals have been locked in close competition since about 1920.

**Navajo; *Navaho.** Although *Navaho* was the predominant spelling as recently as the mid-1960s, today *Navajo* is standard. That's probably because it more closely resembles the Spanish etymon, *navajo*. Cf. *Mohave.*

*Navajo* has three plurals: *Navajos* (best), *Navajo* (second best), and *Navajoes* (not best at all). See **PLURALS (D).**

Current ratio (*Navajo vs. *Navaho): 13:1

Current ratio (*Navajos vs. *Navajoes): 25:1

**naval; navel.** *Naval,* adj., = of, relating to, or involving ships or a navy. *Navel,* n., = belly button. The correct phrase is *navel orange,* which has a navel-like depression at the top. But the mistaken phrase *naval orange* is fairly common—e.g.:


- "Sun Pacific, the largest naval orange [read navel-orange] grower in California and largest kiwi grower in the United States, is exporting the halves the oranges it normally ships because of the port impasse." Peter Fimrite, "Hard-Hit Citrus Growers Crushed by Port Dispute," *S.F. Chron.*

- "Near, should not be used adverbially in place of nearly. That use of the word is dialectal—e.g.: "It's long all right, but not near [read nearly] as long as the money shadow Tiger figures to cast by the time he's ready for the rocking chair alongside the 19th hole." Peter Finney, "Year One: A Gauge into Woods' Future," *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 27 Aug. 1997, at D1. See **DIACRIT.**

**necessitarianism.** See fatalism.

**near** misused for the adverb *nearly.* Stage 1

Current ratio (not nearly as vs. *not near as): 40:1

**nebula /neb-y-o-la/ (= an interstellar cloud consisting of gas and dust sometimes visible in the night sky) has two plurals, *nebulae* and *nebulas.* Although many dictionaries record only the Latinate plural (*ae*), the *-as form isn't uncommon—e.g.: "Designer Tony Walton's fiber-optic light backdrops created *nebulas* and fountains of colored lights to show off the dancers." Maggie Hall, "Miami's 'Jewels' Is a Gem of a Show," *Tampa Trib.*, 19 Apr. 1995, Metro §, at 6. Still, *nebulae* (*-y-o-lee*) has been strongly predominant since the word came into use in the 1700s. See **PLURALS (N).**

Current ratio (nebulae vs. *nebulas): 9:1

necessitous. See necessary.

neck-and-neck. This metaphorical phrase, from horse racing, is sometimes wrongly written *neck-in-neck—e.g.: “The top contenders in both the Republican Senate primary and the Democratic race for governor are neck-in-neck [read neck-and-neck] in the latest polls.” Richard L. Berke, “With 3 Primaries Tuesday, Michigan Voters Go Fishing,” N.Y. Times, 1 Aug. 1994, at A7. The mistaken form doubtless results from the common pronunciation, as if it were neck–n’-neck.

necessitate, necessitates, necessitated. The difference?

nectarous; *nectareous; *nectarean; *nectareal. Though all these adjectives are infrequent, the first is standard. The others are NECESSARY VARIANTS.

nectar. The feminine form, né, often precedes a married woman’s maiden name <Mrs. David Smith (née Mary Jones)> or a screen name <Mark Twain (né Samuel Clemens)> or a screen name <Marilyn Monroe (née Norma Jean Baker)>.

In AmE, the accent mark is often omitted. But especially in the uncommon masculine form, the two characters are apt to be mistaken as a typographical error—so the accent is recommended. See DIACRITICAL MARKS.

The two forms are pronounced the same: /nay/. The feminine form is often misapplied to men’s names—e.g.: • “The movement’s founding troika—Ed ‘Big Daddy’ Roth, Von Dutch (née [read née] Kenneth Howard) and Robert Williams—started out, back in the ’50s, as hot-rod enthusiasts who worked on cars instead of canvas, proudly raising middle fingers to snobby high-art aficionados.” Jessica Dawson, “‘Second Childhood’: The Mechanics of ‘Low Brow,’” Wash. Post, 19 July 2001, at C5.


By slipshod extension, née is used to mean “formerly” and applied to nonliving objects—e.g.: • “Sporting News Radio, née [read formerly] One on One, now mostly exists as a promotional tool for everything Sporting News, from the weekly magazine to its website.” Phil Mushnick, “All Ads, All the Time,” N.Y. Post, 22 July 2001, at 94.

• “If the Bayer (née [read formerly] Alcoa) sign hadn’t been on Mount Washington all these years, we would be just as well without it.” Editorial, “Lighting Their Ire: Signs on Buildings Bring Out the Art Critic in Everyone,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 22 July 2001, at E3.

needless variants, two or more forms of the same word without nuance or differentiation—and seemingly without even hope for either—teem in the English language. They’re especially common in the outer reaches of the language—in technical vocabulary. Unfortunately, the unnecessary coexistence of variant forms (e.g., adjectives ending in -tive and -tory) leads not to precision in technical writing but to uncertainties about authorial intention. The trusting reader silently thinks, “The writer used investigatory...
on the previous page but now has pressed *investigatory* into service—is a distinction intended?"

"It is a source not of strength," wrote H.W. Fowler, "but of weakness, that there should be two names for the same thing [by-forms differing merely in suffix or in some such minor point], because the reasonable assumption is that two words mean two things, and confusion results when they do not" (FMEU1 at 373). The confusion is perhaps greatest when the writer who is fond of *inelegant variation* discovers the boundless mutations of form that exist in unabridged dictionaries: *submission* will appear in one sentence, *submittal* in the next; *quantify* on one page, *quantitate* on the next; and so on.

"On the other hand," Fowler advises us, "it may be much too hastily assumed that two words do mean the same thing; they may, for instance, denote the same object without meaning the same thing if they imply that the aspect from which it is regarded is different, or are appropriate in different mouths, or differ in rhythmic value or in some other matter that may escape a cursory examination" (FMEU1 at 373). Hence the nonlawyer should not jump to assume that *necessities* is uncalled for in place of *necessities*; that *acquittance* has no place alongside *acquittal*; that *recusacy* is yet another needless variant of *recusal*; that *burglarize* is as good for a British audience as it is for an American one; and so forth.

Any number of entries throughout this work attempt to ferret out and discriminate between cognate words with established or emerging distinctions and those that seem, at present, to have neither. To the extent possible, words and phrases rightly classifiable as needless variants ought to be dropped from the language.

**negative, in the.** See affirmative, in the.

**Negatives. A. Negative Prefixes.** The primary negative (or "private"") prefixes in English are *in-* (assimilated in many words to *il-, im-, ir-), *un-, non-, anti-,* and *a-.* For purposes of simple negation, *in-* is the most particularized of these prefixes, since it generally goes only with certain Latin derivatives (e.g., *inaccessible, inarticulate, intolerant*). *Un-* usually precedes most other adjectives, including Latin derivatives ending in *-ed* (e.g., *undilated, unexhausted, unsaturated*). *Non-* is the broadest of the prefixes, since it may precede virtually any word. It often contrasts with *in-* or *un-* in expressing a nongradable contrast, rather than the opposite end of a scale—e.g.: *nonscientific* (= concerned with a field other than science) as opposed to *unscientific* (= not in accordance with scientific principles). *Anti-*, of course, has the special sense "against." *A-* (= not, without) appears mostly but not exclusively with Greek derivatives (e.g., *theist, atheist, symmetrical/asymmetrical*) and scientific terminology (e.g., *mitosis/amitosis*). Because this prefix is easily confused with the defunct Old English prefix *a-* (which is not a negative), it is best kept to established pairings.

As a general rule, try to find the most suitable particularized prefix—and if no other is really suitable, try *non-.*

But consistency is often difficult to find with particular roots. For example, *unsaturated fats* has the corresponding noun *nonsaturation,* not *un*nonsaturation. Likewise, we have *indubitable* but *undoubted,* *irresolute* but *unresolved,* irrespective but *unrespected.* From a typographical standpoint, negative prefixes cause trouble with **phrasal adjectives**, as in *uncross-examined* witness. Wordings that are less compressed are usually preferable; hence *a witness who wasn't cross-examined.*

With few exceptions, the prefix *non-* does not take a hyphen unless it is attached to a proper noun, as with *non-European.* See **punctuation** (I).

**B. Not *un-; not in-.** Double negatives such as *not untimely* are often needlessly used in place of more straightforward wordings such as *timely.* When the negatives serve no such identifiable purpose, they ought to be avoided. To say, for example, that the point is *not uninteresting* or that somebody's writing is *not unintelligible* is probably to engage in a time-wasting rhetorical flourish.

This type of litotes (the negation of an opposite) often makes language convoluted. George Orwell ridiculed it with this example: "A not unblack dog was chasing a not unsmall rabbit across a not ungreen field." "Politics and the English Language" (1946), in 4 Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell 127, 138 n.1 (1968).

**C. Periphrastic Negatives.** Generally we disagree is preferable to *we do not agree—* except that the latter may be slightly more emphatic. Directness is better than indirectness; hence *violate* rather than *fail to comply with; violate* rather than *do not adhere to,* and the like. See **periphrasis.**

**D. Not . . . all.** On the problems caused by this phrasing, see **all** (B).

**neglectful; *neglective.** The latter has always been a **needless variant** that is rare or obsolete.

Current ratio: 486:1

**negligeer; *negligée; *négligé; *négligé.** Some will say that it's good in any form. But in fact *negligeer* is standard. The other three are variants—*négligé* being a **gallicism.**

**negligence; *negligency.** The latter has always been a **needless variant.**

Current ratio: 6,196:1

**negligible.** So spelled—not *neglible*. See **able** (A).

**negociate** (= to discuss [something] for the purpose of reaching a bargain or other agreement) is preferably pronounced /na-goh-shee-ayt/, not /na-goh-see-ayt/.

**neither. A. Pronunciation.** In AmE generally, /nee-thər/ is the traditionally preferred pronunciation; /ni-thər/ is a mildly pretentious variant in most
parts of the country. But in BrE, /nɪ-thər/ is usual. Cf. either (a).

B. Number. As a pronoun, neither is construed as a singular. That is, it should take a singular verb, and any word for which neither is an antecedent should also be singular. Hence neither of the offers was a good one is grammatically better than *neither of the offers were good ones. E.g.:• “The fact is that neither of these men were [read was] an expert on language,” John McWhorter, The Word on the Street 63 (1998).


But often it’s not that simple. In the first example below, the plural themselves is necessary to avoid an awkward or sexist construction (though it would be better to recast the sentence). In the second and third examples, however, there is no danger of sexism because the company isn’t mixed—and therefore the singular would be the better choice. E.g.:• “Even though I was the first born (a common entrepreneurial trait), neither of my parents worked for themselves, and that was a strike against me.” Teresa Burney, “Need Job Advice? Break Out the Chivas (Disc, That Is),” St. Petersburg Times, 9 June 1996, at G1. (A suggested revision: neither of my parents was self-employed.)


• “Defense attorneys said neither of the women had acknowledged their [read her] pregnancy to themselves [read herself] or anyone else and said both were distraught and irrational facing the moment of birth.” Pat Wieden-keller, “Pregnancy, Denial, Tragedy,” Newsday (N.Y.), 21 Nov. 1996, at A27.

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neither as a pronoun erroneously construed with a plural verb: Stage 3 Current ratio (Neither of them is vs. *Neither of them are): 5:1

C. Beginning Sentences with. It is permissible to begin a sentence with neither—just as it is with nor—when embarking on yet another negative subject. E.g.:• “Neither must we suppose that the size of the book makes any difference: big books are not necessarily scholarly, nor small ones superficial.” Frank Wilson Cheney Hersey, English Composition 9 (1921).

• “Neither are they outraged at themselves for playing racial politics by insidiously implying, or outright accusing, every black Clinton Cabinet member of being either a crook or incompetent, or both.” Letter of Thomas E. Davis, “GOP Expresses Outrage, but Its Conduct Is Outrageous,” Nashville Banner, 2 July 1996, at A4.

See nor (A).

neither . . . nor. A. Singular or Plural Verb. This construction takes a singular verb when the alternatives are singular or when the second alternative is singular—e.g.:• “Neither the radiator nor the water pump leak [read leaks].” Ray Magliozzi & Tom Magliozzi, “Duplicate Cars Means Customer Pays More for Name,” Amarillo Daily News, 21 Aug, 1993, at B5.

• “Neither the Health Department nor the governor’s office were [read was] aware of the changes until the governor received the bills, along with hundreds of others, the following week.” Russell Garland, “Plummer Bill Proves Perils of Last-Minute Legislation,” Providence J.-Bull., 21 July 1997, at A1.

• “Neither Haley nor Rowell were [read was] charged with setting the Macedonia fire.” Prosecutor Drops Kevorkian Case,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2 Aug. 1997, at 25.


Cf. either (b).

Moreover, the traditional position is that the verb should precisely match the form mandated by the second of the alternatives. E.g.: “Neither Barton nor I am saying that equities aren’t a great long-term place to be.” Robert Farrell, as quoted in “Can Stocks Still Rise?” Fortune, 18 Aug. 1997, at 68. But in fact, this “rule” has almost never been followed in actual practice when the second element is first person (thereby mandating am). As an empirical matter, *neither he nor I am has never been as common in print as *neither he nor I are. Both are editorially subpar. Yet apart from am constructions, there are several possible variations, among them these:

Neither you nor he is right.
Neither I nor she is right.
Neither he nor you are right.
Neither I nor you are right.

As we have already seen, errors frequently occur—e.g.: “Neither you nor I is likely to change the world.” Jefferson D. Bates, Writing with Precision 82 (rev. ed. 1988). Because any choice there is likely to sound wrong, it’s a good idea to write around the problem instead. Reversing the order of the elements would improve the sound of the sentence: Neither I nor you are likely . . . , or better yet Neither one of us is likely . . . . See PREVENTIVE GRAMMAR.

Of course, when both alternatives are plural, the verb is plural—e.g.: “Neither those goals nor the overall themes of the conference fit the extremist image conjured up by some critics of the gathering, like Senators

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neither . . . nor with singular alternatives erroneously paired with a plural verb: Stage 3

B. Number of Elements. These correlative conjunctions best frame only two elements, not more. Though it's possible to find modern and historical examples of neither . . . nor with more than two elements, these are unfastidious constructions. When three or more are involved, it's better not to say *They considered neither x, y, nor z. Instead, say They didn't consider x, y, or z. Or it's permissible to use a second nor emphatically in framing three elements: They considered neither x, nor y, nor z. Cf. either (n).

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neither . . . nor with more than two elements: Stage 3

C. Parallelism. Not only should there be just two elements, but also the elements should match each other syntactically. (See parallelism.) E.g.:• an error—e.g.: “The arrangement has worked because Practically speaking, though, language is already well stocked. New words must fill demonstrable voids to survive, and each year a few good ones get added to the language. Some become vogue words; others are slow to achieve acceptance; still others, denoting scientific innovations, might never become widely known. Fortunately, lexicographers monitor new entrants into the language and periodically publish compilations such as these: John Ayto, 20th Century Words (1999); Stuart Berg Flexner & Anne H. Soukhanov, Speaking Freely (1997); Sara Tulloch, The Oxford Dictionary of New Words (1991); John Algeo, Fifty Years Among the New Words (1991).

It is sobering to record what the greatest of late-20th-century lexicographers said about the slow acceptance of new words: "It usually takes slightly more than a century for a word to reach such a state of maturity that it is not recognizably or instinctively felt to be a newcomer." Robert W. Burchfield, Points of View 103 (1992).

Yet the explosion of electronic media in the second half of the 20th century has compressed time, and the standards for "maturity" are dropping. For whatever reason, we seem perfectly comfortable today with terms such as workaholic (1971), talk radio (1972), couch potato (1973), PC (a personal computer in the 1980s, political correctness in the 1990s), sound bite (1980), and terms from the 1950s and 1960s such as do-it-yourself, glitch, mall, meritocracy, middle management, nitty-gritty, and prime time. For an excellent discussion about speculating on the success of neologisms, see Allan Metcalf, Predicting New Words (2002).

Neologism is pronounced /nee-ә-hi-loh/. See Neologism.

neologist; *neologizer. The first is standard, the second a needless variant. E.g.: “Sir Thomas Elyot, the great neologist [read neologist], deliberately set out to improve and promote English by introducing new words into the language.” Ronald Wardhaugh, Proper English: Myths and Misunderstandings About Language 76 (1999).

Current ratio: 11:1

neonaticide. See infanticide.

*Nepotiel. See Neapoliian.

nepew; niece. Legally speaking, are the children of a spouse's siblings one's nephews and nieces? No: it's only by courtesy that they're so called.

nepotism is best reserved for the sense "bestowal of official favors upon members of one's family," and not attenuated to refer to friends or political connections. The root sense of nepot- in Latin is "nephew, grandson."

nerve-racking (= exasperating) is so spelled—not *nerve-wracking. See rack.

Current ratio: 1.4:1

Netherlands, the; Kingdom of the Netherlands; Holland; Dutch; The Hague. A. Generally. The European country is called the Netherlands. The Netherlands—together with Aruba, Curaçao, and St.
Maarten—makes up the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In 2010, Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba became special municipalities of the Netherlands. Strictly speaking, Holland refers to two coastal provinces of the Netherlands (North Holland and South Holland), and not to the country’s ten other provinces. Still, Holland is commonly used to refer to the Netherlands as a whole. The people, language, and culture are called Dutch. Although the country’s capital is Amsterdam, its government is located in The Hague.

B. Capitalization, Number, and Possessive Form. The article the is not capitalized in the Netherlands (though it always is in The Hague). The country’s name is plural in form but grammatically singular. This means that it takes a singular verb <the Netherlands is home to the International Court of Justice> but forms a plural possessive <the Netherlands’ population is over 16 million>.

C. Denizens. The predominant noun for a citizen of the Netherlands has consistently been Hollander from 1680 to the present day. Netherlander, an alternative term, was common in the mid-1600s but fell into relative decline. *Netherlands (Netherlandian) is a NEEDLESS VARIANT. See denizen labels.

Current ratio (Hollanders vs. Netherlanders): 3:1
Current ratio (Netherlands vs. *Netherlandian): 231:1

One is tempted to say that /na-vah-da/ is incorrect, since the native people’s preference ought to be determinative—but things are not so simple. Many highly refined people throughout the U.S. believe that /vah/ is the better pronunciation. Given this circumstance, one can only conclude that both pronunciations are acceptable. But if you’re in the state, you’d be wise to say /vad/. Cf. Missouri.

new expected. Eric Partridge criticized this phrase as “incorrect—or, at best, loose—for expected never” (U&D at 202). But in fact the two phrases don’t mean precisely the same thing. Idiomatically, it’s quite proper to say that you never expected something that simply didn’t enter your mind. But to say that you expected never means that you thought about it seriously and were skeptical. Imagine how the following passage would change if never expected were changed to expected never (with the necessary adjustments in syntax made): “Laloo never expected the Rapid Action Force to surround the chief minister’s residence on that fateful Friday afternoon. He never expected to be told to resign by 3 p.m. or face dismissal. He never expected to be confronted by his children in tears. And, most important, he never expected the administration to cut itself off from him.” Swapan Dasgupta & Farzand Ahmed, “The Education of Rabri Devi,” India Today, 11 Aug. 1997, at 18.

neurofibroma. See neuma.

neurofibroma. See neuroma; *neurofibroma. These synonyms denote a usually benign tumor formed on a nerve-cell sheath. The first has consistently been used more frequently in English-language print sources than the second. Although the standard plurals before 1940 were *neuromata and *neurofibromata, usage shifted in the mid-20th century toward the anglicized plurals neuromas and neurofibromas, first in AmE and then in BrE.

Nevada is pronounced /na-vad-a/ inside the state but /na-vah-da/ throughout much of the rest of the country—perhaps on the analogy of enchilada and names such as Estrada and Prada. Given the sovereign right of citizens to choose how their place names are pronounced, the short a in /na-vad-a/ should be preferred.

nevertheless. See *but nevertheless.

New Hampshirite; *New Hampshirite; New Hampshire man. The first is standard; the second is a variant spelling (not nearly as common); the third, with its -man suffix, is a form that some find objectionable as being tinged with sexism. See denizen labels.

*new innovation. Because an innovation is something new or different, the phrase *new innovation is redundant—e.g.:

• “To work, a sequel must return you to the familiar but then lead you into new territory. There have to be new developments, in terms of the narrative and characterization, and it must include new innovations [read innovations] in terms of structure or setting.” Jane Roscoe, “With Right Stuff, Sequels Top Originals,” Newsday (N.Y.), 29 May 2001, at A27.

• “Totally new innovations [read Innovations or perhaps Notable or Remarkable innovations] also were apparent at NeoCon, especially in floor coverings.” Lisa Skolnik, “For Office or Home, Mixing It Up Is the Way to Go,” Chicago Trib., 24 June 2001, H&G §, at 1.

See redundancy.

New Jerseyan; New Jerseyite. The first is standard; the second is a variant used by the U.S. Government Printing Office. Although the -ite form predominated until the 1980s, the -an form is now significantly more common. See denizen labels.

Current ratio: 2:1

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
New Orleanian; *New Orleansian. The first is standard; the second is a fairly rare variant that many New Orleanians consider erroneous. Even though /leen/ isn’t an accepted pronunciation of the final syllable of the city’s name (see New Orleans), New Orleanian is pronounced /noo or-lee-nee-an/. See DENIZEN LABELS.

Current ratio: 196:1

New Orleans is acceptably pronounced either /noo or-lee-anz/ or /noo or-lanz/. Some natives say /noo orl-yanz/, /nahr-lanz/, or /naw-lanz/. Avoid /noo or-leenz/.

news. For most of its life, news was used as both a singular and a plural. It was only in the 19th century that the singular became the exclusively standard usage. The word continues to be regarded as singular—e.g.:


• “Since news has come out of the medical-device manufacturer’s generosity, some 800 requests for assistance have flooded in.” Steve Cranford, “James Question on NB’s Tax Deal,” Bus. J. (Charlotte), 8 Sept. 1997, at 1.

newstand. So spelled—not *newstand.

nexus. The acceptable plural forms are nexuses (English) and nexus (Latin). Naturally, the English form is preferable—e.g.: “The nexuses of activity for both rooms are the counters where the marijuana is dispensed.” Glen Martin, “The Tokin’ Joint,” S.F. Chron., 24 Aug. 1997, at Z1. Some writers have betrayed their ignorance of Latin by writing *nexii, as if it were a second-declension noun. (Actually, because nexus is a fourth-declension noun, it doesn’t change its form in the plural.) In Latin, *nexi refers to people who have been reduced to quasi-slavery for debt! Cf. apparatus & prospectus. See HYPERCORRECTION (A) & PLURALS (B).

nice = (1) subtle, precise <a nice question> <a nice distinction>; or (2) good, attractive, agreeable, pleasant <they’re nice people> <it’s a nice vacation package>. Although purists formerly objected to sense 2, it’s now universally accepted among reputable critics. Still, the word is so vague in that sense—as a generalized expression of approval—that stylists work to find a more concrete term to express their meaning.

nicety = (1) scrupulousness, fastidiousness, accuracy; (2) subtlety, difficulty, the quality of requiring a high level of precision; or (3) something elegant or refined; a luxury. Sense 3 is attested from the 15th to the 20th centuries <clean linen and other niceties of apparel> and has continued into the 21st. Given the primacy of senses 1 and 2, though, one wonders whether luxuries might not be a better word than niceties in the following sentences:


• “For luminaries like . . . Barbra Streisand and others, there are certain niceties that the studios will automatically provide.” Dan Cox, “They Asked for What?” Newsday (N.Y.), 8 July 1997, at B7.


niche is best pronounced /nich/. The pronunciation, predominant in AmE, has led to the phonetic misspellings *nitch* and *nitch—e.g.:

• “Bob said they are planning on more servicing and looking for a niche [read niche] that others can’t [fill].” Joan Pritchard, “Zide Brothers Travel American Way with Sporting Goods,” Parkersburg News (W. Va.), 27 Nov. 1994, at 1.


Although the pronunciation /neesh/ is heard among educated speakers, many consider it a pretentious de-anglicization of a word that has been anglicized since the 1700s. See PRONUNCIATION (D).

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*niche* misspelled *nitch* or *nitch: Stage 1

*nickack. See knickknack.

nictitate (= to wink or blink rapidly) is the standard form. (*Nictate is a needless variant.) This word verges on SESQUIPEDALITY.

nidus /ni-das/ (= a nest or breeding place), a Latinate technical term, conventionally forms the plural nidi /ni-di/—not niduses. The related term nidology denotes the study of birds’ nests.

niece. See nephew.

Nietzsche. So spelled—though often misspelled *Nitsche. The name is pronounced /neet-chah/—not /neetsh/ or /neet-chee/.

Niger (the African country) has the anglicized pronunciation /ni-jor/, which is preferred in English-language contexts. Locals mostly use the Frenchified pronunciation /nee-zhair/.

niggardly (= grudging, stingy) derives from an Old Norse word (hugr “covetous, stingy”); it has nothing to do with the racial slur that it sounds similar to. E.g.: “A tall, heavy-set, good-looking Irishman, he was never niggardly about attorney fees.” Murray T. Bloom, The Trouble with Lawyers 272 (1970). Even so, prudent
speakers and writers have come to shun it just to avoid misunderstandings. The word has been in decline in English-language print sources since 1950.

Unfortunately, the word itself is sometimes misspelled because of such misunderstandings—e.g.: “Mr. Graham carries a reputation for being niggeredly [read niggardly] but he insists there is a difference between shrewd investment and frivolous spending.” “Soccer: No Denying Graham’s Right to Title,” Daily Telegraph, 13 May 1991, at 35.

nightie (= a woman’s or child’s nightgown), a diminutive dating from the late 19th century, has been predominantly so spelled in AmE since about 1915 and in BrE since about 1955. *Nighty* is a variant spelling.

Current ratio: 4:1

nihilism is pronounced /ni-ә-li-zәm/ or /nee-ә-li-zam/. The _-h_ is silent.

nimbus has two plurals, nimbus(es) and nimbi, which are about equally common. Nimbus(es) might be considered preferable as the anglicized plural—e.g.: “Happy faces and halos (she calls them *nimbus(es)*) are parts of her visual vocabulary.” Donald Miller, “Welcome the Mystery,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 31 Mar. 1995, Weekend Mag. §, at 2. See plurals (b).

nimrod. According to all the standard dictionaries—such as *W11* and the *SOED*—this word means “a skillful hunter.” The term derives from the name of a king of Shinar ( Nimrod), who is described in Genesis as a mighty hunter. And the word is often used in this traditional sense—e.g.: “Some sportsmen, of course, would say Mealey has a fatal flaw . . . . *Nimrods* and anglers believe he’s too cozy with groups as varied as ranchers, miners, loggers and even environmentalists.” D.F. Oliveria, “Unattended Youngsters at Great Ranch,” Spokesman Rev. (Spokane), 5 Aug. 1997, at B4.

In late-20th-century slang, though, the word came to mean “a simpleton; dunderhead; blockhead”—e.g.: • “Hey all you mack daddies (cool guys) out there: if you don’t want to sound like a *nimrod* (geek) on your next trip to kili cali (Southern California), don’t get all petro (worried).” “New in Paperback,” Wash. Post, 20 July 1997, at X12.

• “Thus we wind up with the tableau of several hundred more or less disgruntled *nimrods* trudging along like cattle through a process that is at best inefficient, at worst absurd.” Charlie Meyers, “Waiting, Waiting in Line for Leftovers,” Denver Post, 15 Aug. 1997, at D4.

• “Before they know it, they’ve become the sort of uptight *nimrod* who writes passive-aggressive tweets to their rail operator whenever they fail to get a seat in the mornings.” Stuart Heritage, “I Can’t Afford to Bring Up a Child in the Capital,” Guardian, 1 Oct. 2014, at 5.

Though this sense isn’t recorded in most standard dictionaries, it certainly exists and is well known among the generations that grew up watching Bugs Bunny—who used the term snidely in reference to the hunter Elmer Fudd. For now, this usage remains slang. But it surely threatens to kill off the hunter sense. For the fascinating origins of this slang meaning, see p. xlix.

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*nimrod* in the sense “simpleton”: Stage 5

*nitch(e)*. See *nich*.

*nitroglycerin; *nitroglycerine*. The first is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike.

Current ratio: 3:1

no. Pl. noes, preferably not *nos. See plurals (d). Cf. *yes.*

*no-brainer* (= a solution or course of action so obviously right that it needn’t be thought about much) is AmE slang dating from the 1950s. It surged into popularity in the mid-1980s and has since become something of a _vogue_ word not only in AmE but in World English as well.

no doubt. See *doubtlessly*.

*Noel*; *Noël*; *Nowell*. The song “The First Noel” has been traced back to a book of English carols dated 1833, with the spelling *Nowell*. Although the song is known to have originated in rural western England, the composer is unknown. The song title was spelled *nowell* through most of the 19th century, and this spelling made perfect sense. According to the *OED*, *nowell* is “a word shouted or sung as an expression of joy, originally to commemorate the birth of Christ”; it dates, somewhat surprisingly, from the 1300s. Chaucer used it in “The Franklin’s Tale”: “And nowel crieth every lusty [i.e., joyful] man.” The word fell into disuse in the 16th century.

Sometime after the song’s early-19th-century debut, probably in the late 19th or early 20th century, someone “corrected” the spelling of the song title (and verses) to *noel*, which is a French word meaning “a Christmas carol.” To make it even more Frenchified, some writers gave it a diaeresis (*noél*). Although this word is recorded in the English language from 1811, the *OED* contains only three illustrative quotations.

Most American adults who came of age in the 20th century are familiar with the spelling “The First Noel” and with front-yard Christmas signs that spell out *Noel* (or *Noël*). Yet many hymnals, such as the Episcopal Hymnal, consistently used the original spelling. This one makes more historical sense for two reasons. First, the song is English, not French. Second, the traditional English meaning is more in line with what most people intend today: someone with a Christmas display that says “Noel” probably doesn’t mean “a
no expense has been spared

Christmas carol," but instead something like “Christ is born!” Yet noel is the predominant form and will probably remain so, apart from a few stalwart hymnals and songbooks.

no expense has been spared (= somebody has spent a lot of money) is both hackneyed and crass. It’s typically the sort of phrase one expects to hear from a social climber. Cf. no object.

no fewer. See no less (A).

no holds barred. The metaphor comes from wrestling; in some matches, no wrestling holds are illegal. When used as a phrasal adjective, of course, it is hyphenated <a no-holds-barred matchup>.

Some writers, though, misunderstand the phrase and write *no-holes-barred—e.g.:


• “If Phil Mickelson is ever going to win a major—or even the ‘fifth major’ they are playing at TPC Sawgrass this week—he will not do it backing down from his no-holes-barred [read no-holds-barred] style of play.” Hank Gola, Daily News (N.Y.), 23 Mar. 2003, at 50.

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*no holes barred for no holds barred: Stage 1
Current ratio (no holds barred vs. *no holes barred): 74:1

noisome is often misconstrued as meaning “noisy; loud; clamorous.” In fact, it means “noxious; malodorous.” (Cf. fulsome.) The word is related etymologically to annoy.

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noisome in the sense “noisy”: Stage 3

no less. A. And no fewer. The phrase no less, like less, preferably refers to amounts or to mass nouns, not countable numbers. No fewer is the better phrase when discussing numbers of things. (See less (A).) But many good writers nod on this point—e.g.:

• “In this annual, there are no less [read no fewer] than five painters banking on wax for beauty.” Regina Hackett, “A Chance to Shine in Bellevue,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 19 July 1997, at C1.


When the sense is nothing short of, that phrase (or nothing less than) typically improves the sentence—e.g.: “Among the local newspapers, ‘The Hartford Daily Courant’ proclaimed that no less than [read nothing short of] an ‘orthographical mania’ was afoot in Hartford because a competing spelling bee was scheduled on the same spring night.” Joe Duffy, “Twain Floored by ‘Spelling Epidemic,’” Hartford Courant, 31 Aug. 1997, at H1.

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no less for no fewer in reference to a count noun: Stage 4

B. And not less. No less connotes surprise <he weighs no less than 300 pounds>. The phrasing in the example expresses astonishment that he weighs so much. Not less is more clinical and dispassionate <he weighs not less than 300 pounds>. That example states matter-of-factly that he weighs at least that much and maybe more.

no longer requires oxygen. This bit of medical jargon is a peculiar brand of illogic. The true sense, of course, is that the patient no longer requires supplementary oxygen—e.g.: “Since the operation, he says, he’s put on more than 10 pounds of muscle, no longer requires oxygen [insert supplementary before oxygen], and feels liberated to do practically whatever he wants.” Joe Rojas-Burke, “Health Plan OKs Tests for Teen,” Oregonian (Portland), 15 June 2000, at A1. The phrase is, however, perfectly proper when used by morticians.

nom de plume; nom de guerre. See pseudonym.

nomenclature (= a formal system of naming things, esp. in science and allied disciplines) is pronounced /noh-man-klay-char/ in AmE and /noh- men-klay-char/ in BrE.

nominal = in name only, but not in reality. The nominal head of a university department is one whose power is questionable; nominal is a put-down word. By extension, what is nominal may be real but not significant <the popular incumbent faced only nominal opposition>, so the word has taken on the sense of “very little.”

In grammar, nominal has an additional meaning: “of, relating to, or functioning as a noun” <a nominal clause>—though noun is often its own adjective <a noun clause>. And in this context nominal can itself be a noun, denoting a word or group of words functioning as a noun.

Nominalizations. See zombie nouns.

Nomina tive Absolutes. See absolute constructions.

Nominative and Objective Cases. See pronouns (A), (B).

no more than; not more than. The first is the more natural idiom—and historically by far the more common one. Cf. no less (B).

Current ratio: 3:1

non-. See negatives (A).
nonage (= the period of someone's minority or youth) is pronounced /ˈnɒn-ədʒ/ in AmE and /ˈnɒn-ədʒ/ in BrE.

nonbelief. See disbelief.

nonbeliever. See atheist.

noncomparable. See incomparable.

**NONCOMPARABLE ADJECTIVES.** See adjectives (b).

nonconstitutional; unconstitutional. These terms have distinct meanings. *Nonconstitutional* = of, relating to, or involving some legal basis or principle other than those of the U.S. Constitution <a nonconstitutional doctrine>. *Unconstitutional* (the more familiar word) = in violation of, or not in accordance with, principles found in the U.S. Constitution <an unconstitutional and therefore void statute>. See constitutional.

none = (1) not one; or (2) not any. Hence it may correctly take either a singular or a plural verb. To decide which to use, substitute the phrases to see which fits the meaning of the sentence: *not one* is or *not any* are. E.g.:

- “Sexton stressed—several times—that all the meats are farm-raised and USDA-approved and *none* are endangered.” Bob Walter, “Buffalo Bob’s Food Business Takes Walk on the Wild Side,” Sacramento Bee, 1 Sept. 1997, at B4.
- “There are many lessons that society can learn from Mother Teresa’s life . . . . But *none is* as powerful as the lessons that Mother Teresa said she learned from the poor.” *A Powerful Voice,* Orlando Sentinel, 6 Sept. 1997, at A18.

Generally speaking, *none is* is the more emphatic way of expressing an idea. But it’s also the less common way, particularly in educated speech, and it therefore sounds somewhat stilted. The problem is exacerbated by the unfortunate fact that some stylists and publications insist that *none is* is always singular, even in the most awkward constructions. Cf. **no one**.

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*none* in the sense “not any,” with a plural verb: Stage 5

| Current ratio (none is vs. none are) | 1:5:1 |
| Current ratio (none of them is vs. none of them are) | 1:1 |

noneconomic. See uneconomic.

*nonenforceable. See unenforceable.

nonessential; inessential; unessential. Although most American dictionaries list *unessential* as the usual term, it is the least common of these words (and has been since about 1940). *Inessential* is somewhat more common, but *nonessential* is by far the most common <nonessential computer storage>. *Nonessential* has predominated in print since about 1940.

| Current ratio (in order of headwords) | 3:1:1 |

nonesuch; nonsuch. The first spelling is etymologically superior, the word being a combination of *none* and *such*. *Nonsuch* is a chiefly BrE variant. Regardless of spelling, the first syllable is pronounced /nʌn/.  

*Nonesuch* functions both as a noun (= a person or thing without equal) and as an adjective (= unparallel-ed, incomparable).

**nonetheless**. One word in AmE, three (frequently) in BrE.

| Current ratio (one word vs. three words) | 6:1 |

nonexpert, adj. See inexpert.

nonincentive. See disincentive.

nonmarital child. See illegitimate child.

nonmaterial. See immaterial.

nonorganic food. See organic.

nonplus, the verb meaning “to baffle or confound unexpectedly,” preferably makes nonplussed and nonplussing in AmE and BrE alike, because the second syllable is stressed. (See spelling (b).) But the variant *nonplused* appears in some American writing—e.g.:

- “Almost daily, we were nonplused [read nonplussed] by the breaking revelations during the testimony.” “The Wonder of Welfare Fraud,” *L.A. Times*, 13 Apr. 1997, at B7.
- “Everything about her was otherworldly and astonishing: Her eyes were big and brown, her nose was tiny and upturned, and her mouth was set in a nonplused [read nonplussed] purse.” Curtis Sittenfeld, “Bad Latch,” *Wash. Post*, 9 Aug. 2015, at A15.

Since the 1990s there has arisen a mystifying notion that *nonplussed* is essentially synonymous with its near-antonym unfazed. That is a nonplussing misperception.

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1. nonplussed misspelled *nonplused*: Stage 1

| Current ratio (nonplussed vs. *nonplused*) | 9:1 |

2. *nonplused* as meaning “unfazed”: Stage 2

nonprofit; not-for-profit. The first is more common, but the second is increasingly used in AmE for greater accuracy. The phrase *nonprofit corporation* misleadingly suggests that the corporation makes no profits, but such a corporation actually does earn profits and then applies them to charitable purposes. *Not-for-profit* is thought to reveal more accurately that the purpose is not for private gain, though indeed the organization may profit. The hyphenated form of the word, *non-profit*, which sometimes appears in corporate literature and in unedited copy, is always ill-avoided. See negatives (A).
nonresponsive. See unresponsive.

Nonrestrictive Relative Pronouns. See that (A).

non sequitur (= [1] a conclusion that does not follow from the premises; or [2] a statement or response that is unrelated to the one before it) means, in Latin, “it does not follow.” The phrase should be spelled as two words, not hyphenated or spelled as one word; and because it has been fully naturalized, it should not be italicized. The phrase is frequently misspelled -tor, -tar, or -ter in the last syllable—e.g.: “The second half was almost a complete non-sequitor [read non sequitur], musically: The Marcia Ball Band from New Orleans.” Barbara Zuck, “Booming Cannons and Brass Kick Off Lancaster Festival,” Columbus Dispatch, 20 July 1995, at G7.

In the following sentence, the phrase is not only misspelled but also misused because the idea of something following (or not following) something else is missing: “To compare the suffering of Americans of Japanese ancestry to the suffering of the European Jews is a non sequitor [read non sequitur].” “The Manzanar Lesson.” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 30 Sept. 1996, at A9.

A non sequitur, strictly speaking, must be a conclusion that does not follow from the premises. A mere inaccurate or exaggerated comparison—as in the example just quoted—isn’t a non sequitur.

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non sequitur misspelled *non sequitor: Stage 1
Current ratio: 89:1

nonsuch. See nonsuch.

Non-U. See class distinctions.

Nonwords. H.W. Fowler’s formidable American predecessor, Richard Grant White, wrote incisively about words that aren’t legitimate words:

[A]s there are books that are not books, so there are words that are not words. Most of them are usurpers, interlopers, or vulgar pretenders; some are deformed creatures, with only half a life in them; but some of them are legitimate enough in their pretensions, although oppressive, intolerable, useless. Words that are not words sometimes die spontaneously; but many linger, living a precarious life on the outskirts of society, uncertain of their position, and cause great discomfort to all right-thinking, straightforward people.

Words and Their Uses 184 (rev. ed. 1899).

His polemical tone and hyperbole were characteristic and purposeful.

Among the words that he labeled nonwords are three that might still be considered so: *enthused, *experimentalize, *preventative. But with most of the others he mentioned, he proved anything but prophetic—they’re now standard: accountable, answerable, controversialist, conversationalist, donate, exponential, jeopardize, practitioner, presidential, reliable, tangential. The lesson is that in any age, stigmatizing words is a tough business—no matter how good the arguments against them might be.

This book contains entries on dozens of terms that might be considered nonwords by White’s standards. Among the more prominent ones are these (each of which is treated separately in this book):

*affront (see affront (a))
*analyze (see analysis)
*annoyance (see annoyance)
*discomfort (see discomfort (b))
*disburse (see disburse)
*doubtlessly
*fastly
*forbearance (see forbearance)
*furtherest
*illy (see ill)
*improper
*incline (see incline)
*inexpel
*inimicable
*intervent
*irregardless
*muchly
*optimalize
*paralyze
*plan
corporate
*quench
*soonest (see soon)
*thusly (see thus (b))
*uncategorically
*unmercilessly
*unrelentlessly

The term nonword might appear to be a nonword itself because until recently it did not appear in most dictionaries. Today that has changed, though: W11, for example, defines it as “a word that has no meaning, is not known to exist, or is disapproved,” and dates it from 1961. It also appears in RH2 and the OED.

no object. This phrase, literally speaking, should mean “not a goal; not something considered worth achieving.” In fact, though, writers use it to mean “no obstacle” or “no objection”—e.g.:

• “Culpin sees teleworking as capable of making a great contribution to economic growth in a global marketplace where distance is no object [read is irrelevant or is no obstacle].” Claire Gooding, “The Ups and Downs of Teleworking,” Fin. Times, 5 Apr. 1995, at xvii.
• “If you would love a fast, handsome car, and if money is no object [read no obstacle], take a close look at the 911.” Richard Truett, “Staying True to Form,” Fresno Bee, 4 May 1996, at D1.
• “But if size is no object [read not an objection or of no concern], take heart that in the heat of competition, one can purchase superior 2-megapixel cameras from the major brands for less than $200.” Stephen Williams, “Marketplace Reflections On a Grab Bag of Trends,” Newsday (N.Y.), 24 Dec. 2002, at A42.

The nonsense of the phrase is apparent especially in the following example, in which object bears a double sense, through zeugma: “So now it’s on to Florida and the Marlins, where money is no object but winning is.” Patrick Zier, “Leyland Must Produce,” Ledger (Lakeland, Fla.), 30 Mar. 1997, at C1. In that sentence,
seemingly, money is no object (= no obstacle) but winning is an object (= a goal); hence object means different things with the different subjects. And strictly speaking, the final word (is) should be followed by one to counteract the fact that the entire phrase (no object) seems to carry over as understood words—not just the noun object. Cf. no expense has been spared.

noon. See a.m. (c).

no one; nobody. No one is more common than nobody. In AmE, both terms are treated as singular nouns and therefore as singular antecedents <no one in his right mind would care>. But today, as indefinite pronouns, they’re often treated as plural to avoid sexism—e.g.:

- “Yes, Germany was ringed by enemies, but this was just the right time for a bold move, the fuhrer figured. No one in their right mind would expect it.” James Kindall, “The Battle of the Bulge,” Newsday (N.Y.), 15 Dec. 1994, at B3.


Fewer readers than ever seem to be bothered by this type of construction. My informal surveys suggest that 10–20% of a wide readership would think that such a construction lessens the writer’s credibility. That’s at B7.

no other . . . except. See other (b).

no other . . . than. See other (b).

*noplace. This dialectal word, answering to the standard anyplace, was fairly common in the 18th century, but it became stigmatized by the mid-19th century. Although it was moderately on the rise in print sources during the 1980s and 1990s, it remains non-standard for nowhere or no place—e.g.: “As the Joads’ plight continues to worsen there’s no work, no food, noplace [read nowhere or no place] decent to live.” Doug Mason, "Power of Steinbeck’s Book Evident on Stage," Knoxville News-Sentinel, 4 Feb. 1995, at B6. Cf. *anyplace & someplace.

nor. A. Beginning a Sentence. Nor, like neither, may begin a sentence. It must follow either an express negation or an idea that is negative in sense <This is not economical. Nor is it entirely satisfactory . . .>. E.g.:

- “The uttering of a word is not a consequence of the uttering of a noise, whether physical or otherwise. Nor is the uttering of words with a certain meaning a consequence of uttering the words.” J.L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words 114 (1965).

- “Walter did not begrudge his son such precautions. Nor, for his part, had Peter protested his father’s trading the townhouse on Blake Street for a corrode.” Candace Robb, The Riddle of St. Leonard’s 19 (large-print ed. 1997).


- “No, not even the prosecutors, was sure Boria would give the same version of events she had given to two grand juries.” Juan Gonzalez, “Her Bravery Shatters Blue Wall,” Daily News (N.Y.), 27 Sept. 1996, at 21.
In this construction, of course, the word *nor* needn't follow a *neither*. See *neither* (c). See also *also not*.

B. *For or*. When the negative of a clause or phrase has appeared at the outset of an enumeration, and a disjunctive conjunction is needed, *or* is generally better than *nor*. The initial negative carries through to all the enumerated elements—e.g.:

- “There have been no bombings *nor* [read *or*] armed attacks by one side against the other.” William D. Montalbano. “Links to IRA Seen in Rash of Violence in Northern Ireland,” *L.A. Times*, 12 Jan. 1996, at 1.
- “This is *no* longer practical *nor* [read *or*] desirable.” Helene Crane, “Overcoming Fear of Fear,” *Calgary Herald*, 1 June 1996, at A9.
- “The road has *no* sidewalks, shoulders, *nor* [read *or*] crossing guard. There is no other route to school,” Charles T. Bowen, “A Chance to Impact New Schools,” *Tampa Trib.*, 3 Aug. 1997, at 1. (On the use of *impact* in that title, see *impact*.)

Sometimes the best solution is to replace *nor* with *and* *no*—e.g.:

- “Although he has almost *no* name recognition *nor* [read *and* *no*] political cash, Uruhe appears undaunted.” Carlos V. Lozano, “23rd Congressional District,” *L.A. Times*, 30 Oct. 1996, at B1.

See not (b).

**nor’easter**. This *casualism* denotes a storm that brings high winds and rain or snow to the upper Atlantic Coast. The storm is so named because although the cyclonic storm itself moves northeasterly up the coast, the inland winds on its west side blow from out of the northeast.

While the folksy pronunciation might evoke images of a Yankee seafarer in some, the contracted term is neither authentic nor accurate. New Yorkers tend to drop their *r* sounds and are more likely to pronounce *nor’easter* as /naw-thees-tor/. As *Boston Globe* wordsmith Jan Freeman noted, “The facts, however, have not slowed the advance of *nor’easter*. Even in print, where it’s probably less common than in speech, it has practically routed *northeastern* in the past quarter-century or so. . . . [I]t would take a mighty wind, at this point, to blow *nor’easter* back into oblivion.”

The style guides at *The New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* ban the contracted form. But it is now established.

**normality; *normalcy*. The first has long been considered superior to the second—and it is more than twice as common in modern print sources. Born in the mid-19th century and later popularized by President Warren G. Harding, *normalcy* has never been accepted as standard by the best writing authorities. It still occurs less frequently than *normality*, and it ought to be treated as a **needless variant**. Careful editors continue to prefer *normality*—e.g.: “Set to emerge officially from the University of Chicago next week, the landmark study, called the ‘National Health and Social Life Survey’, shatters many preconceptions in its attempts to define *normality*.” Peter Gorner, “Sex Study Shatters Kinky Assumptions,” *Chicago Trib.*, 6 Oct. 1994, § 1, at 1.

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*normalcy* for *normality*: Stage 4
Current ratio (normality vs. *normalcy*): 2:1

**nor; northward(s); northerly.** See directional words.

**nosey.** See nosy.

**no sooner . . . than; *no sooner . . . when.** The first phrasing is better because *sooner* is a comparative that should take the word *than*, not *when*. Although the correct phrasing is vastly predominant, the loose phrasing is lamentably common—e.g.:

- “He had no sooner gotten into the 1996 Mercury Sable *when* [read *than*] he saw a police car chasing them down Old Highway 441.” Frank Stanfield, “Man Convicted in Bank Heist,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 10 Nov. 2000, at 2.

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*no sooner . . . when for *no sooner . . . than*: Stage 3

**nostalgia** /nah-stal-ja/—not /nah-stahl-ja/ or /nah-stal-je-ə/.

**nostrum** (/nos-trəm/ or /nohs-trəm/), meaning either “a quack medicine” or “a panacea,” forms the plural **nostrums**, not *nostra*—e.g. “If it wants to move into the global economy, [India] must give up many of the nostrums, such as the need to preserve small businesses, [that] are deeply enshrined in its social policy.” Peter Montagnon, “Old Protectionism Restrictions Progress,” *Fin. Times*, 19 Nov. 1996, at 4. See plurals (b). Cf. *rostrum*.

**nosy** (= unduly inquisitive; prying) has been the standard spelling since about 1950 in AmE and BrE alike. *Nosey*, once the predominant form, is now a variant.

Current ratio: 3:1

**not. A. Placement of.** When used in a construction with *all* or *every*, **not** is usually best placed just before that word. E.g.:

- “While *every* letter *cannot* be answered, your stories may be used in future columns.” Eileen Ogintz, “Children Connect on a Caribbean Cruise,” *News & Observer* (Raleigh), 31 Aug. 1997, at H7. (A possible revision: *While not every letter can be answered . . . .*) See all (n).
B. Not . . . nor. This construction should usually (when short phrases or clauses are involved) be not . . . or. E.g.:

- “As parents, we need to encourage our children to focus on our inner character, not on our superficial traits, nor on marketing-driven peer expectations.” Ellen J. Dewey, “Dispelling a Myth,” Lancaster New Era, 17 Aug. 1997, at P3. (A possible revision: As parents, we need to encourage our children to focus on our inner character, not on our superficial traits or on marketing-driven peer expectations.)
- “The Ramona trial . . . did not reunite the Ramonas, nor did it convince Steph Ramona that she may have been wrong.” Ann Rule, “Recalling an Elusive Past,” Wash. Post, 7 Sept. 1997, Book World §, at 6. (A possible revision: The Ramona trial did not reunite the Ramonas or even convince Steph Ramona that she might have been wrong.)

See nor (a).
- “The shooter was not a convicted felon nor does it appear his mental health history would have triggered sufficient alarm.” “The Parkers’ ‘Sound Cause,’” Baltimore Sun, 3 Sept. 2015, at A16. (A possible revision: The shooter did not have a prior felony conviction or a mental-health history that would have triggered sufficient alarm.)

C. In Typos. Not is a ready source of trouble. Sometimes it becomes now, and sometimes it drops completely from the sentence. This tendency helps explain why some newspapers use contractions such as shouldn’t and wouldn’t: the negative is unlikely to get dropped. See not guilty (A).

D. Not [this] but [that]. This construction sometimes leads to missetes if the negative isn’t well placed—e.g.: “The dungeon is the center of a debate over not the effectiveness of pedagogic hard labor but the race of the punished and the race of the punishers.” Jon D. Hull, “Do Teachers Punish According to Race?” Time, 4 Apr. 1994, at 30. (A possible revision: The dungeon is the center of a debate not over the effectiveness of pedagogic hard labor but over the race of the punished and the race of the punishers.)

E. Not only . . . but also. Not only . . . but also. See not only . . . but also.

notable. See noticeable.

not all. See all (s).

not all that. See all that.

notarize, originally an Americanism dating from the 1920s, is now commonplace in AmE and BrE alike—e.g.: “Patrick Henry Talbert, a minister who notarizes some Greater Ministries documents, has been sued twice in the past three years by people claiming he bilked them of their investments.” Michael Fechter, “IRS Probes Ministry’s Gift Program,” Tampa Trib., 25 Aug. 1997, at 1.


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*notary publics for notaries public: Stage 1

Current ratio (notaries public vs. *notary publics): 3:1

not as good of a . . . . See as . . . as (d).

notate. See note, vb.

not . . . because. See because (c).

note, vb.; notate. The latter, a back-formation from notation dating from 1871, is a needless variant except in reference to musical notation.

not . . . either. See either (e).

not even. See no one.

not every. See not (A).

noteworthy. See noticeable.

not-for-profit. See nonprofit.

not guilty. A. And innocent. It used to be that only journalists made the mistake of writing plead innocent rather than plead not guilty, but now this phrase has made it even into judges’ writing. Lawyers should avoid the phrase, since there is no such thing as a plea of innocent. Journalists, on the other hand, avoid not guilty merely because not might get accidentally dropped or changed to now:

Many newspapers—and it tends to drive lawyers a little crazy—but many newspapers insist on saying that a defendant “pleaded innocent”; they will not report that he or she “pleaded not guilty.” I’ve gone to clients for many years and said, “That’s wrong. People don’t plead innocent; they are not found innocent. They plead and are found ‘not guilty.’” Now I realize that newspaper writers live in perpetual fear of the word not either being dropped by a printer or being changed from not to now. Therefore, whenever possible, they shy away from the word not, even at the expense of strict accuracy. . . . The lesson is simply this: Before you dismiss others’ workmanship, do understand why they have said what they have said; there may be a good reason for it.


Fair enough. But writers who do have enough time for careful proofreading shouldn’t sacrifice accuracy in this way.

Strictly speaking, not guilty and innocent aren’t quite synonymous. To be innocent is to be blameless. To be not guilty is to have been exonerated by a jury of a crime charged—regardless of actual blame. So in a sentence such as the following one, many can’t help thinking that the writer is blurring a distinction—e.g.: “A San Francisco jury found him innocent [read not guilty] . . .

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plead innocent for plead not guilty: Stage 4

B. *Not guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. This phrasing is ambiguous. The standard by which a jury decides criminal charges is this: a defendant is guilty only if the evidence shows, beyond a reasonable doubt, that he or she committed the crime. Otherwise, the defendant is not guilty. So we say that a defendant was not found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

But it doesn’t follow that we should also say that a defendant was found *not guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Is that not guilty (beyond a reasonable doubt) or not guilty-beyond-a-reasonable-doubt? The latter idea makes more sense—e.g.: “The question is whether a judge can reach a contrary conclusion on the second charge—deciding that though a defendant was not guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, he nonetheless probably committed the crime.” "High Court's High-handed Decision," Chicago Trib., 26 Jan. 1997, at 20.

Yet many readers will misconstrue the phrase. Regardless of the writer’s intention, some will think of *not guilty beyond a reasonable doubt as a strong vindication—rather than as the slight vindication it is (we, the jury, had the slightest bit of reasonable doubt, so we had to find the defendant not guilty). The writer might have gotten it right in the following sentence, but nonlawyers are likely to be misled: "When you know all the facts [of the O.J. Simpson case], you’ll see that the prosecutors failed to meet their burden of proof, and how, contrary to the court of public opinion, the jury arrived at their verdict of 'not guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.'” Patricia A. Jones, "Uncensored: Authors Answer Questions Left with Simpson Verdict," Tulsa World, 1 Dec. 1996, at G5.

If somebody is found not guilty, say not guilty. Omit the standard (beyond a reasonable doubt) to prevent a miscue.

*not hardly. This robust barbarism is fine if your purpose is to show dialect, but it doesn't otherwise belong in the serious writer’s toolbox—e.g.:


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*not hardly for hardly: Stage 1

noticeable; notable; noteworthy; noted. These words overlap to a degree. Noticeable = easily seen or noticed (as, e.g., scars)—the word is generally confined to physical senses. Notable = (1) prominent; excellent <notable books of the season>; or (2) easily seen or noticed (applied to qualities as well as to material things) <her notable industriousness>. Noteworthy = worthy of notice or observation; remarkable <a noteworthy commencement address>. Noted = famous; celebrated; well known <a noted biographer>.

It is worth noting that a noted or notable person may not be noticeable; that a noticeable person may not be at all notable or noted; but that noteworthy achievements may lead one to become noted or notable—and perhaps, after some media attention, even noticeable.

On noticeable as a frequently misspelled word, see spelling (a).

no time should be lost. See lose (b).

not in-. See negatives (b).

not in a position to. This phrase is often wordy for cannot, can't, could not, or the like—e.g.: “Granted, we're talking about hockey players, who, unlike their basketball and football counterparts, usually are not in a position to [read can't] reap immediate financial rewards if they leave early.” Michael Hunt, “Bound by a Common Goal,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 27 Mar. 1997, Sports §, at 1.

*notion seconded. See motion seconded.

not less. See no less (b).

not more than. See no more than.

not only . . . but also. These correlative conjunctions must frame syntactically identical sentence parts—e.g.:

• “Many board games, electronic toys and computer programs are not only enjoyable but also provide [read not only are enjoyable but also provide] educational benefits.” Jeffrey L. Derevensky & Rina Gupta, "Christmas Without Elmo,” Montreal Gazette, 19 Dec. 1996, at B3. (In that revision, the conjunctions frame two verb phrases. Another possible revision: Many board games, electronic toys, and computer games are not only enjoyable but also educational. The conjunctions frame two adjectives.)

• “It not only will save construction costs but also the cost of land acquisition and demolition.” Donna Leslie, “Stadium Belongs on the Riverfront,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 23 Nov. 1997, at D3. (A possible revision: It will save not only construction costs but also the cost of land acquisition and demolition. The conjunctions correctly frame two noun phrases.)

• “These foundation-like funds are useful not only for small donors but also for big donors who don’t want to hassle with the red tape.” Susan Lee, “Loosen Up a Bit, Folks,” Forbes, 15 Dec. 1997, at 64. (The conjunctions frame two for-phrases.)

See parallelism.

One common issue in not only constructions is whether it’s permissible to omit the also after but. The answer is yes, the result being a casuallism—e.g.:

• “Commissioner Pete Rozelle assured Harris County officials that if they made some $67 million in improvements,
the Astrodome would be *not only* adequate but worthy of a Super Bowl.” “NFL Inadequacies,” Houston Chron., 6 Sept. 1995, at A20.


So how do you decide whether to include *also* (which will always result in a correct construction)? It’s merely a matter of euphony and formality: let your ear and your sense of natural idiom help you decide in a given sentence.

Another way to complete the construction is *not only* . . . *but* . . . as *well*. But a writer who uses this phrasing should not add *also*, which is redundant with *as well*—e.g.: “Feminist methods and insights [must] be adopted *not only* by female scholars, *but also* by males *as well*.” J.M. Balkin, “Turandot’s Victory,” 2 Yale J. Law & Humanities 299, 302 (1990). In that sentence, *also* should have been omitted.

No comma is usually needed between the *not only* and *but also* elements, and—as the last citation above shows—to put one in merely introduces an awkward break.

**notorious** may mean either “infamous” (the usual sense) <a notorious killer> or “famous” (an archaic sense). The word’s negative connotations are firmly established in modern usage. Yet the corresponding noun, *notoriety*, is more neutral <achieved notoriety for drug-peddling charges>.

**not proven.** See *proved*.

**Notre Dame, University of.** The predominant pronunciation among stuffed shirts is /noh-troh dahm/ (which, however, is the correct pronunciation for the Paris cathedral). The predominant pronunciation among university officials and alumni is /noh-troh daym/. The predominant pronunciation among all other Americans is /noh-tor daym/.

**not un-**. See negatives (b).

**notwithstanding** is a formal word used in the sense “despite,” “in spite of,” or “although.” In general English-language contexts, it has experienced a steady decline in use since about 1760. E.g.: “*Notwithstanding* an outpouring of editorial opinion on either side of this issue, there are no easy answers.” Richard Baum, “Perspective on China,” L.A. Times, 30 Nov. 1997, at M5.

The question that literalists ask is, What doesn’t withstand what else? Is the outpouring of opinion “not withstanding” (i.e., subordinated to) the lack of easy answers, or is the lack of easy answers “not withstanding” (subordinated to) the outpouring of editorial opinion? Because the former is the correct reading, some believe that *notwithstanding* should be sent to the end of the phrase in which it appears: *The family's objection to the marriage notwithstanding, as opposed to Notwithstanding the family's objection to the marriage.*

But the literalist argument is very much in vain, as the *OED* attests with a 14th-century example of *notwithstanding* as a sentence-starter. This usage has been constant from the 1300s to the present day. In fact, the construction with *notwithstanding* following the noun first appeared more than a century later, and has never been as frequent. The *Century Dictionary* explains: “As the noun usually follows [the word not-\_withstanding], the [word] came to be regarded as a prep. (as also with *during*, ppr.), and is now usually so construed.” 3 *Century Dictionary* and *Cyclopedia* 4029 (1914). The word is not a dangler because it does not function as a participle.

**nought.** See *naught*.

**NOUN PLAGUE** is Wilson Follett’s term for the piling up of nouns to modify other nouns (MAU at 229). When a sentence has more than two nouns in a row, it generally becomes much less readable. The following sentence is badly constructed because of the noun-upon-noun syndrome, which (sadly) is more common now than in Follett’s day: “Consumers complained to their congressmen about the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s automobile seat belt ‘interlock’ rule.” One can hardly make it to the sentence end to discover that we’re talking about a rule. (Even worse, many writers today would leave off the possessive after *Administration.*) In the interest of plague control, the following rewrite is advisable: *the ‘interlock’ rule applied to automotive seat belts by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.* A few prepositional phrases and an adjective (automotive) do the job.

Readability typically plummets when three words that are ordinarily nouns follow in succession, although exceptions such as *fidelity life insurance* certainly exist. But the plague is unendurable when four nouns appear consecutively, as when writers refer to a *participation program principal category* or the *retiree benefit explanation procedure*. Occasionally one encounters even longer strings: in 1997, a major national bank circulated a form entitled Government Securities Dealership Customer Account Information Form—which might be something of a record.

It is true, of course, that noun-stacking really involves making all but the last noun into adjectives. But the problem is that many readers will think that they’ve hit upon the noun when they’re still reading adjectives. Hence a **MISCUE** occurs. For more on the use of nouns as adjectives, see functional variation (b).
Finally, it is worth cautioning against loading a single statement with too many abstract nouns ending in -tion. The effect isn’t pleasing:

- “This work led to a consideration of additional important attributes of information and communication media within organizations.” Ralph H. Sprague, “Electronic Document Management,” MIS Q., Mar. 1995, at 29.
- “All of the ‘classic’ assumptions that are at the basis of the terms ‘culture’ and ‘intercultural differences’ find expression in this intervention. That is why the situation at the Center is not a question of organizational change.” Micha Popper, “The Glorious Failure,” 33 J. Applied Behavioral Science 27 (1997).

For more on words ending in -tion, see zombie nouns. See also sound of prose.

Nouns as Adjectives. See functional shift (b).

Nouns as Verbs. See functional shift (d).

No use. Eric Partridge labeled this “incorrect—or, at best, colloquial—for of no use” (U&EA at 203). Yet it’s no use has greatly outranked it’s of no use in print sources since about 1830. Today many readers and listeners would consider no use colloquial, but the following examples certainly aren’t incorrect:

- “It is no use comparing this city to others, because there is no other city in the world like it.” Dennis Duggan, “The Battle in Defense of Hearth and Home,” Newsday (N.Y.), 8 May 1997, at A8.
- “She knows it’s no use forcing the feisty elders of Ferry County.” Eric Curless, “‘The Fire Ain’t Going to Get Us,’” Spokesman-Rev. (Spokane), 3 Sept. 2015, at A1.

The longer phrase, of no use, would be of no use in any of these citations unless the sentences were rearranged—and made slightly longer.


The phrase keeps the French plural nouveaux riches, as it has since it was first used in the 1790s. But some mistakenly write *nouveau riches or even (as a plural) *nouveau rich—e.g.:

- “Even for those nouveau rich [read nouveaux riches] with the spare change and audacity to have their own personal guard posted at the entrance, it still takes a moment.” “Back Porch,” S.F. Examiner, 22 Dec. 1996, at E3.

See plurals (b).

Some writers seem to believe that the phrase refers not to people but to newfound wealth—e.g.:


The singular and plural forms are pronounced /noo-voh reesh/.

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1. *nouveau rich for nouveau riche: Stage 1 Current ratio (nouveau riche vs. *nouveau rich): 50:1
2. *nouveau riches as a plural for nouveaux riches: Stage 1 Current ratio (nouveaux riches vs. *nouveau riches): 17:1
3. nouveau riche in reference to newfound wealth: Stage 1

B. And Its Near-Synonyms: parvenu; arriviste. The gallicisms parvenu (/pahr-vah-noo/) and arriviste (/ah-ree-veest/) are synonymous, meaning “a person who is newly rich; an upstart.” Arriviste can also refer to someone who has recently acquired power or success that isn’t necessarily monetary. Although nouveau riche is by far the most widespread of these terms, the others are hardly uncommon—e.g.:

- “The people at the arriviste tech companies sometimes consult with him to see what the neighbourhood wants.” Alec Scott, “Medium Rare,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 1 Sept. 2015, at L1.

But parvenu and arriviste are uncommon enough that they smack of sesquipedality.

Novella forms the plural novellas or (less good) *novelle. See plurals (b).
The actor and writer Paul Hogan popularized the phrase outside Australia in his Crocodile Dundee movies (the memorable one of 1986, the less memorable sequel of 1988, and the wholly forgettable second sequel of 2001). Hogan's catchphrase was No worries, mate. The wide appeal of those movies made the phrase something of a vogue expression, sometimes with and sometimes without mate tacked on the end. In many examples, American and British writers make clear that the phrase is an Australianism—e.g.:

- “Not since John McEnroe was thrown out five years ago had the laid-back, no-worries-mate Australian Open rocked the way it did Monday.” “Australian Fans Rock, but Agassi Still Rolls,” Wash. Post, 24 Jan. 1995, at C7.
- “[I]t would be scarcely worth turning up to play against a team that includes Wallaby full-back Mat Rogers, living personification of that ubiquitous Aussie catchphrase, 'no worries, mate!'” Huw Richards, “Rogers Learns to Handle the Pressure,” Frn. Times, 20 Nov. 2003, at 16.
- “‘No worries’, said Lonie, an Australian who was the only non-Californian signed by Tedford.” Jay Heater, “Cal Didn't Venture Far in Finding Strong Recruiting Class,” San Jose Mercury News, 5 Feb. 2004, Sports §, at 3.

But beginning about the year 2000, the expression had spread into mainstream AmE without any hint of its foreignness. The phrase now commonly appears without any reference to Australia at all, as in the title of Chris Tomasson's March 2004 article: “No Ball! No Basket! No Worries,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 19 Mar. 2004, at C7. Sometimes the phrase is part of the syntax <they had no worries about the weather that afternoon>, but often it's a catchphrase used as an incomplete sentence (and this is the quintessential Australianism)—e.g.:


nuance. Although in French this word is spoken with stress on the second syllable, in English the best (and commonest) pronunciation is /nuːs/.
blunder” (in Burchfield’s words) induced by false analogy with words such as muscular, spectacular, and vernacular. Though politicians and other educated people have had difficulty saying the word correctly, if you can do it you should. See pronunciation (b). Cf. metathesis & dialect.

William Safire has suggested that because Presidents Eisenhower, Carter, Clinton, and Bush (George W.) have used the mistaken pronunciation, speechwriters begin printing new-clear in place of this word in the versions of speeches that presidents read. “On Language,” 20 May 2001, § 7, at 24, 26. Not a bad idea.

In 2012, in a public forum, I asked Andrew Card—President George W. Bush’s chief of staff—whether the pronunciation of nuclear had ever been discussed in his presence in the Oval Office. His entirely serious answer: “Endlessly.”

**nucleus.** In traditional senses, the plural is nuclei—not nucleuses. E.g.:

- “He said the genetic therapy company scientists hope to target the mutation by injecting a small molecule made of DNA, the basic material of all cell nuclei [read nuclei].” Mark Guidera, “Oncor to Develop Gene Therapy for Obesity,” Baltimore Sun, 26 Mar. 1996, at C2.

- “[For DNA testing to work,] there have to be cell nuclei present, and hair that has been pulled away from its roots doesn’t contain any nuclei.” Laurie P. Cohen, “Inside the Cell,” Wall Street J., 19 Dec. 1997, at A1.

- “He said there are no queen bees or larvae in either of the nuclei [read nuclei], rendering them useless.” W.T. Eckert, “Beekeeper Allegedly Stings Clients,” Journal (Ogdensburgh, N.Y.), 2 Sept. 2014, News §, at 3.

But in sports talk—in which nucleus means “a core of strong players on a team”—nuclei is standard. E.g.:

- “The Islanders, with two potential lottery picks in the 1997 draft, plus one of the better young nuclei in the National Hockey League, could afford to surrender the five No. 1 draft picks required to sign either Sakic or Forsberg.” Eric Duhahtschek, “Cash Crunch,” Calgary Herald, 15 Feb. 1997, at D4.

- “Christie Burden, Megan Frank and Latoya Robinson all started a year ago and along with Selwyn make for one of the best—if not tallest—nucleuses around.” Michael S. Snyder, “Strongest in Decades,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 19 Nov. 1997, at 22.


See plurals (b).

Current ratio (nuclei vs. nucleuses): 1,223:1

**nuke, v.t.,** is a slangy word that means not only “to attack with nuclear weapons” but also “to destroy, demolish” or “to microwave (food).” The following examples illustrate the three senses:

- “I don’t think I’ve watched my video of the movie ‘Fail Safe,’ in which New York City gets nuked, more than 30 or 40 times.” Mike Royko, “Read On, Gluttons for Punishment,” Chicago Trib., 12 Mar. 1987, at C3.


See slang.

*numbedness.** See numbness.

**number.** See amount.

**number of. **Some pedants think that correctness dictates a number of people is. One critic, for example, refers to “the growing habit of using plural verbs with singular nouns,” adding: “A number of voters were unhappy’ illustrates the offense.” F. Thomas Trotter, “Out on the Campaign Trail, English Grammar Trampled,” Nashville Banner, 12 Sept. 1996, at A13.

But a number of is quite correctly paired with a plural noun and a plural verb, as in there are a number of reasons—e.g.:

- “But when asked, a surprising number of Cubans seem not to know exactly what it is they should be celebrating on December 25.” Pascal Fletcher, “Mixed Blessings for Castro’s Christmas Decree,” Fin. Times, 20 Dec. 1997, at 3.

- “Although most Jefferson scholars have considered the rumor unlikely, a gradually increasing number—including late historians Page Smith and Fawn Brodie—have given credence to the Hemings story.” Barbra Murray, “Clearing the Heirs,” U.S. News & World Rep., 22 Dec. 1997, at 54.

- “A number of clubs, particularly on the continent, operate with a head coach and a technical director who plays a major role in talent spotting.” “Tim: Buck Stops with Me Over Signings,” Birmingham Mail (U.K.), 3 Sept. 2015, Sports §, at 64.

This construction is correct because of the linguistic principle known as synesthesis, which allows some constructions to control properties such as number according to their meaning rather than strict syntactic rules. Since the meaning of a number of things is many things (or several things), and since some things is plural, the verb must be plural.

The question becomes a close one, however, when an adjective precedes number & a significant number of them [is] [are]. Because the adjective emphasizes number as a noun, some writers make the verb singular—e.g.:

- “What matters more than this . . . is that there is abroad in the world these days a substantial number of groups and individuals whose varied labors make inevitable a deepening sense of self.” Wendell Johnson, Verbal Man: The Enchantment of Words 123 (1956; repr. 1965).

- “There is a substantial number (perhaps on the order of fifty) of standard verbs ending in -en that have been formed from adjectives.” Robert W. Burchfield, Points of View 91 (1992).

But these writers are strongly outnumbered by those who, even with the qualifying adjective, see the idiom as being a number of, necessitating a plural verb.
Linguistic authorities have a long tradition of preferring the plural here—e.g.:  

- “As the Greeks understood, there are an infinite number of degrees of simplicity, ranging from the simple colloquial to the simple grand.” A.R. Orage, Readers and Writers (1917–1921) 76 (1922; repr. 1969).  
- “As everybody knows, there are a vast number of words in the language . . . which were deliberately coined to imitate a sound.” Guy N. Pocock, “Sound and Sense,” in Foundations of English Style 180, 182 (Paul M. Fulcher ed., 1927).  
- “As men are now constituted, there are a great number who ever come to feel this surrender to be a sacrifice.” Otto Jespersen, Mankind, Nation, and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View (1946).  
- “We know, for example, that there are a significant number of differences.” Albert Marckwardt, Regional and Social Variations (1958), in A Language Reader for Writers 65, 70 (James R. Gaskin & Jack Suberman eds., 1966).  
- “There are still a large number of unanswered questions about this grammar-building activity.” Graham Wilson, Foreword, A Linguistics Reader xxii (Graham Wilson ed., 1967).  
- “A large number of our teachers of English have had such a meager scientific training that they cannot give their students what they need.” George Curme (as quoted in James Sledd, “Grammar or Gramarye?” in A Linguistics Reader 125, 135 (Graham Wilson ed., 1967)).  
- “There have been an almost infinite number of studies.” Earl W. Buxton, Looking at Language v (M.H. Scargill & P.G. Penner eds., 1969).  
- “There are a remarkable number of words in standard English that are very easy to confuse.” David Crystal, Who Cares About English Usage? 11 (1984).  
- “There are a surprising number of words that seem to us perfectly innocent and acceptable . . . which at one time or another were anathema in usage circles.” Dennis Baron, Declining Grammar 92 (1989).

Few usage critics have ever discussed this particular point. One who did, G.H. Vallins, labeled those who insisted on the singular “purists” (a derogatory term in his mind). (See Vallins, Good English: How to Write It 17 [1951].) Better to stick with the plural.

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a number of with plural noun and plural verb: Stage 5  
Current ratio (a number of them were vs. a number of them was): 82:1

**B. The number of.** When the phrase is used with the definite article the, everything changes. Now, instead of talking about the multiple things, we’re talking about the number itself, which is singular <the number of students planning to attend college is steadily rising>.

**C. With most.** See *most number of things.*

**NUMBERS.** See NUMERALS.

numbness; numbedness. The latter is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 9,252:1

numbskull. See numskull.

**NUMERALS. A. General Guidance in Using.** The best practice is to spell out all numbers ten and below and to use numerals for numbers 11 and above. This “rule” has five exceptions:

1. If numbers recur throughout the text or are being used for calculations—that is, if the context is technical or quasi-mathematical—then numerals are usual.  
2. Approximations are usually spelled out (about two hundred years ago).  
3. In units of measure, words substitute for rows of zeros where possible ($10 million, $3 billion), and numerals are used (3 inches, age 24, 3:15 pm).  
4. Percentages may be spelled out (eight percent) or written as numerals (8 percent or 8%).  
5. Numbers that begin sentences must always be spelled out. (See ii.)

**B. Not Beginning Sentences with.** It is generally considered stylistically poor to begin a sentence—or a paragraph—with a numeral <2002 was a good year for new mystery novels>. Some periodicals, such as The New Yorker, would make that sentence begin Two thousand two was . . . . But most writers and editors would probably begin the sentence some other way, as by writing, In 2002, no fewer than 3,700 mystery novels were published. Sometimes the revision requires significant reworking of the sentence—e.g., “1942 saw the publication of the first major dictionary of its kind.” Robert Allen, “The Big Four,” 12 English Today 41, 41 (1996). (A suggested revision: In 1942, the first major dictionary of its kind was published. [On the change of the zombie noun publication to the passive-voice was published, see the final paragraph of ZOMBIE NOUNS.]) More often, especially with years, the problem can be fixed simply by beginning the sentence with The year. So that quotation could also be fixed by starting the sentence with The year 1942 saw.

Numbers other than years present more problems. Generally, it is acceptable to simply spell out the number rather than using a numeral. That’s no problem with small numbers—most styles call for spelling out small numbers anyway. The trouble comes with larger numbers, and the larger the number, the more troubling it can be. But the rule of reason applies here. When the number can be expressed briefly, or when precision is not an issue, simply write out the number <A hundred years ago we didn’t have these problems>. But rather than writing Thirty-four thousand eight hundred seventy-one people voted for the bond issue, it’s better to reword the sentence: Nearly 35,000 people . . . .

**C. Round Numbers.** Except when writing checks or other negotiable instruments, omit double zeros after a decimal: $400 is better form than $400.00.

**D. Decades.** As late as the 1970s, editors regularly changed 1970s to 1970’s. More recently, the tendency is to omit the apostrophe. That cleaner style should be encouraged, though The New York Times and some
other newspapers still use the apostrophe. See dates (d) & punctuation (a).

E. Votes and Scores. The preferred method for reporting votes and scores is to use numerals separated by an en-dash <a 5–4 decision> <the Cowboys won 38–3>. This method, which gives the reader more speed than spelling out the numbers, is standard today.

F. Cardinal and Ordinal. A cardinal number expresses amount (e.g., one, two, three). An ordinal number expresses place in a series (e.g., first, second, third). Occasionally, cardinal numbers are mistakenly used for ordinal numbers—e.g.: “It wasn’t really a ballet class. It was more of a modern dance class, sort of an introduction to ballet,” Roy explained with the weariness of someone reciting a response for the umpteen million [read umpteen-millionth] time.” Randy Riggs, “Roy: Building a Better Linebacker Through Ballet,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 24 Aug. 1995, at D8.

G. Repetition. The repetition of numbers by spelling them out and then using numerals typifies legal-ese and should never be used outside legal drafting <the sum of forty-one dollars and thirty-seven cents ($41.37)>. Even in modern legal documents it is largely uncalled for—the convention harks back to the days of legal scribes, who doubled words and numerals to prevent fraudulent alterations (words controlled over numerals). See Bryan A. Garner, Legal Writing in Plain English 115–16 (2001). Occasionally, the redundant convention can be seen in informal situations where it is unintentionally funny <they have two (2) children, a son age thirteen (13) and a daughter age seven (7)>.

H. In Names. See names (b).

Numerical; numeric. These words overlap when they mean “of, relating to, or involving numerals” <numerical display> <numeric keypad>. But numerical is the broader (and more common) term, with the additional meaning of “mathematical” <numerical analysis> <numerical advantage>. When the sense of “numerical” involved is a measurement rather than a symbol, numerical is the better choice—e.g.: “These reputed traditional families registered an increase of 5.7 percent during the 1990s, in contrast to numeric [read numerical] decreases during the previous two decades.” William H. Frey, “Married with Children,” American Demographics, Mar. 2003, at 2.

Numerical prefixes. English is a major debtor to the world’s other languages, especially to Latin and Greek. The extent of borrowing from the classical languages is mind-boggling. One of the early editors of the OED, the great Henry Bradley, put it this way: “The Latin element in modern English is so great that there would be no difficulty in writing hundreds of consecutive pages in which the proportion of words of native English and French etymology, excluding particles, pronouns, and auxiliary and substantive verbs, would not exceed five per cent of the whole.” Henry Bradley, The Making of English 94 (1904; repr. 1951).

Among the combining forms that we have inherited are those relating to numbers. Especially in technical contexts, the English language can express numerical relationships through words formed from classical elements. Anyone who takes the time to learn these elements will understand many otherwise unfamiliar words on sight. What follows is a list of the classically derived prefixes that make up English words, with some representative examples. Among these words are several hybrids and morphological deformities (e.g., kilowatt, milliwall, monokini), but most have been devised with some attention to word-formation principles.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

For now, it remains relatively uncommon—e.g.: nurturance

Whereas but the words have diverged in their connotations.

$nurturance$ $nurture$

The noun $nuptials$ (= wedding) is generally a pomposity to be avoided. It should be left to its ineradicable place in newspaper reports of weddings, where grubstreet hacks engage in (not to say become) an adjective, the noun $nuptial$; $nuptials$.

Current ratio ($nuptial$ vs. $nuptials$): 1:1:1

$nurseling$. See $nursling$.

$nurseling$ (= [1] a baby still being nursed; or [2] anything that is being cared for tenderly) has been the standard spelling since the 18th century. *Nurseling is a variant.

Current ratio: 10:1

$nurturance$ looks like a needlessly variant of $nurture$, but the words have diverged in their connotations. Whereas $nurture$ means either “upbringing” or “food,” $nurturance$—a 20th-century neologism dating from 1938—means “attentive care; emotional and physical nurturance.” If this differentiation persists, then $nurturance$ will earn a permanent position in the language. For now, it remains relatively uncommon—e.g.:

• “Moral $nurturance$ comes next, linking self-discipline to self-reliance.” Paul Rosenberg, “Examining Morals in...
O; Oh. Although the distinction isn’t always observed, there is one: O denotes either a wish or a classically stylized address <Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem—Psalm 147>, while Oh expresses a range of emotions from sorrow to pain to shock to longing to momentary hesitation <Oh! You frightened me!> <Oh? You want me to get that?>. O is always capitalized, comes just before a noun, and is usually not followed by any punctuation—e.g.: “O Dionysus, it would be so humiliating to have a seizure now!” Gillian Bradshaw, Cleopatra’s Heir 379 (2002).

Oh may be lowercase if it occurs in midsentence and is always set off by commas inside a sentence <I was just thinking that, oh, I miss my home>.

oaf. Pl. oafs. See plurals (c).

oasis forms the plural oases—not *oasises.

oats, sowing wild. See sow (b).

obligato (= a musical accompaniment traditionally viewed as obligatory in performing a piece) has been predominantly so spelled since 1880—when *obligato became just a variant spelling. Pl. obligatos. See plurals (b) & spelling (a).

obeisance (= a strong respect for and deference to another) is preferably pronounced /oh-bay-san[t]s/—though /oh-bee-san[t]s/ is also acceptable.

obelisk (= a stone pillar erected usu. as a memorial) is preferably pronounced /ob-a-lisk/—not /oh-ba-lisk/.

obfuscate (= to render [a subject] impenetrable to understanding, esp. by means of incomprehensible language) is preferably pronounced /ob fas-kayt/—not /ob-fyoo-skayt/. Before the 20th century, the traditional pronunciation was /ob fas-kayt/.

object, no. See no object.

objectify; objectivize. Objectify, dating from the mid-19th century, means either (1) “to make into an object,” or (2) “to render objective.” Objectivize, dating from the late 19th century, means “to render objective.” It would be convenient for the words to undergo differentiation, so that objectify would be confined to its sense 1, while objectivize would preempt objectify in the latter’s sense 2. See reify.

objectivize. See objectify.

Object-Shuffling. This term describes what unwary writers often do with verbs that require an indirect as well as a direct object. E.g.: “He continued the medicine a few days longer, and then substituted the penicillin with tetracycline [read substituted tetracycline for the penicillin or replaced the penicillin with tetracycline].” This use of substitute for replace, resulting from a confusion over the type of object that each verb may take, is labeled “incorrect” in the OED.

Unfortunately, there is no simple rule for determining which verbs are reversible and which are not. (See Ergative verbs.) One must rely on a sensitivity to idiom and a knowledge of what type of subject acts upon what type of object with certain verbs. It is perfectly legitimate, for example, either to inspire a person with courage or to inspire courage in a person; but the switch does not work with similar words such as instill and inculcate. Good teachers instill or inculcate values into students, but cannot properly be said to *instill students with values or to *inculcate students with values. See inculcate. For additional examples, see arrogate, cite, impart, inflict & levy.
obligratory; obligative. The general term is obligatory (= required, mandatory). Obligative is a grammatical term for the mood of verbs expressing obligation or necessity.

oblivious has traditionally taken the preposition of in its strictest (an increasingly rare) sense of “forgetful” <an oblivious dotage> <oblivious of her pending appointment>. The more popular meaning of oblivious today is “unmindful; unaware; unobservant”; this construction typically (but not always) uses the preposition to <oblivious to signs of a financial disaster>. Oblivious of was the predominant phrasing in English language print sources till about 1968, when it was overtaken by oblivious to.

Although to is now the more common mate of oblivious, some fastidious speakers and writers continue to use of, regardless of whether the meaning is “forgetful” or “unaware”—e.g.: “He confesses that he was oblivious to [or oblivious of] his son, and the evidence he supplies is persuasive.” Malcolm Jones Jr., “The Man Who Sired a Monster,” Newsweek, 7 Mar. 1994, at 67. Both prepositions are standard.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

oblivious to for oblivious of: Stage 5
1934 ratio (oblivious of vs. oblivious to): 2:1
Current ratio (oblivious to vs. oblivious of): 4:1

OBSCRUITY, generally speaking, is a serious literary offense. Simple ideas are often made needlessly difficult, and difficult ideas are often made much more difficult than they need to be.

Obscurity has myriad causes, most of them rooted in imprecise thought or lack of consideration for the reader. The following examples are winners of a “Bad Writing Contest” held in New Zealand in 1997. All three are by English professors—the first two American and the third British:

- “The visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object; while the most austere films necessarily draw their energy from the attempt to repress their own excess (rather than from the more thankless effort to discipline the viewer).” Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* 1 (1992).

- “If such a sublime cyborg would insinuate the future as post-Fordist subject, his palpably masochistic locations as ecstatic agent of the sublime superscape need to be decoded as the ‘now all-but-unreadable DNA’ of the fast deindustrializing Detroit, just as his RoboCop-like strategy of carceral negotiation and street control remains the tirelessly American one of inflicting regeneration through violence upon the racially heteroglossic wilds and others of the inner city.” Rob Wilson’s essay in an anthology entitled *The Administration of Aesthetics* (1994) (as quoted in Ray Lilley, “No Contest: English Professors Are Worst Writers on Campus,” *Sacramento Bee*, 18 May 1997, at A13).


One might try to defend this obtuseness on grounds that the subjects are metaphysical, but the defense will be to little avail.

Things have gotten so bad in some fields that even the experts sometimes can’t distinguish brilliance from gibberish. For example, in 2002 The New York Times reported that two French physicists (twins brothers named Bogdanov) had attracted a great deal of attention to their theory about what preceded the Big Bang. Here’s a sample of their prose: “Then we suggest that the (pre-)spacetime is in thermodynamic equilibrium at the Planck-scale and is therefore subject to the KMS condition.” According to one editor of a professional journal—a journal in which their work was published before the editors had “raised their standards”—the paper was “essentially impossible to read, like ‘Finnegans Wake’.” While a professor in France and another in Boston called the Bogdanovs’ work potentially valuable, a professor in New York called it “nonsense” and another in Santa Barbara called it “nutty.” The New York professor, a physicist at Columbia University, said: “Scientifically, it’s clearly more or less complete nonsense, but these days that doesn’t much distinguish it from a lot of the rest of the literature.” The Bogdanovs defended themselves by saying, “Nonsense in the morning may make sense in the evening or the following day.” For a full account of the affair, see Dennis Overbye, “Are They a) Geniuses or b) Jokers?” *N.Y. Times*, 9 Nov. 2002, at A19. This tale illustrates the beauty of obscurity: it’s all but impossible to judge its content.

The root of the problem is largely psychological: “Most obscurity, I suspect, comes not so much from incompetence as from ambition—the ambition to be admired for depth of sense, or pomp of sound, or wealth of ornament.” F.L. Lucas, *Style* 74 (1962). More bluntly still: “The truth is that many writers today of mediocre talent, or no talent at all, cultivate a studied obscurity that only too often deceives the critics, who tend to be afraid that behind the smoke-screen of words they are missing the effectual fire, and so for safety’s sake give honour where no honour is due.” G.H. Vallins, *The Best English* 106 (1960).

Excessive treatment of details often leads either to this substantive emptiness or to a self-defeating accuracy, in which it’s difficult for the reader to discern the major points because of the cascading minutiae. In writing of this kind, sentences are often so heavily qualified that they become unreadable. Edgar Allan Poe put the point well: “In one case out of a hundred a point is excessively discussed because it is obscure; in the ninety-nine remaining it is obscure
obsequies; obsequious. These words are unrelated in meaning. For the antidote, see plain language.

obstetric; ✳obstetrical. The more common, and the preferred, form is obstetric. The longer form held sway from about 1910 to 1958 but was then superseded.

obscene. Obscenity, not *obstinance, is the noun corresponding to obviate (= stubborn)—e.g.: "Gundolf informed George that he had chided Rausch for his obstinance [read obstinacy]." Robert E. Norton, Secret Germany 419 (2002).

obstinate. Some modern dictionaries define obviate as meaning "to make unnecessary." And some writers actually use the word this way—e.g.: "Volunteering does not, I repeat does not, obviate government's role in providing social services." Betty Winston Baye, "Volunteers Won't Be Enough," Courier-J. (Louisville), 1 May 1997, at A13.

obstructive; *obstructional; *obstructionary. The second and third are needless variants.

obtain. See attain.

obtainment; *obtention; *obtainance; *obtainal. What noun corresponds to the verb obtain? Though none of these four is common, obtainment is the most natural and the most frequent. The others are needless variants. Of course, the gerund obtaining is always available for use, and it's more frequent than obtainment.

obstruction. For the antidote, see plain language.

obvers. See converse, n.

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Obviate is sometimes misunderstood as meaning “to make obvious”—e.g.: “This is just another study obviating the obvious.” Gregory Stanford, “Surprise! Safety Net Does Work,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 8 Dec. 1996, Crossroads §, at 3. (A possible revision: This is just another study making obvious things obvious. Or: This is just another study making obvious things more obvious.)

Obviously, like other dogmatic words (clearly, undoubtedly), is one that writers tend to rely on when they’re dealing with difficult, doubtful propositions. Be wary of it. See very & weasel words. Cf. clearly.

Occam’s razor; Ockham’s razor. In the 14th century, William of Ockham (1285–1349), an Englishman, wrote a book entitled Commentary on the Sentences. In it, he devised what is now known as Occam’s razor (the preferred spelling): Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem (lit., “entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity”). In plain English, this means that the simplest of competing theories is preferable to the more complex ones, or that the parts of an argument should never be multiplied any more than necessary. Although many philosophers still use Ockham, the spelling Occam appears more than twice as often in modern print sources. Another term for Occam’s razor is the law of parsimony.

Current ratio (Occam’s razor vs. Ockham’s razor): 2:1

occupant; occupier. Although both refer to a person who occupies a particular place, AmE greatly prefers occupant for most purposes, while BrE distinguishes between the words based on time. In BrE, occupant connotes a short-term stay, whether in a taxi, a theater seat, or a hotel room <that room’s occupant will check out on Friday>; occupier connotes a long-term resident or tenant <my uncle has been the sole occupier since the house was built> or an occupying military force <the occupier of France during World War II>. E.g.: “While at first these unions were formed with the blessing of the occupier, they could be transformed into spaces of resistance against that occupier . . . .” Japan as the Occupier and the Occupied 79 (Christine de Matos & Mark E. Caprio eds., 2015).

occurred. So spelled. But *occured is a common misspelling—one of the most common, in fact, in the language. See spelling (b).

Current ratio: 272:1

occurrence. So spelled. Various misspellings (such as *occurrence and *occurance) are fairly common. (See spelling (A).) The word’s first syllable is best pronounced /ə/-, not /oh-/-.

Oceanic (= of, relating to, or involving one or more oceans) is pronounced /oh-shee-an-ik/—not /oh-see-an-ik/.

Ochre. See governmental forms.

Ochre; *ocher. Meaning “a clay from which a dark-yellow pigment is produced,” *ocher is usually so spelled in AmE dictionaries. Ochre is the spelling found in BrE dictionaries. But American writers have long used both spellings, and since the late 18th century they have always preferred ochre. It’s now twice as common as *ocher. See -er (b).

Current ratio (AmE): 2:1

Current ratio (World English): 4:1

-OCK. See diminutives (I).

Ockham’s razor. See Occam’s razor.

Octet (= [1] a group of eight, esp. of musicians; or [2] a musical composition for eight musicians) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Octette is a variant.

Current ratio: 268:1

Octopus. Because this word is actually of Greek origin—not Latin—the classical plural is octopodes /ok-top-ə-deez/, not *octopi. But the standard plural in AmE and BrE alike is octopuses—which has vastly predominated in print sources since the early 20th century. Still, some writers mistakenly use the supposed Latin plural—e.g.:

• “Winnik did a column on the sex life of octopi [read octopuses], but it’s not the kind of thing that should be in a family newspaper.” Bob Krauss, “Our Hawaiian,” Honolulu Advertiser, 5 Feb. 2003, at 1.

• “Had he won the thing after having won last week at the Bob Hope, the fans would have tossed hats or octopi [read octopuses] onto the 18th green.” Scott Ostler, “Bank Shot Is Given Hole New Meaning,” S.F. Chron., 10 Feb. 2003, at C1.


See plurals (b) & hypercorrection (a). Since 1900, octopuses has greatly predominated in English-language print sources.

Occasionally the pedantic octopodes appears, but it is relatively rare—e.g.: “The baby octopus salad, made with finger-sized octopodes, whole and purplish, were marinated in a tasty, sesame oil dressing and lightly sprinkled with sesame seeds.” Rose Kim, “Food Day,” Newsday (N.Y.), 19 Oct. 2001, at B23.

Language-Change Index
*octopi for octopuses: Stage 3
Current ratio (octopuses vs. *octopi): 3:1

Ocular is turgid for visual or with one’s eyes <ocular inspection>. The word is sometimes misspelled *ocular.

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
odenalisk is a variant. The word is pronounced /oh-da-link/. See spelling (A.).

\[ \text{See sentence adverbs.} \]

odds. Odds are is a familiar locution. But when odds is separated from the verb, a mistake in subject–verb agreement often appears—e.g.:

- "The odds that a woman might have more than one is [read are] extremely low." Sandra Coney, "Full Cancer Evaluation—Now," Sunday Star-Times, 16 May 1999, at C4.
- "The odds of an instrument being contaminated is [read are] slight to begin with." Sandi Doughton, "Clinic Warns of Infection Risk," Seattle Times, 27 Aug. 2015, at A1. (On the failure to use a possessive before the gerund being in that example, see fused participles.)

\[ \text{Language-Change Index} \]

*odiferous. See odorous.

odious (= hateful, repellent) derives from odium (= hatred; the reproach that attaches to an act that people despise). E.g.: "The other problem with this legislative effort is that it came about in reaction to people despise). E.g.: "The other problem with this legislative effort is that it came about in reaction to"

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- "The only thing that gave him trouble was finding a toad; the rest of the stuff, though mostly nasty and odiferous [read odorous or malodorous], was obtained with little difficulty." Theodore R. Cogswell, "The Wall Around the World" (1953), in The Mammoth Book of Fantasy 1, 12 (Mike Ashley ed., 2001).

*odiferous is an erroneous shortening of odoriferous that sprang up about 1920. It is often misused for odorous or malodorous—e.g.: "I was in the Texas Panhandle, typically maligned for its harsh weather, odoriferous [read malodorous] feedlots, and dull, wind-whipped landscape—flat as a tortilla and practically treeless." Joe Nick Patowsky, "Grand Canyons," Texas Monthly, Aug. 1997, at 130. Only someone familiar with garlic plants knows whether the odor in the following example is nice or foul (probably the latter): "They are underplanted with useful plants ranging from fragrant peppermint to odoriferous [read malodorous, odoriferous, or odoriferous] garlic chives." Rosemary Herbert, "New England Gardening," Boston Herald, 3 Aug. 1997, at 53.

Just as odious (= offensive) is sometimes misused to describe a foul smell, so odoriferous is sometimes misused in the sense "foul-smelling" (= having a pronounced odor) as an alternative definition of odoriferous. In one sense that's understandable, because corruption and bad smells have always been associated (the usage passes the sniff test). But in a larger sense it's unfortunate, since we can't clearly distinguish all the odor words we already have—and it just continues the degeneration of the word's connotations. It would be far better to think of this loose extension as an ineffectual metaphor rather than as a definition. See odious.
oenology. See enology.

-OES. See plurals (d).

of. A. Signaling Verbosity. However innocuous it may appear, the word of is, in anything other than small doses, among the surest indications of flabby writing. Some fear that of and its resulting flabbiness are spreading: “Clearly, of is now something more than a mere preposition. It’s a virus.” “All About Of,” N.Y. Times, 8 Mar. 1992, at 14. The only suitable vaccination is to cultivate a hardy skepticism about its utility in any given context. If it proves itself, fine. Often, though, it will merely breed verbosity—e.g.:

- “In spite of the fact that a great percentage of the media coverage of Muslims mainly targets the negative actions of some splinter groups and several individuals, there are still a shrinking number of people who are still under the false impression that Al-Islam is a bloody and dangerous religion, as the Bishop puts it.” Frederick Qasim Khan, “Muslims Do Not Denounce Christians,” Call & Post (Cleveland), 4 Jan. 1996, at A5. (A possible revision: Because the media frequently put Muslims in a negative light, some continue to believe that Al-Islam is a “bloody and dangerous religion,” as the Bishop puts it. [Five ovs to none; 56 words to 28; and heightened logic in the revision.])

- “By the mid-1980s, many of these politicians were seen as a big part of the problem not only in terms of poor economic performance but also in terms of political authoritarianism.” Julius E. Nyang Oro, “Critical Notes on Political Liberalization in Africa,” J. Asian & Afr. Studies, 1 June 1996, at 112. (A possible revision: by the mid-1980s, many of these politicians were seen as having contributed to the problem both through poor economic performance and through political authoritarianism. [Four ovs to one; 32 words to 25.])

- “In light of the high number of requests from retail investors, the Treasury can expect to top the million mark in terms of numbers of small shareholders participating in the privatization.” Deborah Ball, “Telecom IPO in Italy Has Strong Start,” Wall Street J. Europe, 21 Oct. 1997, at 13. (A possible revision: Given the high demand from retail investors, the Treasury can expect to more than a million small shareholders will participate in the privatization. [Four ovs to none; 31 words to 23.])

As the examples illustrate, reducing the ovs can, even at the sentence level, make the prose much more brisk and readable. See prepositions (A).

B. Intrusive of. The word of often intrudes where it doesn’t idiomatically belong, as in *not that big of a deal (read not that big a deal), *not too smart of a student (read not too smart a student), *somewhat of an abstract idea (read a somewhat abstract idea), etc. E.g.: “Spurs guard Mario Elie doesn’t seem to think the Spurs will have that difficult of a time [read a difficult time] handling the Knicks in these Finals.” “Elie Attacks,” Fla. Today, 17 June 1999, at C2. Cf. all (a), as . . . as (b) & too (c).

For the opposite tendency—omitting a necessary of—see couple (c).

C. Superfluous in Dates. December of 1987 should be December 1987. See dates (b).

D. For have. Because the spoken have (especially in a contraction) is often identical in sound with of <I’ve done it>, semiliterate writers have taken to writing *should of, *could of, and *would of (aka *shoulda, *coulda, and *woulda). But the word is have, or a contraction ending in ve, and it should be written so. This error has typified uneducated usage since about the time of World War I. Instances of it are legion—e.g.:

- “‘He may of [read have] been otherwise occupied by his other legal troubles’; Lanza said. ‘Other than that, I don’t know.’” Jack Sherzer, “Spitz Suit Against Officers Dismissed,” Harrisburg Patriot, 1 Aug. 1996, at B4 (quoting David J. Lanza, who can’t be faulted for the mistranscription).

- “Humans are great with second-guessing and hindsight, but the truth is that we only know this reality and not the one that might of [read have] been.” Richard Kohn, “Politics Is Harmful to Heroes’ Health,” News & Record (Greensboro), 23 Aug. 1998, at F3.

- “When it turned out Watson was up north, he changed his story, admitted he might of [read have] done the job himself, called it self-defense.” Peter Matthiessen, “The Killing of the Warden,” Audubon, 1 Nov. 1998, at 36.


See *had have.

Language-change index of misused for have: Stage 1

E. Of a . . . nature. See nature.

F. Of-genitive vs. Possessive. See of (a) & possessives (h).

*of a. The collocation [adj.] + of a + [noun] is unrefined usage. See of (b).

off. See *off of.

off-color (= [1] varying from a given color; or [2] in poor taste; risqué) is the standard term. *Off-colored is a variant form with nothing to recommend it.

Current ratio: 21:1

offence. See offense.

offendable; *offendible. The former is standard, the latter a variant spelling. See -ABLE (A).

offense; offence. The first has been the AmE spelling since about 1910; the second has always been standard BrE. In AmE and BrE alike, the word is preferably accentoned on the second syllable: /ə-fen(t)s/. Unfortunately, because athletes and sports announcers put the accent on the first syllable (/of-en(t)s/), many American speakers have adopted this pronunciation.
even in the word’s legal sense. The sound of it puts the literate person’s teeth on edge. Cf. defense.

In BrE, and to a lesser extent in AmE, lawyers commonly distinguish crimes (at common law) from offenses (created by statute). It is common in both speech communities to use offense for less serious infractions and crime for more serious ones. Lawyers would not speak of the “offense” of murder. Nor would they refer to the “crime” of parking a car in the wrong place.

**Language-Change Index**

1. offense pronounced with accent on first syllable in sports usage: Stage 5
2. offense (= infraction, crime) pronounced with accent on first syllable: Stage 2

**offeror, *offerer.** The first is standard in AmE and BrE alike—and has been so since the mid-20th century. But see profferer.

Current ratio: 5:1

**offhand, adj.; *offhanded.** Although offhand (not *offhanded*) is the standard adjective, offhandedly is the standard adverb—in AmE and BrE alike.

Current ratio (offhand vs. *offhanded): 12:1

**office, vb., has become a commonplace expression in the American business world, but not among fastidious users of language. Although office is recorded as a verb from the 16th century, the new vogue began in the Southwest during the 1980s within the oil-and-gas industry. Gradually it has spread to other fields and has started to overrun the country. No one seems to have an office anymore; instead, everyone offices. E.g.:**


This is a classic example of the issue discussed under **functional shift** (a), (b).

**Language-Change Index**

**officiate.** The verb, meaning “to perform the duties of an official,” has traditionally been intransitive—that is, it doesn’t take a direct object; instead, it has a preposition after it. A priest officiates at a wedding, and a referee officiates at a sports event. Only up to the early 1700s was the word ever transitive, and then only rarely. But this usage is now undergoing something of a resurgence. One sees it most often in the passive voice—e.g.:”

- “A memorial Mass was officiated [read was led] by Rev. Nathanael Foshage on Wednesday, Sept. 26 at St. Michael’s Catholic Church in Delta.” “Allison” (obit.), Chicago Trib., 27 Sept. 2001, at 7. [Or read: The Rev. Nathanael Foshage officiated at the memorial mass on Wednesday . . . .] (On the use of Rev. in the original sentence, see Reverend.)
- “The game was officiated very tightly.” David Steinle, “Belaire, Capitol in Final,” Advocate (Baton Rouge), 15 Dec. 2001, at D9. [Read The referees officiated over the game very tightly.]

Some writers attempt to preserve intransitivity by writing was officiated at—e.g.: “Limbaugh—a conservative of such clout that his 1994 marriage to third wife Marta Fitzgerald was officiated at by Justice Clarence Thomas—is determined to stay on the air.” Lori Rozsa, “Rush Limbaugh Reveals He Is Going Deaf,”
People, 22 Oct. 2001, at 60. But the passive form necessarily means that the verb is being used transitively: to say that Justice Thomas officiated at the wedding can't properly be rendered as the wedding was officiated by Justice Thomas. See ergative verbs.

**officious.** In Samuel Johnson's day, officious had positive connotations ("eager to please"). Today, however, it means "meddlesome; interfering with what is not one's concern." E.g.: "Over the years, the most officious and obnoxious customs officials I encountered were those in India." Thomas Snowell, "On Busybodies, Young 'Adults' and Self-Respect," Atlanta J.-Const., 6 Sept. 1995, at A10.

In the context of diplomacy, the word has a strangely different sense: "having an extraneous relation to official matters or duties; having the character of a friendly communication, or informal action, on the part of a government or its official representatives" (OED) <an officious communication>.

The word has been subjected to slipshod extension. Some mistakenly think it means "official-looking"—e.g.: "He still lived in the same old dormitory, but in a bigger and more officious room." Still others take it to mean "official-sounding" or merely "official"—e.g.:

- "A dead person is the 'decedent' in the officious lingo [read jargon] of the medical examiner, for example, and ballistics experts often refer to 'the signature of the weapon.'" Phil Reisman, "Firsthand Look at the Ease of Getting an Indictment," J. News (Westchester Co., N.Y.), 9 Jan. 2003, at B1.

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**officious** in the sense "official-looking": Stage 3

**offing, in the.** This is the correct, idiomatic phrase meaning "likely to occur soon"—not *on the offing.**

**off of** is idiomatically inferior to *off without the preposition—e.g.:

- "It wasn’t as though Porch was looking for a tall bridge to jump off of [read off] after last week’s loss," Brian J. French, "Porch Makes Amends for Fumble, Carries the Tribe Past Offspring—e.g.: "A dead person is the 'decedent' in the officious lingo [read jargon] of the medical examiner, for example, and ballistics experts often refer to 'the signature of the weapon.'" Phil Reisman, "Firsthand Look at the Ease of Getting an Indictment," J. News (Westchester Co., N.Y.), 9 Jan. 2003, at B1.

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- "As I raked, I knew all the leaves and the people that had planted the trees they fell off of [read off]!" Adyne Wakefield, "Raking Up the Past as Winter Nears," Oregonian (Portland), 21 Nov. 1997, at D19.
- "When Witty arrived at UC in 2010, the Bearcats were coming off of [read off] their glorious Sugar Bowl season (12–1) under Brian Kelly," Tom Groeschcn, "UC Years to Be Back in Top 25," Cincinnati Enquirer, 3 Sept. 2015, at C8.

In print sources since 1500, the collocation off the has been in constant use, while *off of the occurs only seldom. Cf. outside.

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*off of for off: Stage 3

Current ratio (off the vs. *off of the): 42:1

**offspring (= one or more children or descendants) is either singular or—more commonly—plurals <many parents aren't teaching their offspring these days>. There is no plural form *offsprings, but this escapes some writers. E.g.: "And with three horses—his mare and two offsprings [read offspring]—at nearby Crestwood Farm, he is well on his way." Mark Woods, "Hard-Hitting Cat Has Soft Spot for Horses," Courier-J. (Louisville), 11 Sept. 1997, at C1.

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*offsprings for plural offspring: Stage 1

Current ratio (several offspring vs. *several offsprings): 72:1

**oft.** See *often (b).*

**often.** A. Pronunciation. The educated pronunciation is /of-an/, but the less adept say /of-tan/. To put it another way, the silent-t pronunciation is U; the spoken-t pronunciation is distinctly non-U. (See class distinctions & pronunciation (b).) Similar words with a silent -t- are chasten, fasten, hasten, listen, soften, and whistle.

**Language-Change Index**

often pronounced /of-tan/: Stage 4

B. And *oftentimes; *oft; *oftimes. Oftentimes is a common synonym of *often; it often seems to add weight and perhaps quaintness to a pronunciation. The second and third are literary archaisms and needless variants. Substituting often is almost always (not merely often) better—e.g.:

- "Bessette and Gleason know that oftentimes [read often] it's the little things they do that make the most difference." Ashley Clemente-Tolins, "The Night Shift," Oregonian (Portland), 21 Dec. 1995, at 1.
- "Although she oft [read often] made it to the lane, Sadler (7 points on 2-for-13 shooting) was usually greeted by Hillwood's Latonia Clay, a 5-11 center with a penchant for altering shots." Jeff Pearlman, "Stamper Smooths Out Hillwood's 49–36 Romp," Tennessean, 10 Jan. 1996, at C4.

About the only time oft is justified is when it's part of a phrasal adjective <an oft-quoted passage>. Cf. once & then (A).  

*ofttimes. See *often (b).
ogle (= to stare in a flirtatious or sexually suggestive way) is preferably pronounced /oh-gal/—not /ah-gal/ or /aw-gal/.

ogrish (= rather like an ogre) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Ogrish is a variant.

Oh. See O.

*oinology. See enology.

okay; OK; O.K. Each of these is okay. Although OK predominates in highly informal contexts, okay has an advantage in edited English: it more easily lends itself to cognate forms such as okays, okayer, okaying, and okayed. The term is a casualism in any event, but okay is slightly more dressed up than OK. Some purists prefer OK simply because it's the original form. It is, after all, the most successful Americanism ever—perhaps the best-known word on the planet.

A few publications, such as The New Yorker, prefer the periods—e.g.: “It's O.K. Take your time.” Arthur Miller, “The Bare Manuscript,” New Yorker, 16 Dec. 2002, at 82, 91. For more on the presence or absence of periods, see abbreviations (a).

okina. For a brief discussion of this diacritical mark in Hawaiian English, see Hawaii (b).

Oklahoma Citian; *Oklahoma Cityan. The first is the standard spelling; the second is a variant. See denizen labels. Cf. Kansas Citian; Twin Citian.

Oklahoman; *Oklahomian; Okie. The first is standard; the second is a needless variant that rarely appears in print; the third is a common casualism considered derogatory by many Oklahomans. See denizen labels.

ol'. See olde.

old adage. See adage.

olde; ole; ol'. These affected variants of old come in two distinct flavors. Olde is a 20th-century invention intended to mimic Old English <Ye Olde Pub>. The spurious coinage has become tediously popular in an age of mass-produced quaintness. The spuriousness is compounded in the example above when ye is pronounced as it is spelled. The first letter of the authentic Middle English term was a thorn, identical in form to the letter y but pronounced with a voiced th, as in this.

By contrast, ole and ol' are 19th-century inventions used mostly in dialogue to signify dialect <Grand Ole Opry> <Bubba's a good ol' boy>.

The spelling olde is distinctly out of place when used in a rural rather than Old World context—e.g.: “Texas Olde [read Ol' or Ole] Time Fiddlers Jam.” “Best Bets,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 19 July 2002, at E2.

olden. Apart from the set phrases olden times and the olden days, this adjective doesn't generally appear in good writing (except in that of Shakespeare and his contemporaries). Today, the word describes itself: it's a creaky archaism.

older; oldest. See elder.

ole. See olde.

oligarchy. See governmental forms.

oligopoly; oligopsony. The former denotes control or domination of a market by a few large sellers; the latter, control or domination of a market by a few large customers.

ombudsman; ombuds; *ombudsperson. Ombudsman = (1) an official appointed to receive, investigate, and report on private citizens’ complaints about the government; or (2) a similar appointee in a nongovernmental organization. Originally a Swedish word denoting a commissioner, ombudsman spread throughout the world during the mid-20th century as governments and other institutions saw the wisdom of having such an official. Though the word entered the English language only as recently as the mid-1950s, it has caught on remarkably well.

But despite its prevalence throughout the English-speaking world, this word might prove to have a short life span. Because of the -man suffix, many writers consider it sexist. (See sexism (c).) Some have taken to lopping off the suffix, and though the word ombuds looks distinctly un-English and remains unrecorded in most English dictionaries, it is surprisingly common—e.g.: “To resolve disputes with managers, lab employees can go to the ombuds office, where a neutral mediator tries to facilitate resolutions informally and confidentially.” Adam Rankin, “Lab Vows to Win Worker Trust,” Albuquerque Trib., 28 Jan. 2003, at D3.

Several writers have tried *ombudsperson, but that coinage should be allowed to wither. Others have experimented with ombuds officer, which at least satisfies one's desire to have a word that looks as if it denotes a person—e.g.: ‘Columbia University last week named its first ‘ombuds officer’ as a reference point on campus for people who have grievances within the university and are looking for options to deal with them.” “Campus Life: Columbia,” N.Y. Times, 14 July 1991, § 1, pt. 2, at 31.

In 2008, ombudsman remained more than ten times as common in print sources as its rivals. Current ratio (ombudsman vs. ombuds vs. *ombudsperson): 12:1.5:1

omelet; omelette. American dictionary publishers are in step with current usage, which prefers omelet to omelette by a 2-to-1 ratio. But in BrE, omelette is about 3 times more common.

omissible. So spelled—not *omissable. (See -able (a.).) *Omittable is a needless variant.

Current ratio (omissible vs. *omittable vs. *omissable): 39:3:1

on; upon. These synonyms are used in virtually the same ways. The distinctions are primarily in tone and
connotation. On, the more usual word since the mid-18th century, is generally preferable: it’s better to write put the groceries on the counter than put the groceries upon the counter. But upon is the better word for introducing a condition or event—e.g.: Upon receiving the survey, you should fill it out completely. See upon.

on behalf of. See behalf.

onboard; on board. As an adjective, onboard is a closed compound <on an onboard navigation system>. As an adverbial phrase, on board remains a preposition with its object <loading cargo on board>. Writers occasionally flounder—e.g.: "The man had brought nothing onboard [read on board], the movie screen wasn’t working, and apparently all he could do for entertainment was tap on the window and sing to himself." Joshua Kurlantzick, "The Agony and Ecstasy of 18 Hours in the Air," N.Y. Times, 2 July 2006, § 5, at 3. Cf. online. See also aboard.

once. By convention, once isn’t hyphenated either adverbially <a once powerful monarch> or adjectively <the once and future king>. Cf. often (b) & then (A).

once in a while. So written. The phrase is occasionally disfigured into a mondegreen—e.g.: So written. The phrase is occasionally disfigured into a mondegreen—e.g.: Such a disfigured version, "the once and future King," would have a strong possibility of conveying a meaning other than the intended one. See sexism (b). So it should probably be improved—e.g.:

dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive” (Acts 25:19). Today, however, the word one usually looks askance at any name following it. But occasionally it can be neutral in connotation, when the writer wants to hint that the person named is not someone the reader is probably familiar with.<ref>at the table were Madonna, Elton John, and one Harold Pfister of Des Plaines</ref>.  

one and one (is) (are). See <ref>subject–verb agreement (g)</ref>.  

one and the same, a phrase dating from the 16th century, is occasionally misrendered *one in the same.  

Current ratio: 39:1  

one another. See each other.  

one-armed bandit (= a slot machine) is the preferred spelling. *One-arm bandit is a variant.  

Current ratio: 8:1  

*one fewer. See fewer.  

one . . . he. See one (b).  

180-degree turnaround; *360-degree turnaround.  

In nontechnical contexts, when you use measurements of geometric degrees, you’ll probably want either 90 degrees (a right angle, as for a left- or right-hand turn) or 180 degrees (a complete turn). The phrase 360 degrees refers to a full-circle turn <ref>a 360-degree skid</ref> or a panorama—e.g.: “On the fourth floor, windows provide a 360-degree view of the treetops.” Ruth Ryon, “Living Above It All in Converted Water Tower,” L.A. Times, 6 Apr. 2003, at K14. To turn 360 degrees is to be facing the same direction you started with.  

By contrast, 180 degrees from one direction is the opposite direction. In the common idiom, to make a 180-degree turnaround is to change circumstances completely—e.g.: “NBC’s 180-degree turn between Sunday, when it defended [Peter] Arnett’s decision to grant the Iraqi TV interview, and yesterday, when he was fired, was an eyebrow-raiser.” Melanie McFarland, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 1 Apr. 2003, at E1.  

Sometimes writers turn the idiom too far, referring absurdly to a *360-degree turnaround, which would logically denote “full circle” or (to change the geometrical metaphor) “back to square one”—e.g.:  


• “For many rock fans, the ‘alternative rock’ music scene out there today is quite disappointing—the music sounds too manufactured and fake and isn’t very original. The Used is a 360-degree [read 180-degree] turn from all of this.” Melissa Ortiz, “A Utah Alternative,” Buffalo News, 13 Nov. 2002, at N4.  


See illogic.  

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*360-degree turnaround for 180-degree turnaround:  

Stage 1  

Current ratio (180-degree turnaround vs. *360-degree turnaround): 13:1  

one in [number] is; *one in [number] are. In this construction, a singular verb is required because one is the subject. But writers frequently get it wrong—e.g.:  

• “Only one in five believe [read believes] that their parents had more fun as teenagers than they are experiencing now.” Bob Dart, “A New National Study of Teen Attitudes Reveals a Remarkably Gloomy View,” Chicago Trib., 3 Aug. 1988, Style §, at 12. (In this sentence the words their and they also create a number problem. See <ref>concord (b) & pronouns (d)</ref>.)  

• “Research has found that only one in six think [read thinks] that political agreement is important for a successful marriage.” Cherrill Hicks, “How on Earth Can You Live with a Tomy?” Independent, 22 Mar. 1992, at 24.  

• “One in six think [read thinks] motor insurance companies are not doing enough to combat crime, while 53% similarly accuse car manufacturers.” “Car Stolen Every Two Minutes, Says RAC,” Herald (Glasgow), 11 Jan. 1994, at 5.  


• “Nearly one in two Brazilian women of childbearing age have [read has] been sterilized, according to a 2001 government survey.” John Jeter, “Infertile Ground Is Sown in Brazil,” Wash. Post, 11 June 2004, at A14.  

The same holds true when the construction is one of five, etc. See <ref>subject–verb agreement (k)</ref>.  

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*one in three believe for one in three believes: Stage 2  

*one in the same. See one and the same.  

one less. See fewer.  

one of [number]. See one in [number] is.  

one of the [* pl. n.] who (or that). This construction requires a plural verb in the relative clause, not a singular one. After the who or that, the verb should be plural because who or that is the subject, and it takes its number from the plural noun to which who or that refers—e.g.:  

• “One of the most insidious perils that waylay the modern literary life is an exaggerated success at the outset of a career.” Edmund Gosse, “Making a Name in Literature” (1889), in A Reader for Writers 86, 97 (William Targ ed., 1951).  

• “When we look at living creatures from an outward point of view, one of the first things that strike us is that they are a bundle of habits.” William James, Habit 3 (1890; repr. 1914).  

• “This is one of those spurious truisms that are not intelligently believed by anyone.” Henry Bradley, “Spoken and Written English” (1913), in The Collected Papers of Henry Bradley 168, 168 (1928; repr. 1970).  

• “It is one of the colloquial terms that worry me.” Anthony Burgess, A Mouthful of Air 23 (1992).
The reason for this construction becomes apparent when we reword any of those sentences: “Of the insidious perils that waylay the modern literary life, this is one.” / “Of the first things that strike us, one is that . . .” / “Of those spurious truisms that are not intelligently believed by anyone, this is one.” / “Of the colloquial terms that worry me, this is one.”

Yet many writers erroneously believe that one is the (singular) subject—e.g.:  
- “One of the things that is very interesting to know is how you are feeling inside,” Gertrude Stein, “Poetry and Grammar” (1935), in Perspectives on Style 44, 45 (Frederick Candelaria ed., 1968). (A possible revision: One thing that is very interesting to know is how you are feeling inside.)
- “Very is one of the words that contributes [read contribute] to flabby writing.” Lester S. King, Why Not Say It Clearly 55 (1978).
- “Social class is one of the extralinguistic factors that often shows [read show] a correlation with language variation.” Ronald K.S. Macaulay, Locating Dialect in Discourse 13 (1991).
- “Chemistry is one of those words that always makes [read make] me a little suspicious.” Ron Hoff, I Can See You Naked 95 (1992).
- “[David] Frum is one of those who has [read have] undergone a conversion (or two).” Patricia Cohen, “Conservative Thinkers Think Again,” N.Y. Times, 20 July 2008, at WK3.

As the following quotations illustrate, British writers have just as much trouble with this phrasing as Americans—e.g.:  
- “One of the words that dangles [read dangle] to worst purpose is because after a negative statement.” Basil Cottle, The Flight of English 87 (1975).
- “Here we have one of those packagings that decays [read decay] with time rather faster than the contents.” Christopher Hitchens, For the Sake of Argument 280 (1993).
- “It is clearly one of those words which has [read that have] become a marker for intellectual unreliability.” Minette Marrin, “Bish Talks Bosh,” Sunday Telegraph, 11 June 1995, at 31. (In that sentence, a marker should be mark.)
- “I’ve just completed one of those loathsome but entirely necessary tasks which serve [read that serve] as a reminder of just how unnecessary a lot of our exchanges with our fellow human beings are.” Jonathan Ross, “The Past Is All in the Cards,” Sunday Times (London), 18 June 1995, Style §, at 2. (For the reason for changing which to that in the last two sentences, see that (A).)

So how adamant should we about observing this distinction? The great linguist Otto Jespersen was unbudgeable: “It is not proof of logical or grammatical narrowmindedness to set oneself against expressions such as ‘he is one of the kindest men that has ever lived,’ instead of ‘that have ever lived.’ One can be the enemy of pedantry without surrendering one’s liking for clear logic.” Mankind, Nation, and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View 106–07 (1946). The grammarian Wilson Follett was even more resolute: “Let three thousand say one of those who believes while only three say those who believe; and as long as the three thousand do not also say we believe, you believes, they believes, the three thousand will be wrong from the only point of view that is relevant here, the point of view of form” (MAU at 24). But Follett’s position won’t hold up if the tide of usage is so strongly against this linguistic nicety as he hypothetically posits. The tide isn’t nearly so strong. And yet this is one of the grammatical points that trip (not trips!) up even the “experts” (see the quotations in the second paragraph above).

The linguist Dwight Bolinger gave up on the traditional usage back in 1980: “I believe that the question is no longer an issue in American English—that, for better or worse, it is close to being decided in favor of the singular.” “Progress Report on One of Those Who Is . . . ,” 55 Am. Speech 288, 288 (1980). To some, that announcement was probably welcome news; to others, it amounted to a rash surrender.

For the traditionalist, perhaps the most sensible course is to prefer the traditional usage in your own writing, to adhere to it when editing or correcting others’ work, but not to despair unduly as the age-old preference continues eroding.

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*one of the few that is for one of the few that are:*

*Stage 4*

Current ratio (one of those who are vs. *one of those who is): 9:1

**onerous** (= burdensome) for **heinous** (= shockingly evil; abominable) is an occasional error—e.g.:  
- “We can all take pride in the fact that this onerous [read heinous] crime was ferreted out and nipped before it could destroy the neighborhood.” Letter of Albert P. Johnson, “Community Activist Remembered,” St. Petersburg Times, 23 Jan. 1988, at 2.
- “There can’t be any of this revolving-door justice where penalties for onerous [read heinous] crimes are reduced to tut-tutting, decorated cells and a few years.” “Murder, They Wrote,” Toronto Sun, 2 Sept. 1995, Editorial §, at 1.
- “Because Saudi Arabia has the most onerous [read heinous] violations among the 15 countries cited, the report said, the U.S. government needs to get serious about pressuring the desert kingdom to reform.” Julia Duin, “Saudis Top Violators of Religious Rights,” Wash. Times, 14 May 2003, at A1.

The word is pronounced either /ən-ar-as/ (like honor us) or /ən-nər-as/ (like owner us).

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

onerous misused for heinous: Stage 1

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)  
**Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but . . . **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but . . . **Stage 5:** Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
*onery. See orneriness.

oneself. *One's self. Oneself became the predominant spelling of the reflexive pronoun about 1900. *One's self is an archaic variant that was already becoming old-fashioned when this passage was written: "The first and probably the most important one is production discipline, making one's self [read oneself] write whether one feels like it or not. The second is revision discipline; the third, rejection-slip discipline." Anne Hamilton, How to Revise Your Own Stories VII (1946). By the late 20th century, the two-word version had become distinctly nonstandard and pedantic-looking. Yet it still appears occasionally—e.g.:

- "Going to work for one's self [read oneself] often proved the only solution to bridging gaps in a work record," Mary Agria, "Flexibility Is Key for Working at Home," Telegraph Herald (Dubuque), 22 Sept. 1996, at D3.

The two-word construction is correct, however, when referring to one's self in a psychological or spiritual sense—e.g.: "The desire to pass on something of one's self, whether genetically in offspring, materially in prized possessions or inheritance, or spiritually in writing, art or music, is a near universal human inclination." Philip Chard, "Time Does Its Best to Erase Our Legacies," Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 11 Feb. 2003, at F1.

Current ratio: 7:1

one-time, an ambiguous term that can mean either "former" <a one-time professional wrestler> or "occurring only once" <a one-time opportunity>, is generally so hyphenated. AmE has moved toward solidifying the word—as given in 2001, at B1.

on line, stand. See stand in line.

only. A. Placement. Only is perhaps the most frequently misplaced of all English words. Its best placement is precisely before the words intended to be limited. The more words separating only from its correct position, the more awkward the sentence; and such a separation can lead to ambiguities. (Cf. just & solely.) Yet the strong tendency in AmE is to stick only right before the verb or verb phrase regardless of the illogic—e.g.:

- "The prosecution was hindered from seeking a conviction on attempted manslaughter charges because Seles elected not to testify at the hearing and only provided her medical records shortly before [read provided her medical records only shortly before] the trial was to begin." Cindy Shmerler, "WTA Still Working for Harsher Sentence," USA Today, 28 Apr. 1994, at C11.
- "So far, the county proposes that PDA [planned-development agriculture] only be allowed for about [read be allowed for only about] 15 areas in the eastern county." Dale White, "Instead of Homes on Huge Lots, Houses Could Be Clustered Around Open Land," Sarasota Herald-Trib., 19 Nov. 1997, at B1.
- "In the U.S., boys only seem to go for girl heroes when [read seem to go for girl heroes only when] they are teamed up with male partners, as in the Power Rangers." Philip Murphy, "Kidvid Producers Cautiously Optimistic," Variety, 1 Dec. 1997, at 70.
- "You'd only need an apostrophe if you used a noun after the possessive." Mary Newton Bruder, The Grammar Lady 106 (2000). [A suggested revision: You'd need an apostrophe only if you used a noun after the possessive.]

The great H.W. Fowler was surprisingly permissive on this point back in 1926: "There is an orthodox position for the adverb, easily determined in case of need; to choose another position that may spoil or obscure the meaning is bad; but a change of position that has no such effect except technically is both justified by historical & colloquial usage & often demanded by rhetorical needs" (FMEU1 at 405–06). The problem with Fowler's view is that what is merely "technically" obscure for one person may for another person be a full-fledged ambiguity.

Fowler's American contemporary, John F. Genung, was more sensible in his approach (writing somewhat earlier): "Capable of being either an adjective or an adverb, [only] can modify almost any part of speech; so if not placed immediately before the word
(or phrase) to which it belongs its force is liable to be stolen by what comes between.” *Outlines of Rhetoric* 71 (1893).

More than a century before Genung and Fowler wrote those passages, the rhetorician Hugh Blair summed up the rationale for being careful about placing *only* and similar words. It holds true even today: “The fact is, with respect to such adverbs as *only, wholly, at least,* and the rest of that tribe, that in common discourse, the tone and emphasis we use in pronouncing them generally serves to show their reference, and to make the meaning clear; and hence, we acquire a habit of throwing them in loosely in the course of a period [i.e., a sentence]. But in writing, where a man speaks to the eye, and not to the ear, he ought to be more accurate; and so to connect those adverbs with the words which they qualify, as to put his meaning out of doubt upon the first inspection.” Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* vol. 1, at 245 (1783; 11th ed. 1809).

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*B. In Doublespeak.* A paltering *only* sometimes reflects doublespeak. Consider the signs that, beginning in the mid-1990s, appeared at American Airlines gates throughout the United States: *Beverages only in main cabin.* The airline is saying that while first-class passengers will get both meals and drinks, coach-class passengers will get only drinks. If the sign read *Meals only in first class,* the syntax would work pretty well, but the majority of passengers (in coach) would be miffed. If it said *No meals in coach class,* the sense would be right—but once again the coach passengers might feel as if they were being shorted. So the sign-writers changed *coach class to main cabin* (a kind of euphemism) and then worded the sign as if it were an honor being bestowed: *Prizes only for the winners. Jackpots only for the lucky few. Beverages only in main cabin.* It sounds as if everyone else on board must do without: no drinks for those in the cockpit or in first class. But of course that isn’t so. First-class passengers don’t complain about the sign because they know they’ll be fed and get all the drinks they reasonably want. Coach passengers don’t complain because they don’t think through what the sign really means. See airlinese.

**C. As Noncomparable Adjective.** See *adjectives (b).*

**D. And sole.** See *sole.*

*Only if.* See if (b).

**onomatopoetic, *onomatopoetic.* The first is now standard for the adjective corresponding to *onomatopoia (= the formation or use of a word that sounds like the action or object it denotes); the second is a needless variant that confusingly suggests an inherent linkage with poetry. Since about 1950, the *-poetic* form has outnumbered the *-poetic* form by a wide margin—e.g.:

- “A vast number of words in the language—*onomatopoecic* words they are called—. . . were deliberately coined to imitate a sound.” Guy N. Pocock, “Sound and Sense,” in *Foundations of English Style* 180, 182 (Paul M. Fulcher ed., 1927).
- “The Italian playwright and performer Dario Fo has a similar routine, called Grummetol, an *onomatopoetic* babble that communicates the sense of a speech through rhythm and tone rather than words.” Ryan McKittrick, “*Archimedes* an Inventive Play on Words,” *Boston Globe,* 7 Dec. 2001, at D3.
- “Ever since Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix popularized the wah-wah pedal—a foot-operated device that derives its *onomatopoetic* name from the reverb sound it creates—guitarists have used their toes to do more than tap along to the beat.” “Horizons’ Wah-Wah Rings,” *Christian Science Monitor,* 8 May 2008, Innovation §, at 14.

One historian of the English language has suggested *echoic* as a simpler substitute: “One theory is that words imitated natural sounds, such as the cries of animals or the noises made by rapidly moving or colliding objects. Words that had this origin are sometimes said to be *onomatopoetic,* but the term *echoic* is to be preferred as being shorter, easier to spell, and more obviously descriptive of what is intended.” G.L. Brook, *A History of the English Language* 17 (1958).

*onomatopoetic* is pronounced /on-ә-mat-ә-pee/. Take care not to use the sloppy pronunciation /on-ә-mon-ә-pee/. Current ratio: 3:1

**on the contrary.** See *contrary (b).*

**on the grounds that.** See *because (d).*

**on the lam (= on the run from law-enforcement authorities) began as American slang.** Although the expression has been traced back to the late 19th century, its precise origin remains obscure. The phrase didn’t become common till about 1930. It is fairly widespread today—e.g.:

- “A former Bank of the Desert loan officer, who has been on the lam since May, was arrested in Las Vegas this week on federal bank fraud and money-laundering charges.” Don McAuliffe, “Former Desert Bank Executive Arrested,” *Press-Enterprise* (Riverside, Cal.), 28 Aug. 1999, at D3.
- “Grauman was on the lam after escaping from both the South Dakota prison and a jail in Wyoming.” “Escapee Charged with Murder,” *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), 15 June 2000, at A33.

Occasionally the phrase is mistakenly made *on the lamb*—e.g.: “The owner of a local clothing company
was arrested Tuesday and an employee of the company is on the lamb [read on the lam], in the wake of a raid by the state Department of Industrial Relations.” Yomi S. Worrine, “Agents Stage Raid on an Unlicensed Garment Producer,” Orange County Register, 16 Oct. 1997, at 2.

on the other hand. It is pure pedantry to insist that this contrastive phrase must always be paired with on the one hand. In fact, to do so in most cases would be verbose. On the other hand has been in common use without a preceding on the one hand since the 17th century. For a similar problem, see former.

on the part of. This phrase is usually verbose—e.g.: • “Watterson is somewhat self-effacing about how he comes up with such metaphysical thoughts on the part of [read for] the kid, such cogent comments by the cat.” “After a Highly Successful Decade, Cartoonist Is Pulling the Plug on ‘Calvin & Hobbes,’” Ashby Park Press (Neptune, N.J.), 3 Dec. 1995, at C3.
• “Although the election rerun is the result of illegal financial actions on the part of [read by] the developer, rather than pulling the plug.” Paul Grondahl & Eric Anderson, “Retail Project Near TU Stalls,” Times Union (Albany), 2 Sept. 2015, at C10.
• “It’s more of a pause and reassessment on the part of [read by] the developer, rather than pulling the plug.”

on the whole. It has been a set phrase since the 17th century. Some writers mistakenly make it *on a whole—e.g.: “Economic matters are by far the biggest concern among those polled, and on a whole [read on the whole], people seem to feel they are not doing badly.” Michael Winerip, “Backers of Bush in ‘92 Are Turning to Clinton,” N.Y. Times, 27 May 1996, at 10.

*operable*; operative; operational. Operable is now commonly used in two senses: (1) “practicable; capable of being operated”; and (2) “(of a tumor or other bodily condition) capable of being ameliorated through surgery.” In sense 1, the word is occasionally, and wrongly, written *operatable—e.g.: “In Focus Systems will move into new emerging market segments by . . . producing smart and wireless projectors or making [its projectors] operatable [read operable] on batteries.” “Lightest Multimedia Projector Makes Debut,” Bus. Times, 7 Mar. 1997, at 7. See -able (d) & -atable.

Operative = (1) having effect; in operation; efficacious <the regulations are now operative>; or (2) having principal relevance <may be the operative word of the statute>. As a noun, operative most commonly means “a secret agent” or “a detective”—e.g.: “The most elaborate [scheme] involved an attractive young female operative on a bike. . . . When the winsome operative staged an accident, two Warriors came to her aid. She talked her way into their house, looking for evidence.” Peter Elkind, “Blood Feud,” Fortune, 14 Apr. 1997, at 90.

Operational = engaged in operation; able to function; used in operation. E.g.: “The $69 million adult medium-security prison, which would be built on a 120-acre site, would employ more than 200 construction workers and have about 450 full-time employees once it becomes operational.” Courtney Challos, “Town Sees Prisons as Freedom from Economic Woes,” Chicago Trib., 31 Mar. 1997, at N1. Sometimes, though, the word appears in phrases where it probably shouldn’t. For example, the idea denoted by operational costs is more usually expressed as operating costs—e.g.: “But commissioners discussed two possible options that would bring in money for operational [read operating] costs.” Angela Cortez, “Facilities’ Upkeep a Concern,” Denver Post, 1 Apr. 1997, at B2.

*operationalize*, dating from the 1950s, smacks of pure JARGON. Some businesspeople talk about *operationalizing objectives when all they mean is working toward goals or translating objectives into operating procedures. Others use it in equally fuzzy ways, often as a fancy substitute for use—e.g.: • “Indeed, the merit of this contribution is arguably in illustrating how the previous approach can be more fully operationalized [read used] and empirical results readily interpreted.” Ben Fine & John Simister, “Consumption Durables: Exploring the Order of Acquisition,” 27 Applied Economics 1049 (1995).
• “Clinton commended Gore for educating the public about global warming, which earned Gore a Nobel Peace Prize. ‘The sale’s been made,’ he said of Gore’s work. ‘But now what we have to do is figure out how to operationalize [read implement] this.’” Anna-Louise Jackson, “Clinton Promotes Going Green,” Chicago Defender, 9 Nov. 2007, at 6.

See -ize.

on the other hand

op. cit. See ibid.

open-ended(iness) should be hyphenated so that it won’t look too monstrous. See PUNCTUATION (i).

opera. See opus.

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See -ize.
the eye, although ophthalmologist is now much more usual than oculist. An ophthalmologist may perform intraocular surgery as well as other procedures and may prescribe drugs and glasses or contact lenses. An optometrist is a doctor trained in a school of optometry (an O.D.) and is licensed to examine the eyes, diagnose problems, and prescribe drugs, glasses, and contact lenses—and may even perform minor surgical procedures. An optician makes or sells lenses and, like a pharmacist, fills prescriptions (for glasses). Finally, an oculist makes, colors, and fits artificial eyes.


**Language-Change Index**


ophthalmology is sometimes misspelled *opthamology, *optamology, or *opthamology. Pronouncing the /l/ in the second syllable is more cultivated than not pronouncing it. To omit it is to invite the first and third of the misspellings just noted.

opine. A. Generally. Opine today often connotes the forming of a judgment on insufficient grounds. It can suggest the giving of an idle or facetious opinion—or: “At Boardinghouse, a South Shore shop catering exclusively to snowboarders, the young staffers on duty opined that skiers are as doomed as the dinosaurs.” Glen Martin, “Ski Season Coasts In,” *S.F. Chron.*, 1 Dec. 1997, at A1.

The word can carry many nuances. Sometimes opine seems intended to cheapen the opinion given—e.g.:

- “The couple . . . were often berated on Boston radio shows as greedy careerists who had entrapped their sons to an inexperienced sitter in order to save a few dollars. (‘Apparently the parents didn’t want a kid,’ *opined* one talk show caller. ‘Now they don’t have a kid.’)” Bill Hewitt et al., “MURDER or Not?” *People*, 17 Nov. 1997, at 54.
- “According to Benson, education is not a state responsibility but is ‘the responsibility of the local people.’ He *opines* that ‘what it says in the (New Hampshire) constitution.’” AIF E. Jacobson, “Benson Is Wrong,” *Union Leader* (Manchester, N.H.), 3 Feb. 2003, at A8.

Often the word suggests mild ridicule (as in the third example below), folksiness (as in the second), or jocularity (as in the third)—e.g.:


The word is also used in the sense “to express or pronounce a formal or authoritative opinion” (OED). Although the OED calls this sense rare, it’s anything but rare in AmE. In law, it routinely denotes the testimony of an expert witness. It is also fairly common elsewhere—e.g.: “When Intel Chief Executive Craig Barrett visited the ancient Chinese city of Xi’an last spring, thousands of students at Xi’an University packed a hall to hear him *opine* about the future of technology.” Ted Sickinger, “State Must Risk to Keep Tech Edge,” *Oregonian* (Portland), 4 Feb. 2003, at A1.

Since the word sometimes implies authoritative-ness, sometimes disingenuousness, and sometimes ridicule, it’s perfect for denoting political spin control—e.g.: “Almost as the applause still echoed, the audience practically sprinted out to parse, *opine* and analyze beneath the bright television lights set up in a marble chamber near the House floor.” Bob Dart, “State of the Union,” *Atlanta J.-Const.*, 29 Jan. 2003, at A6.

B. And *opinion, vb. When used as a verb, opinion is at best a needless variant of *opine, at worst a non-word. E.g.:


**Language-Change Index**

*opinioned* for *opined*: Stage 1

**opossum; possum. Opossum (o-poses-am), long said to be standard, has never been as common in AmE or BrE as *possum. The colloquially shortened form of this Algonquian term, *possum, is more than twice as common in journalistic sources, and it is even more common in speech (because of the unaccented first syllable of *opossum). Possum quite rightly appears in the casualism *play possum* (= to play dead or pretend to be asleep). It also appears in dialect and in literary rendering of dialect. While *possum* is generally thought to be Southern dialect, in fact it is seen throughout the English-speaking world—e.g.:

- “Today, the eighth-grader at the Williams School in New London owns about 200 dummies. These include Freddy, a *possum* who tries to cross the road.” Joanna Mechlinski,

• “Ryan knew they were animal tracks—raccoons, possums, squirrels, birds.” Denis Hamill, “No Furr-giving Ryan’s Cat Lady,” Daily News (N.Y.), 4 Feb. 2003, Suburban §, at 3.


• “We raised chickens and ducks; the yard was host to quail, mourning doves, snakes, possums and a variety of other creatures.” Jon Love, “Kindness Cuts Across Borders,” Fresno Bee (South Valley ed.), 7 Feb. 2003, at 13.


The misspellings *opposum* and *opossum* have arisen doubtless from the influence of opposite—e.g.:


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. possum for opossum: Stage 5
   Current ratio (possums vs. opossums): 1:2:1

2. opossum misspelled *opossum* or *opossum*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (oposum vs. *opossum* vs. *opposum*: 129:1:1

**opportunistic; opportune.** Opportunistic describes someone who is motivated by expediency and self-interest—e.g.: “Everybody—greedy players, lying owners, feeble commissioner, slimy lawyers, opportunistic Congressmen—pretends to tell us the precise nature of baseball’s labor problems.” Bob Hunter, “Steinbrenner Spends to Win, but Won’t Hide His Intentions,” Columbus Dispatch, 19 July 2002, at C3.

Opportune describes something that is convenient, fit, suitable, appropriate, or well-timed—e.g.: “This would be an opportune time for a Latino candidate to run for the City Council.” Sam McManis, “Latinos Lack Political Pull in Concord,” S.F. Chron., 9 Aug. 2002, Contra Costa §, at 1.

But opportunistic is now sometimes misused to mean opportune—e.g.:


• “Some of Stuckey’s more exciting plays couldn’t have come at more opportunistic [read opportune] times.” Chris Hughes, “Stuckey Will Leave Large Legacy at Northside,” Macon Telegraph, 14 June 2002, at C1.

**opposition.** For an odd misusage, see apposition.

**oppress; repress.** Oppress = to subject (a person or a people) to inhumane or other unfair treatment; to persecute. Repress = (1) to keep under control; (2) to reduce (people) to subjection; (3) to inhibit or restrain; or (4) to suppress. The negative connotations of oppress are greater than those of repress.

**oppressible.** So spelled—preferably not oppressable (which has become common since about 2000). See -ABLE (A).

**oppgn.** See impugn (A).

**opt (= to choose or decide) is usually followed by for or to—e.g.:**


• “After being left off the postseason roster in a decision manager Mike Hargrove called ‘very difficult,’ Winfield opted to sit in the dugout and travel on the road.” John Giannone, “‘Peeved’ Winnie Along for Ride,” Daily News (N.Y.), 4 Oct. 1995, at 56.

Readers may find opt for (a casualism) a bit too jaunty for some contexts.

The phrase opt between is unusual and unnecessary—e.g.: “For one thing, a patient choosing medical care doesn’t have the leisure, knowledge or power enjoyed by a consumer opting [read choosing] between a Big Mac and a Whopper.” “Why Wait for Hillary?” Newsweek, 28 June 1993, at 38, 40. That example illustrates inelegant variation, from an ill-founded fear of repeating the verb choose.

**Opt out (of), meaning “to choose not to participate [in],” is a bit of legalese that has entrenched itself in the public consciousness through class-action lawsuits, contracts, and governmental regulations—e.g.:**

• “Roughly $5.2 million will be distributed by formula among the settlement class members, unless they opt out.” Ken Harney, “Some Reverse Mortgages Are Perilous for the Unwary,” Baltimore Sun, 9 Feb. 2003, at L1.


*ophthalmology. See ophthalmologist.

**optician.** See ophthalmologist.
optimize (= to make the best use of) is the word, not *optimalize—e.g.: “Insulin dosage was optimalized [read optimized] by the study physician.” Julio Wainstein et al., “The Use of Continuous Insulin Delivery Systems in Severely Insulin-Resistant Patients,” 24 Diabetes Care 1297 (1 July 2001). See nonwords.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*optimalize for optimize: Stage 1
Current ratio (optimized vs. *optimalized): 7,885:1

optimum. Optimum is the noun, but optimal is—optimally speaking—the better adjective. Hence the phrase should be optimal advantage, not *optimum advantage. The reason is that there’s no need for optimal if we use optimum both as a noun and as an adjective. It serves the principle of differentiation to distinguish between the two forms. But the adjectiveal optimum seems to be edging out optimal in practice, and the latter may one day be just a needless variant.

optometrist. See ophthalmologist.

opt out. See opt.

opus. Pl. opuses—preferably not opera (except in references to operatic works). See plurals (b).

opusculum; opuscule; *opuscle. Although the Latinate opusculum (= a minor literary or musical work) was long ago anglicized to opuscule, the latter has never occurred as frequently in English-language print sources as the former. And although one might expect opuscules to be more convenient to readers of English than the plural opuscula, in fact the more bookish term has predominated in all varieties of English. *Opuscle is a variant form. For nonscholars, of course, all these terms are hopelessly pedantic.

-or; -er. See -er (a).

-or; -our. Although all agent nouns except saviour (BrE) take -or in both AmE and BrE (e.g., actor, investor), the general distinction is that of the other nouns that end in either of these forms, AmE nouns tend to be spelled -or, and BrE nouns -our. That distinction occurs primarily in abstract nouns. Hence the British write behaviour, colour, flavour, and humour, whereas Americans write behavior, color, flavor, and humor. The following words, however, end in -or on both sides of the Atlantic: error, horror, languor, liquor, pallor, squalor, stupor, terror, torpor, and tremor. Glamour is the primary exception to the -or rule in AmE.

In BrE, nouns ending in -our change to -or before the suffixes -ation, -iferous, -ific, -ize, and -ous (e.g., coloration, honorific). But -our keeps the -u- before -able, -er, -ful, -ism, -ist, -ite, and -less (e.g., honourable, labourer, colourful). At least one British writer has suggested that BrE would be better off hastening toward the AmE spellings. G.H. Vallins refers to the “slow process in English (we have terror, horror, governor, all of which were once spelt with a u),” adding that this process “merely needs quickening up by a few journalists and novelists with confidence and vigour enough to defy convention.” G.H. Vallins, Better English 116 (4th ed. 1957). (Make that vigor, G.H.) See Labour Party.

or. See and/or.

oral. See aural & verbal.

orangy (= suggestive of an orange—the fruit or the color) has been the standard spelling since the early 1970s. *Orangy is a variant.

orangutan; *orangutang; *orang-utan; *orangoutan; *orangoutang. The spelling of this word—deriving from the Malay term oran utan (“forest man”)—has been settled since about 1950: orangutan. The others are variant spellings. The standard AmE pronunciation is /ә-rang-[g]ә-tan/. But the other pronunciation (/ә-rang-[g]ә-tang/) remains quite common, possibly because the reduplicative rhyme makes the word easier to say.

orate, a back-formation from oration, was once widely considered objectionable or merely humorous. But it has almost completely lost this stigma. It sometimes suggests that the speaker is pompous, but the word itself no longer strikes most readers or listeners as being facetious—e.g.:

- “Whether he was orating from the House dais or taking an operatic pie in the face at the Bushnell, Weicker thrived on center stage.” Michele Jacklin, “Weicker Leaves Office as He Governed: On His Own Terms,” Hartford Courant, 1 Jan. 1995, at A1.
- “Helping inestimably to evoke the era are Charles Corcoran’s effective set and Jill Nagel’s sound design, which subtly adds echo to Roosevelt’s voice as he orates from a small balcony.” Andy Webster, “The Amazing Adventures of a Gregarious Dissident,” N.Y. Times, 16 May 2008, at E3.

For the misuse of perorate for orate, see perorate.

orchestrate, in nonmusical contexts, is a cliché and a vogue word. But it is arguably useful in indicating that an (apparently spontaneous) event was clandestinely arranged beforehand. Cf. choreograph.

order of protection. See protective order.

ordinal numbers. See cardinal numbers & numerals (f).

ordinance; ordinance; ordonnance. Ordinance (= a municipal [i.e., city] law) is common in AmE but rare in BrE, where byelaw serves this purpose. Ordinance =
military supplies; cannon; artillery. *Ordonnance* = the ordering of parts in a whole; arrangement.

Occasionally *ordnance* is misused for *ordinance*—e.g.:


The opposite error, *ordinance* for *ordnance*, also occurs—e.g.:


• “There are a number of unexploded small *ordinance* [read *ordnance*] scattered about the entire island.” Andrew Doughty & Harriet Friedman, Maui Revealed 141 (2001).


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *ordinance* misused for *ordnance*: Stage 1

2. *ordnance* misused for *ordinance*: Stage 1

**Oregon.** Some natives of the state insist on a long medial -ee-/or-i-ee-gan/. Others, though, are perfectly happy putting a short vowel or schwa in the middle syllable: /or-i-gan/ or /or-a-gan/. No full-blooded Oregonian /or-i-goh-nee-an/, though, countenances rhyming the last syllable with *gone*. It’s *gun*, not *gone*.

**organdy** (= a sheer cotton or silk fabric) has been the standard spelling since the late 1930s. *Organdie* is a variant.

**organic**. This adjective traditionally means (to a chemist) “carbon-based” or (to a physician) “of, relating to, or involving a body organ.” Purists may object to its odd extensions in reference to plant foods that are grown without chemicals, pesticides, or genetic manipulation, but the phrase is here to stay—it’s even codified in federal law. The phrase *inorganic food* is, strictly speaking, an oxymoron, since all foods contain carbon. Use *nonorganic food* instead.

**orient; *orientate***. The latter is a *NEEDLESS VARIANT* of *orient*, which means “to get one’s bearings or sense of direction”—e.g.: “It’s doubly daunting for foreign players trying to *orientate* [read *orient*] themselves to the USA.” Chris Colston, “For Some, a World of Change,” USA Today, 22 Jan. 2008, at C5.

The longer variant (a back-formation from *orientation*) is more common in BrE than in AmE—e.g.:

• “Not everyone, even in *market-orientated* [read *market-oriented*] America, is wholly happy with what is happening.” Sunday Times (London), 11 Dec. 1988, at H1.


• “As excited as she had been to be reunited with Connor, she had felt *disoriented* [read *disoriented*] by leaving the Vampirate ship—and her friends there—so precipitately,” Justin Somper, Vampirates: Tide of Terror 79–80 (2007).

Cf. *disorient*.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*orientate* for *orient*: Stage 2

Current ratio (oriented vs. *orientated*): 22:1

**ornery** (= recalciitrant; mean-spirited) is the standard spelling of this word, which is pronounced /or-na-ree/. *Onery* is a variant spelling influenced by the dialectal pronunciation /on-[a]-ree/. Interestingly, *ornery* was originally an alteration of the word *ordinary*, but today (of course) it no longer bears that sense. See *dialect*.

Current ratio: 37:1

**orphant**. See widow.

**orphanhood; *orphancy; *orphandom***. The first is the usual word, the other two being *NEEDLESS VARIANTS*.

**orthopedics** (= the branch of medicine dealing with correcting problems with bones and muscles) is so spelled in AmE, *orthopaedics* in BrE. The divergence in spelling occurred in the first decade of the 20th century.

**orthoscopic**. See *arthroscopic*.

-os. See plurals (d).

**ostensible; *ostensive***. *Ostensible* (the usual term) = seeming; apparent <her ostensible opinion isn’t supported by her actions>. *Ostensive* = clearly displaying; directly demonstrative <his behavior was ostensive of his debased character>. Though some dictionaries sanction the usage, it’s an error to use *ostensive* synonymously with *ostensible*—e.g.:


• “The convention’s charge is to select three candidates, *ostensively* [read *ostensory*] to help the governor make a final selection for the board.” “The School Convention Worked,” Baltimore Sun, 27 June 1995, at A10.

• “The fun—and there is quite a bit to be had—derives in part from the over-the-top performance by Sizemore and the sometimes painfully ordinary ‘insights’ of the *ostensive* [read *ostensory*] geniuses, but the film is surprisingly free of cant.” Philip Martin, “Review: The Genius Club,” Ark. Dem.-Gaz., 1 Feb. 2008, Moviestyle §, at 1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*ostensive* misused for *ostensible*: Stage 1

**ostopathy**. Osteopathy is the drug-free alternative-medicine discipline that focuses on treating muscular and skeletal problems primarily by using noninvasive manual therapies. In the United States, *osteopathic*
**medicine** is distinct. Its practitioners are osteopathic physicians, who must be fully trained as medical doctors and receive specialized training in the musculoskeletal system to earn the degree Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine, or D.O. In much of the rest of the world, an osteopath is not a physician but a person specially trained only in treating musculoskeletal conditions through manual techniques, such as applying pressure to or moving muscles and bones.

Osteopathy is pronounced /os-tee-op-a-thee/—not /os-tee-a-path-ee/.

**ostler.** See hostler.

**other. A. *Other . . . other than.** Repeating other in this way is a fairly common redundancy—e.g.: “The fractional approach typically does not integrate with any other type of social insurance program other than Social Security.” Carolyn M. Burton et al., “Disability Insurance with Social Integration,” *J. Am. Soc’y of CLU & ChFC*, Sept. 1995, at 56. Either one of the others should be dropped.

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*other . . . other than: Stage 1

B. **No other . . . than.** This phrase often gets mangled into *no other . . . except, which is a piece of ILLOGIC. The correction is typically no . . . other than—e.g.: • “The Bruce Willis supernatural thriller has grossed $20 million for the fifth consecutive weekend, accomplishing what no other film has done except ‘Titanic’ [read what no film other than ‘Titanic’ has done or no film has done except ‘Titanic’].” Robert W. Welkos, “Weekend Box Office,” *L.A. Times*, 8 Sept. 1999, at F3. • “Some people may believe we will have no other choice except [read no other choice than] light rail.” Jay Tibshraeny, “Chandler to Study Transit Woes, Options,” *Ariz. Republic*, 21 Feb. 2001, at 4. • “He desires no other woman except [read no woman other than or no other woman than] his absent fiancee.” Loren King, “Rohmer Films, in Focus at Brattle, More than Just Talk,” *Boston Globe*, 23 Feb. 2001, at D5.

Very occasionally, the no other . . . except phrasing is actually correct—e.g.: “Vojtas has testified repeatedly that he earned less than $50,000 a year as a police officer and that he had no other source of income except for gifts from his mother.” Bruce Keidan, “Brentwood Drops Vojtas Appeal,” *Pitt. Post-Gaz.*, 10 Feb. 2001, at A1. Here the word other refers to something already mentioned (the $50,000 salary), as opposed to referring to something in a yet-to-be-completed than-clause.

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*no other . . . except for no other . . . than: Stage 1

Current ratio (no other person than vs. *no other person except): 10:1

C. **And otherwise.** See otherwise (A).

**otherwise. A. And other.** Pedants insist that other is the adjective, otherwise the adverb—and that it’s wrong to use otherwise as an alternative to an adjective <no real impact, substantial or otherwise>. Wilson Follett believed that “to pronounce this otherwise inadmissible would be to fly in the face of a strongly established usage. But usage, which can allow it on sufferance, cannot prevent it from being rejected by more exact writers” (*MAU* at 242–43). In fact, though, this usage is so strongly established that—to most educated speakers—otherwise would sound incorrect. E.g.: “Cowboys simply aren’t cowboys—urban or otherwise—without a pair of boots between them and the ground.” Dan R. Barber, “Boot Bonanza,” *Dallas Morning News*, 11 Sept. 1997, at A33.

Of course, otherwise often functions adverbially as well—e.g.: “Paul Sanchez . . . said his business has been booming, financially and otherwise.” David Snyder, “Vendors Confident Fair Will Be Successful,” *Albuquerque Trib.*, 5 Sept. 1997, at A8.

B. **As a Conjunction Meaning ‘or else.’** This slipshod usage, which leads to run-on sentences, occurs primarily in BrE. Otherwise shouldn’t connect two clauses in a compound sentence—e.g.: • “It’s got to be attractive, otherwise people won’t go there.” George Martin, “Why My Montserrat Is More than Just a Home for Retired Rockers,” *Evening Standard*, 11 Sept. 1997, at 23. (Put a period or semicolon after a comma after otherwise. Otherwise change otherwise to or else.) • “The alliance needs to receive clearance from London, Washington and Brussels by November otherwise BA and American may not be able to launch joint services in time for next summer’s timetable” Michael Harrison, “Brussels Urged to Relax Stance on BA Alliance,” *Independent*, 12 Sept. 1997, at 21. (Put a period or semicolon after November and a comma after otherwise. Or else change otherwise to or else.) • “But they cannot afford to do this, since they must believe that their view is correct, otherwise why would they be bothering to put it forward.” Richard J. Evans, “Bound by the Web of Facts,” *Fin. Times*, 13 Sept. 1997, at 4. (Put a period or semicolon after correct and a comma after otherwise.)

In each of those sentences, a period or semicolon should precede otherwise; after otherwise, the comma is optional but preferred.

**otiose** (= unneeded; not useful) is a word used more by literary critics than by other writers. You might say that the word itself is otiose—e.g.: “Otiose happens to be a word whose meaning the formidable William F. Buckley Jr. once confessed kept escaping him. Does the rather plain context of [Niall] Ferguson’s passage warrant ransacking the language for a term so arcane that it baffles a Buckley?” Frederic Morton, “Dynasty:
The House of Rothschild," L.A. Times, 21 Nov. 1999, Book §, at 4. It appears much more commonly in BrE than in AmE—e.g.:


• “This set turns out to be a plea against pandering to stereotypes, against one generation preaching to another, against modern-day mediocrity in all its otiose reality-TV, electronic-tablet, Coke Light forms.” Mark Monahan, “Comedy,” Daily Telegraph, 22 Aug. 2015, at 19.

An alternative definition (“idle, at leisure”) is labeled archaic in NOAD. It’s certainly rare.

The preferred pronunciation in AmE is /oh-shee-ohs/. The BrE pronunciation /oh-tee-ohs/ sounds affected here.

**otolaryngology; otorhinolaryngology.** These are essentially synonymous words denoting the medical field dealing with the ears, nose, and throat. The -rhino- version manages to work in explicit reference to the nose, but the resulting word is downright procrasti-ology. These are essentially synonymous words denoting the medical field dealing with the ears, nose, and throat. The rhino- version manages to work in explicit reference to the nose, but the resulting word is downright procto-rhino-version. The words are pronounced as follows: otolaryngology /oh-toh-ler-in-gol-a-jee/; otorhinolaryngology /oh-toh-ri-noh-ler-in-gol-a-jee/.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 5:1

Ought. **A. Infinitive Following.** Ought (an old past tense and past participle of owe, now a modal auxiliary verb) should always be followed by a full infinitive, whether the phrase is ought to or ought not to—e.g.:

• “Clinton to this day insists his day-and-night shakedown of contributors constituted, at one and the same time, action that ought to be illegal, but an innocent exercise in democracy and the free play of ideas.” John Hall, “Few Mourn End of Thompson’s Hearings, and That Is a Shame,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 6 Nov. 1997, at A9.

• “Editors ought not to have been so thin-skinned when asked to participate in the recent forums.” William McGaughy Jr., “Star Tribune Should’ve Taken Part in Media and Public Forums,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 22 Nov. 1997, at A23.


As if striving to earn some type of scholastic badge, some writers omit the particle to, especially when the expression is in the negative or interrogative. But there is no warrant for the bare infinitive—e.g.:


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• *ought not be for ought not to: Stage 2 Current ratio (ought not to be vs. ought not to be): 13:1

**B. And should.** Ought should be reserved for expressions of necessity, duty, or obligation; should, the slightly weaker but more usual word, especially in speech, expresses appropriateness, suitability, or fitness.

• *Had ought.* This phrasing is nonstandard in place of ought—e.g.:

• “You had ought [read ought] to see some of the aeroplanes travel here and see some of the battles in the clouds.” Norm Maves Jr., “Rats the Size of Half-Grown Mules Visit Trenches,” Oregonian (Portland), 8 Nov. 1994, at B1.


See double modals.

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• *had ought for ought: Stage 1

**D. Oughtn’t.** This quaint contraction sometimes appears. The same principles govern its use as those governing ought. That is, it should be followed by the full infinitive, not a bare infinitive—e.g.:


Most writers would use the far more natural word shouldn’t.  

• *Ought to could.* See double modals.

**E. Confused with aught.** See ought (c).

• *-our.** See -or.

**ours,** an absolute possessive, is sometimes wrongly written *our’s—e.g.:

• “We don’t have nearly the physical challenge here that we had there.” Barnett conceded. ‘Our’s [read Ours] is more mental.” B.G. Brooks, “Back in Focus,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 29 Aug. 1999, at N10.
• “Our selectmen are bypassing the intent of federal law for cases such as ours [read ours] because they think that in being more accommodating to Massport, they will somehow win special relief!” Lori Eggert, “Bedford Town Meaning to Air Participation in FAA Suit,” Boston Globe, 14 Jan. 2001, North Weekly §, at 5.


See possessives (c).

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*ours* for *ours*: Stage 1
Current ratio (ours vs. *ours*): 555:1

ourselves; ourselves; *theirself*. *Ourself* is technically ill formed, since *our* is plural and *self* is singular. In the preferred form, *ourselves*, both parts are plural. *Ourself* is established, though, in the editorial or royal style—e.g.: “You’d be surprised how hard it is to write a column from the shower. We’ve been stuck in here, hosing ourself down, since watching Michael Jackson creep the hell out of the entire country.” Tim Goodman. “Jackson Show Is Over, but He’s Still Creeping Us Out,” S.F. Chron., 12 Feb. 2003, at D1. But *theirself for themselves*, increasingly common since 1900, is indefensible (see sexism (b)).

out. A. As an Unnecessary Particle in Phrasal Verbs. Out is usually superfluous in phrases such as *calculate out, *cancel out, *distribute out, *segregate out, and *separate out. (Colloquially, it occurs in figure out, lose out, make out, test out, try out, and work out.) See phrasal verbs.

But sometimes out is quite necessary—e.g.: “At the time of the crash, the FAA said potentially explosive sparks had been *designed out* of all big-jet fuel tanks.” Robert Davis, “FAA Agrees to Fuel-Tank Changes,” USA Today, 4 Dec. 1997, at A4. The phrase design out (= to rid of [an undesirable characteristic]) is common in patent contexts.

B. As a Noun. This usage <she was looking for an out> is a casualism.

outbid > outbid > outbid. So inflected. *Outbidden* is an error confined mostly to BrE and Australian English—e.g.: “They admit to feeling plenty of pressure to find their dream home in the current market, having been outbidden [read outbid] on numerous occasions.” Andrew Carswell, “House Price Frenzy,” Daily Telegraph, 2 Oct. 2013, at 15.

outdoor(s); out-of-door(s). *Outdoor* is the better, more economical choice for the adjective <outdoor activities>. *Out-of-door* is a formal and awkward equivalent <an out-of-door affair>, and *out-of-doors* is even creakier.

Outdoors and *outdoors* are both adverbs. Once again, *outdoors* is the better choice.

And, of course, *outdoors* is also a noun <the great outdoors>.

*out loud. See aloud.*

out-of-door(s). See outdoor(s).

*out of sync. See sync.*

outside does not need of—hence *outside the house*, not *outside of the house*. E.g.: “Italian goods have done well *outside of* [read outside] the Continent because the lira has fallen 15% vs. the U.S. dollar in the past year.” James C. Cooper & Kathleen Madigan, “Sprinting Toward Entry in the EMU,” Business Week, 15 Sept. 1997, at 31. In modern print sources, the collocation *outside the* occurs about five times as often as *outside of* the. See of (b). Cf. *off of.*

When *outside of* appears in the sense *apart from* or *aside from*, either of those phrases would be more serviceable—e.g.: “Outside of [read Apart from or Aside from] economies of scale in purchasing and merged back-room operations, Pillowtex reaps Fieldcrest’s well-known brands in sheets, comforters, [and] towels.” Jennifer Steinhauer, “Pillowtex to Acquire Fieldcrest for $400 Million,” N.Y. Times, 12 Sept. 1997, at D6.

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*outside of* for *outside*: Stage 4
Current ratio (outside the vs. *outside of the*): 5:1

outsized; *outsise*, adj. The first is standard AmE. The second is standard BrE.

Current ratio (outsized head vs. *outsize head* in AmE): 3:1

Current ratio (outsized head vs. *outsize head* in BrE): 1:3:1

*outward(s). See directional words (A).*

ova. See ovum.

over. A. For more than. In one of its uses, the prepositional *over* is interchangeable with *more than* <over 600 people were there>—and this has been so for more than 600 years. The charge that *over* is inferior to *more than* is a baseless crochet. E.g.:


In 2014 even the Associated Press came around, finally sanctioning *over* “in all uses to indicate greater numerical value.” One curmudgeonly copyeditor snapped back: “More than my dead body!”

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over in the sense “more than”: Stage 5
B. Over- as a Combining Form. See *overly.

_overall_ is a VOGUE WORD, often a lame sentence adverb. Many sentences would read better without it—e.g.:

- “Overall, Berea’s statistics [read Berea’s statistics] speak worlds about the demand for affordable higher education; this year, the college accepted only 22 percent of its applicants.” Tamar Lewin, “With No Frills or Tuition, a College Draws Attention,” _N.Y. Times_, 21 July 2008, at A12.

_overarching_ /oh-var-ahr-ch-ing/. The -ch- is sometimes mispronounced with a /k/ sound.

_overdo; overdue_. The first is the verb (= to do too much), the second the adjective (= past due, late). But the two are sometimes confused—e.g.:

- “If you have blue eyes, bring them out. But when you do, don’t _overdo_ [read _overdo_] it with too much makeup or jewelry.” “By Design,” _L.A. Times_, 16 June 1994, at E3 (quoting Homer Prefontaine).
- “The Izod Center—eaten alive by the Xanadu mess at the Meadowlands—needs millions in long_.overflow_ [read _overdue_] improvements for it to continue as a viable home.” Steve Politi, “It’s Time to Bring Nets to Newark,” _Star-Ledger_ (Newark), 2 May 2008, at 31.

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1. _overdo_ misused for _overdue_: Stage 1
2. _overdue_ misused for _overdo_: Stage 1
Current ratio (_overdo them_ vs. _*overdue them_): 59:1

_overestimate_. See underestimate.

_overflow _> _overflowed_ > _overflowed_. Some writers mistakenly use _overflowed_ as the past participle of _overflow_.—e.g.:

- “But water has _overflowed_ [read _overflowed_] the levee at least four times since it was built.” Missy Baxter, “Levee Project Halted After Flood Proves New Wall Would Have Failed,” _Courier-J._ (Louisville), 14 Apr. 1997, at B2.
- “Though waste was found in a lagoon at the farm, some waste had _overflowed_ [read _overflowed_] at a lift station designed to pump it from four hog houses to the lagoon.” Hannah Mitchell, “Hog Waste Feared Leaking into River,” _Morning Star_ (Wilmington, N.C.), 10 July 1997, at B1.


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_overflowed_ misused for _overflowed_ as past participle of _overflow_: Stage 1
Current ratio (_overflowed its banks_ vs. _*overflowed its banks_): 44:1

_overfly_ > _overflew_ > _overflown_. Oddly, this verb dates from the 14th century. Though never common, it’s become more so in the age of flight—e.g. “It’ll be the first time the shuttle crew has _overflown_ the heartland since the 2003 Columbia tragedy.” Mark Carreau, “Shuttle Begins Journey Home,” _Houston Chron._, 6 Nov. 2007, at A4.

_overlay; _overlie_. To _overlay_ is to spread (something) on top of; to overspread <she intended to overlay the culture plates with bacteria>. To _overlie_ is either to lie above <the preserve overlies vast oil deposits> or to smother by lying on <ash from an eruption would _overlie_ valuable winery fields>.

As with _lay_ and _lie_, the most common error is to use _overlay_ when the proper word is _overlie_. One signal of the misuse is putting the present participle _overlaying_ at the beginning of the sentence—e.g.:

- “_Overlaying_ [read _Overlying_] all this was a perfectionism so intense that it was difficult to get products out of the lab, let alone to market.” Betsy Morris, “Big Blue,” _Fortune_, 14 Apr. 1997, at 68, 71.
- “_Overlaying_ [read _Overlying_] all of [delete of] this is the recent Supreme Court ruling upholding Obamacare exchanges.” “Upheaval in Health Care Hitting Region,” _Beaumont Enterprise_ (Tex.), 2 July 2015, at 6.

See _lay_.

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_overlay_ misused for _overlie_: Stage 3

_overlook; oversee; look over_. To _overlook_ is to neglect or disregard. To _oversee_ is to supervise or to superintend. To _look over_ is to examine.

Although historically _overlook_ bore the meanings of _oversee_ and _look over_ (see _see_), the word has narrowed its sense in standard English. Today it’s sloppy to use it interchangeably with _oversee_—e.g. “It will improve the quality of the water,” said Mark Norton, who _overlooks_ [read _oversees_] projects for a joint powers agency.” Vanessa Colon, “Underwater Propellers to Save Fish,” _Press-Enterprise_ (Riverside, Cal.), 31 Jan. 2003, at B1. See _oversight_.

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_overlook_ misused for _oversee_: Stage 2

*overly*. Although it’s old, dating from about the 12th century, _overly_ was never much used until about 1950. It is almost always unnecessary because _over- _may be prefixed at will: _overbroad, overrefined, overoptimistic, overripe_, etc. When _overly_ is not unnecessary, it’s merely ugly. Some authorities consider _overly_ semiliterate, although the editors of the Merriam-Webster dictionaries have used it in a number of definitions. Certainly this adverb should be avoided whenever possible, though admittedly _over- _as a prefix sometimes just doesn’t sound right (_overburdensome_). Yet it usually serves well—e.g. “To supporters, Duke’s initiative was a worthy, if _overly_ ambitious [read _overambitious_], effort.” Peter Applebome, “Duke Learns of Pitfalls in Promise of Hiring More Black Professors,” _N.Y. Times_, 19 Sept. 1993, at
1. When over- is awkward or ugly-sounding, another word is invariably at the ready—e.g.:
   - “Hence the UN inspectors were not overly [read especially] skeptical when they started their work of scrutinizing Iraq’s arsenal of weapons of mass destruction.” “Saddam’s UN Nemesis,” Boston Globe, 8 June 1997, at D6.
   - “There are certain things that are correct in one context but overly [read unduly] formal or stuffy in another.” Mary Newton Brudner, The Grammar Lady 6 (2000).

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*overly* instead of unduly or the prefix over-: Stage 4 Current ratio (overeager vs. *overly eager*): 3:1

**oversea(s)**, adj. The standard form is overseas <we didn’t send brochures to overseas clients>. *Oversea* is a variant form.

Current ratio: 106:1

**oversee.** See overlook.

**oversight.** A. As a Noun. Oversight = (1) an unintentional error; or (2) intentional and watchful supervision. For sense 2, oversight is an unfortunate choice of word: supervision is preferable, or perhaps even monitoring. In administrative oversight sounds less like a responsibility than a bureaucratic botch. See contronyms.

B. As a Jargonistic Verb. In some fields, people have begun using oversight as a verb in place of oversee—or, more often, *oversight* in place of overseeing or the simple oversight itself. The usage is common in Australia, but elsewhere it occurs primarily in speech—e.g.:

- “Of that 66 percent, there’re likely to be a whole lot who voted to put [Tom] Udall into Congress, and they might be very annoyed over Congress wasting its time in such oversighting [read oversight!]” Letter of William R. Dales, “Phone Taps OK,” Santa Fe New Mexican, 16 May 2006, at A5.
- “The investigative mechanism of Congress will be brought to bear fully on Iraq. Because that’s the mechanism by which Democrats tell their activists they’re dealing with Iraq: ‘Hey, we’re investigating. We’re overseeing [read overseeing] them.’” Bill Steigerwald, “Now Come the Dems” (interview with reporter Major Garrett), Pitt. Trib.-Rev., 6 Jan. 2007.

See jargon & overlook.

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*oversighting for overseeing; Stage 1

**oversized; *oversize**, adj. The first is standard <an oversized box>. The second is a needless variant. Current ratio (oversized engine vs. *oversize engine*): 3:1

**OVERSTATEMENT.** In persuasive or even polemical prose, such words as clearly, patently, obviously, and indisputably generally weaken rather than strengthen the statements they preface. They have been debased by overuse. Critics have noted that a writer who begins a sentence with one of these words is likely to be stating something questionable. See clearly & sentence adverbs.

Unconscious overstatement is also a problem. It is never good to overstate one’s case, even in minor, unconscious ways, since doing so will make the writing less credible. Unless the purpose is to be humorous or satirical, good writers avoid exaggeration.

**overthrow, n.; *overthrowal.** The latter, a needless variant that cropped up in the 1830s and has persisted, isn’t recorded in most dictionaries. But it does, unfortunately, occur—e.g.:

- “The military says more than 2,000 people had been killed in insurgency-related incidents since the February overthrow [read overthrow] of President Ferdinand Marcos.” “Philippine Rebel Leader in Favor of Peace Talks,” Chicago Trib., 13 Nov. 1986, at C4

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*overthrowal for the noun overthrow: Stage 1 Current ratio (the overthrow of vs. *the overthrow of*): 1,028:1

**overweening (= presumptuous, arrogant, or immoderate) is so spelled—but the misspelling *overweaning* is common. The word derives from the Old English verb wean, meaning “to hope or believe.” It has nothing to do with the verb to wean (see wean). E.g.:

- “Bush has a certain self-confidence, as one Democrat put it, so that he doesn’t exude an overthrowing [read overweaning] need to fill up every corner of every room with his magnificent presence, or be right all the time.” Carolyn Lochhead, “The Name of the Game,” S.F. Chron., 12 Feb. 2001, at A25.

The word is sometimes misused for overwhelming. Jacques Barzun cites the example of a suggestion “greeted with overweening [read overwhelming] disapproval.” Simple and Direct 30 (1975).

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1. overweening misspelled *overweaning; Stage 1 2. overweening misused to mean “overwhelming” :Stage 1
**ovum** (= the female reproductive cell; egg cell) forms the plural *ova*—not *ovums*. See plurals (b).

Current ratio: 644:1

**owing**, adj; owed. Although *owing* in the sense of *owed* is an old and established usage <$45 was owing on the bill,> the more logical course is simply to write *owed* where one means *owed*. That’s precisely what most writers and editors do today: beginning about 1970, the collocation *amount owed to* overtook *amount owing to* in frequency of use in print sources. The active participle may sometimes cause *miscues*—e.g.:


See passive voice.

Current ratio (*amount owed to* vs. *amount owing to*): 3:1

**owing to** (= because of) is an acceptable dangling modifier now primarily confined to BrE—e.g.: “Prolonged rain in the West Country has caused today’s meeting at Newton Abbot to be abandoned owing to waterlogging,” “Racing: Newton Abbot Off Due to Waterlogging,” *Independent*, 2 Dec. 1997, at 29.

Yet it does occur in AmE—e.g.:

- “*The stalking, which continues sporadically today, is at once bizarre, terrifying and, owing to Paul’s deep pockets, maddeeningly relentless and difficult to trace, according to the book.*” Andy Newman, “Stalked: A Decade on the Run,” *N.Y. Times*, 31 July 2008, at G1.

Cf. due to. See danglers (e).

**Oxford Comma.** See punctuation (d).

**oxidize**, oddly, forms the noun *oxidation*, not *oxidation*. But some writers mistakenly use the longer form—e.g.:

- “While the shelving wasn’t in danger of collapsing, it was expanding as it rusted—a natural result of *oxidation* [read *oxidation*].” J. Linn Allen, “Prudential Face Lift Draws Some Frowns,” *Chicago Trib.*, 21 Dec. 1996, at 1.
- “Beans or tomatoes . . . are quite acidic and may turn black when *oxidization* [read *oxidation*] occurs from an improperly seasoned pan.” Sylvia Carter, “Cast Iron, the Metal of a Good Cook,” *Newsday* (N.Y.), 19 Feb. 1997, at B19.
- “Grapes were left on the vine for too long and then once picked weren’t chilled long enough, resulting in *oxidization* [read *oxidation*].” “Scottish Wine Still Needs Refining,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, 25 July 2015, at D14.

Meanwhile, *oxidate* is a needless variant of oxidize.

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1. *oxidization for oxidation: Stage 1*  
   Current ratio (*oxidation* vs. *oxidization*): 178:1
2. *oxidate for oxidize: Stage 1*  
   Current ratio (*oxidize* vs. *oxidate*): 129:1

**Oxymoron.** A Generally. This term, originally a Greek word meaning “keenly foolish” or “sharply dull,” denotes an immediate contradiction in terminology. Thus:

- amateur expert
- baby grand
- build down
- conspicuous absence
- exact estimate
- executive secretary
- found missing
- intensive apathy
- mandatory choice
- nonworking mother
- organized mess
- pretty ugly
- standard deviation
- sure bet

Among language aficionados, collecting and inventing cynical oxymorons is a parlor game; they enjoy phrases that seem to imply contradictions, such as *military intelligence, legal brief, and greater Cleveland* (this last being quite unfair to a great city).

Writers sometimes use oxymorons to good effect—e.g.: “And there was, moreover, an irresponsibly giddy antigovernment fervor among the more *sophomoric House freshmen.*” Joe Klein, “The Una-bomber and the Left,” *Newsweek*, 22 Apr. 1996, at 39. The main thing to avoid is seemingly unconscious incongruity such as *increasingly less* or *advancing backwards.*

**B. Plural.** Although most dictionaries list only the Greek plural *oxy mora*, Margaret Nicholson listed *oxy morons* first in 1957 (*DAEU* at 403). In fact, *oxymoron* is now about six times as common as *oxymora* in print sources, and it ought to be accepted as standard—e.g.:


Today, *oxymora* looks pedantic—e.g.:

- “During a fall month of a Major League Baseball season, former catcher/manager Yogi Berra, the king of *oxymora* [read oxymorons], once noted that it was getting ‘later earlier.’” "July Was 2nd Driest on Record," *Indianapolis Star*, 6 Aug. 1997, at B4.

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1. *oxymora for oxymoron: Stage 5*  
   Current ratio (*oxymorons* vs. *oxymora*): 6:1
pabulum; pablum. *Pabulum* /pab-ya-lam/ = (1) food, nourishment; (2) nourishment for the mind; or (3) a soft, bland cereal for babies. *Pablum*, with a capital P, is a trademark for a brand of the cereal *pabulum* (sense 3). The lowercase *pablum* (formed through syncopation) has taken on the figurative sense “bland, trite, or simplistic writing or ideas” —e.g.: “Still, the raw charm of her way of life is the better-formed word, but it’s no picnic to pronounce—which is probably why today it’s no more than a needlessly variant. Although R.W. Burchfield says that “the shorter form is now the only one in use” (*FMEU3* at 566), the longer form is lamentably common in *AmE*—e.g.: “And then there are the *pacificists* [read *pacifists*], groups like the historic American Friends Service Committee founded by Quakers in 1917, which plans to host an exhibit called “The Costs of War,” detailing how the $720 million spent each day on the war could be spent on education and housing.” Colleen O’Connor, “Activists to Color Democratic Convention,” *Houston Chron.*, 22 June 2008, at A19. The term *passivist* (= one with a passive attitude or way of life) is usually set against *activist*—e.g.: “Sitting-in seems more *passivist* than activist, but activism can apparently take many shapes, including simple relentlessness.” Russell Baker, “Activism Epidemic!” *N.Y. Times*, 28 June 1994, at A17. “McCain also seems stunningly unaware that the justices he simplistically lauds as ‘judicial *passivists*’ are nothing of the sort.” Geoffrey R. Stone, “McCain’s Justice: Conservative Activism Gone Wild,” *Chicago Trib.*, 7 May 2008, at C23.

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pacan. A. And *pean; paen; paeon. A *paean* (/pee-in/) is a joyous tribute. (*Pean is a variant spelling.*) A *paen* (/pee-in/ or /pee-ahn/) is a four-syllable metrical foot in classical or English prosody. The two words have a common origin (the Greek word *paiôn*) and came into English at about the same time—1589 and 1603, respectively—but have been differentiated almost all that time. (See *differentiation*.) A *peon* (/pee-ahn/) is a low-level worker or drudge, especially one held in compulsory servitude. There are two plurals: *peons* (preferred) and *peon* (/pee-oh-nee/)—a Portuguese plural. See plurals (A).

B. *Paean of praise. Because a *paean* is specifically a song of praise or thanksgiving, the phrase *paean of praise* is a redundancy intended perhaps to provide contextual clues to those with an etiolated vocabulary—e.g.: “She recited a moving *paean of praise* [read *paean*] when the order ‘Pour le Mérite’ was conferred on me.” Chris Deerin, “Salmond, an endless negotiation.” *Scottish Daily Mail*, 26 May 2014, at 14.

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pea.n. Pal.* Pale.

pair. A. Plural Form. The preferred plural of *pair* is *pairs*—a choice that became predominant by 1850, when the matter should have been settled. In non-standard usage, *pair* often appears as a plural—e.g.:

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**pair** as a plural for **pairs**: Stage 3

Current ratio (two pairs vs. two pair): 6:1

**B. Pair of twins.** Is it right to speak of a **pair of twins**—that is, does this phrase denote two people or four? Because twins are always two per birth, a pair of twins is two people. (Shoes also come in pairs, and a pair of shoes is two—not four—shoes.) Four twins are two pairs of twins. But the redundant phrase **pair of twins** can be found in print sources fairly steadily from 1800 to the present day.

**pajamas; pyjamas.** The former is the AmE spelling, the latter BrE. The word is best pronounced /pa-jah-maz/, not /pa-jam-az/.

**pale, beyond the.** This phrase, which means “bizarre, outside the bounds of civilized behavior,” derives from the legal sense of **pale** from English history (“a district or territory within specific bounds, or subject to a particular jurisdiction”). In medieval Ireland, the district around Dublin, settled by the English and considered a law-abiding area, was known as the **Pale** or **within the Pale**. The land beyond that area was characterized as wild “bandit country.” Today, whatever is **beyond the pale** is a forbidden area or subject.

Modern writers occasionally mangle the phrase by writing *beyond the pall instead of pale*, a blunder that spread especially after 1950. E.g.:  

- “To have a panel of citizens and the Commonwealth’s Attorney . . . call for the board members’ resignations with such harsh and demeaning language, however, is beyond the pall [read pale],” “School Board Members’ Resignation Letters,” Virginian-Pilot & Ledger Star (Norfolk), 10 Mar. 1996, at 7.

- “Justice [William] Brennan, who authored the opinion in Roth that placed obscenity beyond the pall [read beyond the Pale] of First Amendment protection, now dissented.” John E. Semouch, Censoring Sex 45 (2007). (Here, though, beyond the pale would also be inappropriate, unless you consider the First Amendment “outside the bounds of civilized behavior.”)

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*beyond the pall for beyond the pale*: Stage 1

Current ratio (beyond the pale vs. beyond the pall): 398:1

**palette; palatte; pallet.** **Palette** (= [1] a board used by artists for mixing colors; or [2] a set or range of colors) is sometimes misused for its homophone **palate** (= [1] the roof of the mouth; or [2] the sense of taste). It’s an exquisite solecism, if there is such a thing:

- “When Ginny Lang moves from Georgetown to Los Angeles, one of the places she will miss most is Sugar’s, a Georgetown convenience store that for 50 years has served a range of tastes, from sophisticated **palettes** [read palates] to the junk food preferences of college students.” Tara Stevens, “A Stool at Sugar’s Is a Special Spot in Georgetown,” Wash. Post, 27 Sept. 1984, at D1.

- “Dr. Bill Magee, a plastic surgeon and founder of Operation Smile, was there and fixed the cleft **palette** [read palate] of the girl, Meng Fang.” Mya Frazier, “Doctor Learns of Love Through Chinese Man’s Travails,” Columbus Dispatch, 24 June 1995, at C5.

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**palette** misused for **palate**: Stage 1

**pall; pallor.** **Pall** = (1) a piece of cloth draped over a coffin or tomb, or (2) a shortened form of **pallium**, a robe worn by a bishop or by a monarch at a coronation. It is sense 1 that appears figuratively in the set phrase **to cast a pall over** (a situation), meaning to have a sense of gloom and defeat settle in. **Pallor** = paleness of face, esp. a deathly lack of color.

Both words suggest that things aren’t right. But there the difference ends: a **pallor** is a paleness in the face, while a **pall** is something that causes gloom. Only a **pall**, not a **pallor**, is cast or hung. One grows pallid at the thought of these misuses:

- “In fact, a **pallor** [read pall] hung over the Coming Out Week activities at the University of Minnesota, said Kjersten Reich, 20, of the Queer Student Cultural Center.” Rosalind Bentley, “Many Say Shepard Symbolizes Struggle of Gays and Lesbians,” Star Trib (Minneapolis), 14 Oct. 1998, at A1.

- “The strong-arm tactics cast a **pallor** [read pall] over the once-lustrous Espy name.” Charles Whitaker, “Mike Espy: Brused but Unbowed,” Ebony, 1 Apr. 1999, at 98.


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**pallor** misused for **palate**: Stage 1

**palmetto.** Pl. **palmettos**—not *palmettoes*. See **plurals** (d).

Current ratio: 9:1

**palominos.** So spelled. See **spelling** (a).

**palpable** (lit., “touchable”) = tangible; apparent. There is nothing wrong with using this word in figurative senses <palpable weaknesses in the argument>, as it has been used since at least the 15th century.

What is nonsensical, however, is to say that the **level of frustration, tension, etc. is palpable—e.g.**:

- “While Tyagachev and his colleagues conveyed a degree of ambiguity about what could force the delegation to leave before the closing ceremony or to boycott the Athens Games, their level of frustration and anger was palpable” [read their frustration and anger was palpable],” Michael Janofsky, “Russians Threaten to Pull Out of Games,” N.Y. Times, 22 Feb. 2002, at D1.

- “When they share a scene, the energy level is palpable [read the energy is palpable],” David Bianculli, “Net Goes 0 for 2,” Daily News (N.Y.), 24 Sept. 2002, at 79.

- “Even in America’s heartland, far from the sniper and terrorist attacks, the anxiety level [omit level] is palpable.”

The word is occasionally confused with *palatable* (= [of food or drink] tasty; or [of a situation] acceptable)—e.g.: "As a foreigner, especially having come from the relative political docility of Australia, this tension was *palatable* [read *pulpable*], almost like he could smell it coming from the fear of the populace.” Gregory Paul Broadbent, *On the Obsidian Sea* 263 (2014).

**pamphlet**. This word is pronounced with the *-ph*- as if it were an *-f*—/pəm-*plat*/. Many people incorrectly say /pam-*plat*/. See pronunciation (b), (f).

**panache** (= admirable flair, verve, and style) is preferably pronounced /pa-*nash*/—not /po-*nahsh*/.

**pandemic** = (of a disease) prevalent over the whole of a country or continent, or over the whole world. The word is usually an adjective but may be used as a noun—e.g.: "The 1918 flu *pandemic* killed 20 million.” Shannon Brownlee, “The Disease Busters,” *U.S. News & World Rep.*, 27 Mar. 1995, at 48. Cf. *epidemic*.

**pander**. The oldest use of this word—dating from about 1530—is as a noun meaning “a go-between in a sexual rendezvous; procurer.” The sense was long ago extended to “someone who caters to others’ base desires.”

By the 1600s, the word had come to be a verb meaning (1) “to act as a go-between in a sexual rendezvous,” or (2) “to exploit the weaknesses of others.” Sense 2 is now more common—e.g.:

- "While the mayor will *pander* to almost any group when the time and place are right, he has made surprisingly few efforts to ingratiate himself in the city’s black communities.” Joseph Dolman, “Police Scandal Is About Power, Rather than Race,” *Newsday* (N.Y.), 21 Aug. 1997, at A54.

The word still sometimes appears as a noun, but now the verb has become so widespread that few consider the word a noun. Meanwhile, in the mid-19th century, the noun *panderer* sprang up. It has now gone far toward displacing the noun *panderer*—e.g.:

- “During his three-decade career, Bowie has been both a bold explorer and a sad *panderer*.” Richard Cromelin, "Bowie Gives a Focused Show in Intimate Small-Club Setting," *L.A. Times*, 12 Sept. 1997, at F20.
- “Don’t expect the weak-kneed *panderers* to actually solve tough problems or work to make life better for Alabamians.” “Alabama Legislators Fail to Reflect Will of the People,” *Birmingham News* (Ala.), 7 Aug. 2015, at A8.

**panegyric** (= a rapturous encomium) is pronounced /pan-*i*-jir*/—not /pan-*i*-jít-rík*/.

**panel**, vb., makes *paneled* and *panelling* in AmE, *panelled* and *panelling* in BrE. See spelling (b).

**panic**, v.i., makes *panicked* and *panicking*. Usually intransitive, *panic* can also be a transitive verb meaning “to affect with panic”—e.g.: “British director Bernard Rose will try to *panic* audiences with a new film known as ‘Candyman.’” “Sweet Terror,” *Wash. Times*, 11 Oct. 1992, at D1. Cf. *mimic* & *picnic*.

**pants; pant**. Clothing retailers lack standardization when referring to trousers. Neiman Marcus uses *pant*—“9H. Women’s Pant 305.00.” Bloomingdale’s uses *pants*—“E. Clam Digger Pants.” And Silhouettes alternates (without any apparent reason) between *pants* and *pant*.

This inconsistency has been around for a long time. The *OED* quotes A.L. Hench from 1936 as follows: “For six or seven years now, I have been hearing clothes dealers speak of a pair of pants as ‘a fine pant.’ The reasoning seems to be that if a pile of pairs of pants is *pants*, then one pair is a *pant*.”

*Pant* may appear to be a false singular of *pants* or even a back-formation. But both words are actually abbreviations of *pantaloons*, and have been so used since the late 19th century when H.A. Shands noted that in Mississippi, “They say: ‘I have a pant that I can sell you,’ etc. Of course, *pants* is a well-known abbreviation, but I think *pant* is rather a new word.

**papal** (= of, relating to, or involving the Pope) is pronounced /po-*pәl*/—not /po-*pә*-

**paparazzi** (= photographers who follow celebrities, often aggressively, in hopes of snapping candid photos) is a plural; *paparazzo* is the singular. Originally Italian—invented for Federico Fellini’s film *La Dolce Vita* (1960)—the term first surfaced in English in the mid-1960s. Unfortunately, because the singular form is so rare, some writers have begun using the misbegotten double plural *paparazzis*—e.g.:

- “We would feel fully entitled to turn around and reject a new framework, on the grounds that we did not hack phones, or pay *paparazzi* [read *paparazzi*], or bribe public servants.” “A Royal Charter Alone Will Not Restore Trust,” *Independent*, 18 Mar. 2013, at 14.
On 31 August 1997, the day Princess Diana died after a car crash while being chased by paparazzi, many television commentators used the incorrect form—no doubt spreading the mistake among millions of viewers. See spelling (A).

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*paparazzi* for the plural *paparazzi*: Stage 1

**Paperwork.** One word.

**papier-mâché.** So spelled—not *paper-mâché* or *paper-mache*. E.g.: "This morning, when the gates open at 8 a.m., the lifesized *paper-mâché* band will start to play with the flick of a switch in the Circus Museum." Kate Gurnett, "Altamont Fair Awaits August Crowds," *Times Union* (Albany), 14 Aug. 1995, at B1. Although American dictionaries spell the phrase with the diacritical marks, it’s often spelled without the circumflex over the -a-.

Even so, the phrase is best pronounced /pay-pәr-ә/-, not /pay-par-ә/- or /pay-yay-/-.

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*papier-mâché* misspelled *paper-mâché* or *paper-mache*: Stage 1

**papillae** (= a nipple-like projection such as a tastebud) is pronounced /pә-pil-ә/-—the plural being /pә-pil-ee/.

**paprika** (the piquant red powdered spice) is pronounced /pә-pree-kә:/ or /pә-pree-kә/ in AmE or /pә-pri-kә:/ sometimes in BrE.

**papyry** /pә-pә-rәs/- (= [1] a tall sedge native to northern Africa, [2] the pith of this plant made into paper-like writing material, or [3] a manuscript written on this material) overwhelmingly makes the plural *papyri* /pә-pә-tәr/-—not *papyruses*.

par. See *subpar*.

*parchro-nism.* See anachronism.

**paradigm.** A. Sense. *Paradigm* = (1) an example, pattern; (2) a pattern of grammatical changes within a language; (3) a theoretical framework; or (4) a prevailing attitude, esp. within education or scholarship.

B. Plural. The preferred plural is *paradigms*, as opposed to *paradigmata*. See plurals (b).

C. For *paragon.* The term *paragon* (= a model of perfection) is sometimes displaced by *paradigm*, especially in the phrase *paragon of virtue*—e.g.: "A person might be called a paradigm [read paragon] of virtue if their [read his or her] behaviour is to be emulated." Alexander Bird, *Philosophy of Science* 276 (1998).


"Swans were long held out as the paradigm [read paragon] of virtue, but it turns out they aren’t all that faithful either." Stephanie Brenowitz, "A Biological Explanation for Infidelity," *Columbus Dispatch*, 12 Aug. 2001, at F7.

**D. Pronunciation.** *Paradigm* is pronounced /per-ә-dim/-—though it was /par-ә-dim/ in both AmE and BrE through the early 20th century.

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*paradigm* misused for *paragon*: Stage 1

**paradox.** A *paradox* is a seeming contradiction or a statement that appears on its face to be contrary to reason, but whose incongruity sometimes resolves itself on closer analysis—e.g.: "What explains this poor-in-wealth, rich-in-health mystery? That’s exactly what Hayes-Bautista hopes to discover and what health experts have dubbed the ‘Latino epidemiological paradox.’" Yvette Cabrera, "Latina Mothers Poor in Wealth, Rich in Health," *Milwaukee J. Sentinel*, 11 Aug. 2002, at A8.

In strict usage, a *paradox* is not an unresolvable problem—e.g.: “Two months shy of kicking off its 2002 campaign, United Way of South Hampton Roads officials are faced with the *paradox* [read problem] of a bad economy. Community needs rise. And too often, donations go down.” Janie Bryant, "Economy, Scandal May Affect Fund-raising in the Region," *Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk), 19 July 2002, at B4.

Nor is it an incongruous situation—e.g.: “The Texas prison system doesn’t provide inmates with condoms, but it still wants its 143,000 prisoners to be as educated as possible about AIDS. If there is a *paradox* [read an inconsistency] there, no one mentioned it at the Darrington Prison Unit, where 128 convicts from 16 state prison units gathered to get the latest information about AIDS and other infectious diseases.” Steve Olafson, "Inmates Learn About AIDS at First Conference of Its Kind," *Houston Chron.*, 18 July 2002, at A27.

And since a *paradox* is an *apparent* contradiction, the phrase *apparent paradox* is a redundancy—e.g.: "And how does one solve the Democratic Party’s *apparent paradox* [read problem] that a Republican flying the Stars and Bars is explicitly wrong while a Democrat doing the same is implicitly okay?” Editorial, "Paradox," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 20 July 2002, at A8.

**paradoxically.** See sentence adverbs.

**paragon.** See paradigm (c).

**paralipsis; *paralepsis; *paraleipsis.** Although the more classical spelling *paraleipsis* predominated until about 1960, *paralipsis* has become standard among rhetoricians since that time. *Paralepsis* is the second most common spelling. Let’s not fully discuss the degree to which *paraleipsis* has fallen into disfavor. For the meaning of this rare term, see p. 1019.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 3:2:1

**parallel, vb., makes paralleled and parallelling in AmE and BrE alike—not *paralleled* and *parallel-ling. See spelling (b).*

**Parallelism.** A. Generally. *Parallelism*—the matching of sentence parts for logical balance—helps satisfy
every reader’s innate craving for order and rhythm. In a list, for example, you might have noun + noun + noun, or verb + verb + verb, or adjective + adjective + adjective. By phrasing parallel ideas in parallel grammatical constructions, you show the reader how one idea relates to another. You supply correspondences. Stylists have long emphasized the importance of matching phrase to like phrase:

- “One of the first requisites for the writing of good clean sentences is to have acquired the art of denomination, that is, of stringing together three or four words or phrases of identical grammatical value without going wrong.” H.W. Fowler, *EMEUI* at 142.
- “Everyone who tries to write—at least, everyone not afflicted with what is sometimes called a tin ear—has a degree of natural instinct for putting like thoughts into like constructions. Some have the instinct in excelsis, . . . [But] most of us possess the instinct for matching parts in no more than a variable and inferior degree and must strengthen it by self-discipline and taking thought.” Wilson Follett, *MAU* at 211.
- “How do you make ideas parallel? In a series, all the items should be alike, whether all nouns, all gerunds, all infinitives, all phrases or all clauses. If a series of verbs is used, they should all be in the same tense, voice and mood. Subjects of parallel clauses should be in the same person and number. When two phrasal prepositions or conjunctions are used together, both need to be present in their entirety.” Brian S. Brooks & James L. Pinson, *Working with Words* 73 (2d ed. 1993).
- “No long complex sentence will hold up without parallel construction. Paralleling can be very simple. Any word will seek its own kind, noun to noun, adjective to adjective, infinitive to infinitive.” Sheridan Baker, *The Practical Stylist* 101 (8ed. 1998).

**B. Parts of Speech.** With correlative conjunctions and with lists (even short ones), noun should be matched with noun, adjective with adjective, adverb with adverb, etc. Avoid mixtures—e.g.:

- “The poem is derivative, ceremonial, and *an elegy* [read *elegiacal*].” D.S. Brewer, *Chaucer* 44 (2d ed. 1960). (Another possible revision: *The poem is a derivative and ceremonial elegy.* The original list consisted of adjective + adjective + noun.)
- “John Baker is conservative and a *traditionalist.*” Murray Teigh Bloom, *The Trouble with Lawyers* 223 (1970). (A possible revision: *John Baker is conservative and traditional.* Or: *John Baker is a conservative and traditional.* The original list consisted of adjective + noun.)
- “Webb, who batted .104 last season, had two doubles, three walks and *scored three times* [read and *three runs*].” Rick Sevitt, *Freshman Sits in Driver’s Seat as Longhorns Cruise,* Austin *Am.-Statesman* 5 Feb. 1995, at E1, E8. (The original list consisted of noun + noun + verb phrase.)
- “Her French-Canadian husband, Jean Marc, 50, was *gentle, generous and a millionaire* [read *a gentle, generous millionaire*].” Adam Fresco & Ian Cobain, *Weetabix Wife Lived a Life of Novel Charm,* *Times* (London), 23 Mar. 2001, at S. (The original list consisted of adjective + adjective + noun.)

A clear thinker presents lists logically so that grammatical and commonsense relationships are clear.

**C. Phrases and Clauses.** One of the most common mistakes in falling into a nonparallel construction involves mixing phrases and clauses by introducing a verb late in the game. “Orthopedic surgeons study for four years in a college or university, four years in an orthopedic residency program and may have one optional year of specialized education.” “Podiatry vs. Orthopedics,” USA *Today,* 14 Apr. 2003, at D7. The writer follows two four years phrases with the clause *may have one optional year of specialized education.* Worse, the first two elements are objects of the shared preposition for, a job that the *may have* clause can’t serve. A suggested revision: *Orthopedic surgeons study for four years in a college or university and four years in an orthopedic residency program; they may have one optional year of specialized education.*

**D. Content.** To the true stylist, mere grammatical parallelism isn’t enough: the grammar should match the ideas. That is, you should strive for notional parallelism. It seems obvious that you shouldn’t say that someone is hungry, tall, and Italian. But subtler problems arise: “The poetic opening stiffens, dreamily relaxes, then mightily reclines: an instability of mood and texture both *symptomatic* of the mature Schubert and *disorienting* to generations of frustrated admirers, beginning with Robert Schumann.” Joseph Horowitz, “A Symphony Is Where You Find It,” N.Y. *Times,* 24 May 1992, § 2, at 1. Although both *symptomatic* and *disorienting* begin adjective phrases, the ideas expressed aren’t coordinate. A possible revision: *The poetic opening stiffens, dreamily relaxes, and then mightily reclines. The instability of mood and texture—symptomatic of the mature Schubert—has been disorienting to generations of frustrated admirers, beginning with Robert Schumann.* The revision subordinates one phrase (symptomatic) to the other (disorienting), so that frustrated readers themselves aren’t disoriented by writing that is symptomatically unparallel.

**paralyse.** See *paralyze.*

**paralysis; *paralyzation.*** The first is standard. The second is a nonword that arose in the 19th century and today appears with some frequency—e.g.:

- “A federal appeals court tossed out his conviction, calling the *paralyzation* [read *paralyzation*] ’shocking to the
paralyze; paralyse. The first is the AmE spelling; the second is the predominant BrE spelling.

parameters. A. Generally. Technical contexts aside, this jargonistic VOGUE word is not used by those with a heightened sensitivity to language. To begin with, only a specialist in mathematics or computing knows precisely what it means: elsewhere it is a mush word. Second, when it does have a discernible meaning, it is usurping the place of a far simpler and more straightforward term, such as boundaries, limits, or guidelines. Although this 20th-century VOGUE word abounds in AmE, it doesn't occur in the best writing—e.g.: • "Similarly, his [Frank Zappa's] music broke down barriers even as it expanded parameters." Harry Sumrall, "Mother of Invention," Austin Am.-Statesman, 18 May 1995, Entertainment §, at 13. (How could it not expand "parameters" if it is breaking down barriers? A possible revision: delete even as it expanded parameters.) • "In March, school board members set parameters [read guidelines] for the search, saying they would consider only those with superintendent experience and a doctorate." Forrest White, "Schools Superintendent Job Draws 38 Applications," Post & Courier (Charleston, S.C.), 30 Apr. 1997, at B4. • "At 14 months, babies already know a lot about the parameters [read limits] of their safe little world." Elisabeth Kallick Dyssegaard, "The Danes Call It Fresh Air," N.Y. Times, 17 May 1997, § 1, at 19.

Rarely is the word used in the singular, but it does occur: "How many corporations inhabit a world so neat that one parameter can summarize it?" "The Limitations of WACC," Harv. Bus. Rev., May–June 1997, at 136.

B. And perimeter. Sometimes perimeter, the meaning of which has influenced the senses of parameter, is used ostensibly so that the writer can sidestep any criticisms for the use of parameter. Although this usage makes literal sense, a clearer expression is available—e.g.: "Some of the nation's foremost experts in medicine, law and politics will discuss the 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which sets parameters for [read establishes procedures in the event of] presidential disability and [determines] when the president must transfer power to the vice president." "Wake Forest Forum Features Address by President Ford," News & Record (Greensboro), 10 Nov. 1995, at B2. And in any event, perimeter is best left to physical senses <the fort's perimeter>.

paralyzation, see analysis. For the similar nonword *analyzation, see analysis.

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*paralyzation for paralysis: Stage 1
Current ratio (paralysis vs. *paralyzation): 959:1

paramount means "superior to all others" or "most important"—not merely "important." E.g.: "It is extremely paramount [read extremely important or paramount] that effective deployment of sworn deputies must begin with the distribution of these workers on a proportionate-need basis." Letter of Michael J. Robinson, "Sheriff's Defeasist Attitude Is a Cop-Out," St. Petersburg Times, 13 Sept. 1989, at 2. See tautamount & adjectives (b). Cf. penultimate.

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paramount in the sense "important" (rather than "most important"): Stage 2

paramountcy is the noun corresponding to the adjective paramount. It's not often seen but quite proper—e.g.: "Deng Xiaoping the economic pragmatist was always shadowed by Deng Xiaoping the political ideologue, who asserted, at every critical juncture, the paramountcy of the Chinese Communist Party in his nation's affairs." Frank Viviano, "China's Supreme Leader Dies," S.F. Chron., 20 Feb. 1997, at A1. *Paramountcy is a variant spelling to be avoided.

A more familiar word, such as supremacy or preeminence, will almost always be a better choice.

Current ratio (paramountcy vs. *preeminence): 70:1

*paramutual; *paramutuel. See parimutuel.

paraphrase, n. & vb., is sometimes misspelled *paraphraze.

paraplegic (= someone who is immobile from the waist down) has four syllables: /par-a-plee-jik/—not /par-a-pa-lee-jik/ (with an epenthetic schwa).

parasitic (= [1] living on other organisms, as a parasite does, or [2] fawning for favors; sycophantic) is the predominant form of the word in all varieties of World English. *Parasitical is a needless variant.

parasol. So spelled. See spelling (a).

parcel, vb., makes parceled and parceling in AmE, parcelled and parcelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

pardon, vt. See commute (b).

pardon me. See excuse me.

paren. This casualism for parenthesis, based on the term's long-standing abbreviation, is gaining in popularity—e.g.: • "As far as I know, I'm the first one who did colon, minus, paren." Katie Hafner, "Emoticon at Age 20 Continues to Stir :-)", Chicago Trib., 23 Sept. 2002, Bus. §, at 4 (quoting Scott E. Fahman of Carnegie Mellon University).

• "Besides singing, my favorite thing to do is to connect people for business, romance, or just because," Manisha Shahane wrote to me. Perhaps it was her final earnest set of parens that grabbed my attention: '(Ask anyone who knows me!). ' Kristen Paulson, "The Single File," Boston Globe, 12 Dec. 2002, Cal. §, at 8.

Part of the reason for this trend may be that the singular (paren) and the plural (parens) are formed...
according to the regular manner—whereas parenthesis gives some speakers and writers trouble in its various uses. See parenthesis.

parental (of, relating to, or involving being a parent and esp. being responsible for a child’s safety and development) is pronounced /ˈpær-ən-təl/—not /ˈpær-an-təl/.

PARENTHESES. See parenthesis & punctuation (k).

parenthesis /ˈpær-ən-θsis/, the singular noun, forms the plural parentheses /ˈpær-ən-θseiz/. But because the plural is more common than the singular, some speakers use the mistaken back-formation *parenthese (wrongly pronounced /ˈpær-ən-thiə/). The error occurs occasionally in writing as well as in speech.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*parenthese as false singular in place of parenthesis: Stage 1

Current ratio (parenthesis vs. *parentheses): 155:1

Parenting; grandparenting. Parenting, a vogue word meaning “the raising of a child by its parents,” is a fairly recent coinage: W11 dates it from 1958. It began as jargon used by psychologists, sociologists, and self-help practitioners, but spread into the general language during the 1980s. Its relative grandparenting is much rarer—e.g.: “Grandparenting Styles Differ,” Charleston Daily Mail, 10 Oct. 1995, at A8.

Of course, the gerund parenting implies a verb, but that form appears less often than the noun. It’s more jarring, and there’s usually a handy and simple substitute—e.g.:

“• ‘The group says other clients are trying to have babies that will genetically match children they have already parented [read given birth to] and lost.’ “Cloning Facts,” Denver Post, 29 Dec. 2002, at A6.

• ‘He admits that marriage isn’t the silver bullet for social ills but observes that well-parented [read well-reared] kids often cause less crime or other problems, thus costing society and the government less money.’ Abraham McLaughlin, Christian Science Monitor, 13 Jan. 2003, USA §, at 1.

• ‘This legislation is a slap in the face to them and to hundreds like them across Iowa who are parenting [read raising children] and foster-parenting [read providing foster homes], with all of the challenges and little of the recognition that ‘traditional’ couples receive.’ Letter of Heather L. Adams, “No Evidence for Adoption Ban,” Des Moines Register, 17 Feb. 2003, at A10.

PARLOR. See parlor & ARCADIUS (b).

parlor /ˈpær-lor/ is often confused with parlour, which is correct. See parlour & ARCADIUS (b).

parliament = (of) a parliament.

Parliament. See parliament & language (k).

parliament /ˈpær-ləmənt/ is the singular noun, forms the plural parliaments /ˈpær-ləmənts/.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
parimutuel misspelled in various ways: Stage 1

Parish ( = a citizen or resident of Paris) is pronounced /ˈpær-izh-an/ or /ˈpær-ree-zhan/ in AmE but /ˈpær-ree-an/ in BrE.

parley, parlay. A. As Nouns. A parley (/ˈpær-lee/) is a discussion of disputed matters, especially a negotiation between warring parties to end hostilities. A parlay (/ˈpær-lay/) is a series of all-or-nothing wagers made in hopes of eventually accumulating large winnings.

Each word is sometimes misused for the other—e.g.:


• “What was that the sources were saying Friday about an ‘enormous breakthrough’ in the Yahoo-Microsoft negotiations? Obviously what they meant to say was ‘enormous breakdown.’ Steve ‘Not A Dime More’ Ballmer and Jerry ‘Not A Dime Less’ Yang held one last parlay [read parley] on Saturday, and as dawn broke Sunday, the Yahoo generals looked out from their battlements on a dusty, empty field, tents and equipment abandoned—no giant wooden horse, no nothing.” John Murrell, “Good Morning Silicon Valley,” San Jose Mercury News, 30 Mar. 2007, at C3.

B. As Verbs. Parley = (1) to discuss differences of opinions, or (2) to negotiate an agreement or settlement, esp. an end to a war. Parlay = (1) to repeatedly wager the original stake plus the accumulated winnings, or (2) in an extended sense, to use something on which to build momentum or to use as a foundation.

Although misuses are rare, they do occur—e.g.:


• “How can we possibly be so deluded as to think such negotiations this time will not produce results akin to those of previous efforts to parlay [read parlay] with
other totalitarianists: confirming their contempt for Western interlocutors, reinforcing the despots’ sense of inevitable victory and encouraging more aggressive behavior by the latter to achieve that outcome on an accelerated basis.”

Frank J. Gaffney Jr., “What Were They Thinking?” Wash.
Times, 10 July 2007, at A14.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *parley* misused for *parlay*: Stage 1
2. *parlay* misused for *parley*: Stage 1

**Parliament.** The definite article (*the*) is unnecessary before this word when it is used as a proper noun (i.e., in reference to a particular parliament) — <Parliament voted to make such conduct illegal>. Cf. *Congress.*

**parliamentary** need not be capitalized unless one is referring to the doings of a particular parliament. Unlike *congressional*, which should not be capitalized, *parliamentary* as a lowercase adjective has other senses, most commonly in denoting procedural rules for governing meetings. So there may be more justification for the uppercase *Parliamentary* than an uppercase *Congressional*. See [Congressional](#).

**parochial** = (1) of or related to a church parish; or (2) confined in range or outlook. The *OED* dates sense 1 to Chaucer in the early 15th century, and it is still current — e.g.: “It took less than a year for Algene Patrick to learn all she needed to know about William H. Brazier Elementary School . . . . The grandmother decided enough was enough, and she put Lawrenesha in parochial school.” Elizabeth Weiss Green, “Grade School Goes Corporate,” *U.S. News & World Rep.*, 7 May 2007, at 50.

But the figurative sense 2, in use since the 1850s, is unobjectionable — e.g.:

- “Financially the United States heretofore has been parochial. Unlike England, Scotland, Germany, France, Canada, and South Africa, we have not had to rely on powerful banking organizations.” Susan Adams, “90 Years Ago in Forbes,” *Forbes*, 7 May 2007, at 38.

- “[B]efore the Giuliani campaign got off the ground, many Republican operatives believed that a major liability for the candidate would be his dependence on this closed circle of parochial advisers, none of whom is experienced in national elections.” Thomas B. Edsall, “Party Boy,” *New Republic*, 21 May 2007, at 26.

- “[D]avid Buss] was accused of being parochial. Though the surveys had been distributed in 37 countries, his critics argued that the populations surveyed were still mostly Western or Westernized.” Karen Olsson, “Human Mate Selection Is a Many-Splendored Thing,” *Texas Monthly*, June 2007, at 138.

**paroxysm** (= a sudden spasm or attack of pain, coughing, shaking, etc.) is preferably pronounced /par-ak-siz-əm/, not /par-ək-siz-əm/.

**parricide; patricide.** *Parricide*, the more usual word, means (1) “the murder of one’s own father”; or (2) “someone who murders his or her own father.” Sense 1: “According to Mones, there are about 300 parricide cases a year in the United States . . . . About 70 percent of all parricides involve adolescent boys killing a father.” Regina Brett, “Defense of Abused Teen in His Father’s Slaying Made Ohio Court History,” *Buffalo News*, 21 Apr. 1997, at C1. Sense 2: “The contention that quadriplegia is ‘punishment enough’—like the parricide’s claim that he deserves mercy as an orphan—is one addressed to the sentencing court’s discretion alone.” *United States ex rel. Villa v. Fairman, 810 F.2d 715, 717–18 (7th Cir. 1987).*

It is also used in extended senses, such as “the murder of the ruler of a country” and “the murder of a close relative.” These are not examples of *slipshod extension*, however, for even the Latin etymon (*parricide*) was used in these senses. See -cide.

*Patricide* is a needless variant.

**parsec.** See light-year.

**parsimony, law of.** See Occam’s razor.

**part.** See portion.

**partake** is construed with either *in* or *of* in the sense “to take part or share in some action or condition; to participate.” *In* is the more common preposition in this sense — e.g.: “From 5 to 5:30 p.m., members will meet and partake in a wine and cheese reception.” Joan Szelgowski, “Town ‘N’ Country,” *Tampa Trib.*, 10 Sept. 1997, at 4.

*Of* is the correct preposition when the sense is “to receive, get, or have a share or portion of”— e.g.: “So should one partake of Chinese cuisine, British history and Clint Eastwood?” T. Collins, “Carryout, Videos Make Dating Like Staying Home,” *Courier-J.* (Louisville), 12 Sept. 1997, at W27. All in all, the collocation *partake of* has always been more prevalent than *partake in*.

**partially. A. And partly.** Whenever either word can suffice in a given context, *partly* is the better choice. *Partially* occasionally causes ambiguity because of its other sense “in a manner exhibiting favoritism.” E.g.: “The case was partly heard on May 31, 1995.” Lydia Barbara Bashwiner, “Aubrey Family-Member Rule Is Applied Prospectively Only,” *N.J. Lawyer*, 24 Feb. 1997, at 36. But aren’t cases supposed to be heard impartially?

The first edition of *AHD* (1969) notes that *partly*, which has wider application, “is the choice when stress is laid on the part (in contrast to the whole), when the reference is to physical things, and when the sense is equivalent to *in part, to some extent*” <partly to blame> <a partly finished building>. “Partially is especially applicable to conditions or states in the sense of *to a certain degree*; as the equivalent of *incomplete*, it indirectly stresses the whole” (*AHD*) <partially dependent> <partially contributory>. The third edition (1992) dropped this helpful distinction.

Another way of thinking about the distinction is that *partly* deals with a part, while *partially* deals with the whole, but only to a partial extent or degree.

**B. As an antonym of impartially.** Often this usage causes no real ambiguity — e.g.:

But sometimes it can cause real confusion—e.g.:


• “A world very partially [read only partly? cliquishly?] unified by technology still has no collective consciousness or collective solidarity.” Stanley Hoffmann, “ Clash of Globalizations,” Foreign Affairs, 1 July 2002, at 104.

**PARTICIPATORY**; *particpative*. The latter is a NECESSARY VARIANT.

Current ratio: 6:1

**PARTICLES IN NAMES.** See names (d).

**parti-colored** (= many-colored, multihued) is the correct form. But *party-colored* is a fairly common misspelling, perhaps because of the festiveness suggested by the word’s meaning—e.g.: “The lawn grows lush and is bordered by . . . scattered groupings of annuals such as party-colored [read parti-colored] seed dahlias.” Kym Pokorny, “Presidential Bouquet,” Oregonian (Portland), 18 Aug. 1996, at L1.1. See etymology (d).

*Parti-color*, adj., is a NECESSARY VARIANT.

Language-Change Index

**parti-colored** misspelled *party-colored*: Stage 3

Current ratio: 3:1

**particular** (= of, relating to, or involving a single person or thing) is pronounced /pa-tik-ya-lar/—not /pa-tik-lar/. The adverb particularly has five distinct syllables: /pa-tik-ya-lar-lee/—though in dialect it can be shortened to three (/pa-tik-lar-lee/). For more on the adverb, see the next entry.

**particularly**. The phrase and particularly is usually unnecessary for particularly—e.g.: “But the law, and particularly [read particularly] its quota system, has been sharply criticized by the Council of Europe and other Western organizations that Latvia hopes to join someday.” Alessandra Stanley, “Divided Latvians Awaiting Clinton,” N.Y. Times, 6 July 1994, at A1, A5. Once the and is deleted, the reader is comfortable with the phrase particularly its quota system as a mere APPOSI TIVE—and is comfortable with the singular verb.

**partisan; partizan**. The first is the preferred spelling in both AmE and BrE. Although the term denotes “someone who takes part or sides with another,” it has connotations of “a blind, prejudiced, unreasonable, or fanatical adherent” (OED).

Current ratio: 76:1

**partition** is often mispronounced as if it were petition.

partly. See partially.

**party** is a legalism that is unjustified when it merely replaces person. If used as an elliptical form of party to the contract or party to the lawsuit, party is quite acceptable as a term of art. E.g.: “Either party may enforce the terms of this contract, and in the event that either party must use attorneys to effect such enforcements, then such expenses and other fees may be charged against the other party.” Fred Rodell’s quip is worth remembering: “Only The Law insists on making a ‘party’ out of a single person.” Rodell, WoE Unto You, Lawyers! 28 (1939; repr. 1980). The word has become something of a popularized technicality on restaurant waiting lists <The Butter-worth party>—a usage so convenient and so commonplace now that any objection is bootless.

*party-colored*. See parti-colored.

parvenu. See nouveau riche (b).

**passable; passible.** Passable = (1) capable of being passed, open; or (2) acceptable. Passible (a rare term) = feeling; susceptible to pain or suffering. The primary error is to misuse passible for passable, especially in sense 2—e.g.: “They get passible [read passable] fake identification like driver’s licenses in the border states and then look for work.” Jack Sherzer, “Company Is Fined $150,000,” Patriot & Evening News (Harrisburg), 29 Mar. 1996, at B4. See -able (a). Cf. **impassible**.

Language-Change Index

**passible** misused for passable: Stage 1

passage. See voyage.

**pass away.** This phrase—sometimes shortened to pass <she passed last week>—is the most common euphemism for die. Characteristic of non-U speech, it was most common during the Victorian era. See class distinctions.

**passcode.** See password.

**passed** is sometimes misused for past—e.g.: “He said that in addition to the organizers’ decision to exclude the openly homosexual group from the parade, ‘there have been other efforts as well to eliminate some of the other excesses associated with the parade, the drinking and rowdy behavior present in years passed [read past].’” Pam Belluck, “Irish March Stars Cardinal O’Connor,” N.Y. Times, 18 Mar. 1995, at 16.
The opposite error also occurs—e.g.: "Before you know it, thirty minutes has past [read passed], and you are done." Carter G. Phillips, Advocacy Before the United States Supreme Court, 15 T.M. Cooley L. Rev. 177, 190 (1988). See past.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. passed misused for past: Stage 1
2. past misused for passed: Stage 1

**passerby.** Pl. passersby—not *passerbys.** See plurals (g).

**Current ratio: 199:1**

**passible.** See passable.

**passim** (lit., "throughout") is used in citing an authority in a general way and indicates that the point at hand is treated throughout the work. It's a fairly erudite citation signal—e.g.: "There is a curious reluctance on the author's part to let go of linear frameworks—from 'differentiation to integration' (p. 13), 'dependence to interdependence' (p. 19), 'childhood to maturity' (p. 25), and on to ever-higher 'states of consciousness' (passim)." Michael Edwards, "Popular Development: Rethinking the Theory and Practice of Development," J. Dev. Studies, Apr. 1997, at 581.

**Passive Voice. A. Generally.** Many writers talk about passive voice without knowing exactly what it is. In fact, many think that any be-verb signals passive voice, as in:

The quotation is applicable to this point.

But that sentence is actually in active voice—even though it's badly in need of editing. Most professional editors would change is applicable to applies, but they wouldn't call it "passive" because it's not. It's just a flabby be-verb.

The point about passive voice is that the subject of the clause doesn't perform the action of the verb.

Instead, you back into the sentence:

Passive: The deadline was missed by the applicant.
Active: The applicant missed the deadline.

And, of course, in the passive form, it's possible to omit the actor altogether—a prime source of unclarity. Sometimes it amounts to responsibility-dodging:

Passive: The deadline was missed.

As anyone who follows political discourse knows, the passive voice is a staple of politicians <mistakes were made>.

The unfailing test for passive voice is this: you must have a be-verb (or get) plus a past participle (usually a verb ending in -ed). Hence constructions such as these are passive:

- is discussed
- are believed
- was sent
- were delivered
- been served
- being flattered
- be handled
- am given
- get stolen

Sometimes, though, the be-verb or get won't appear. It's simply an implied word in the context. For example:

Recently I heard it suggested by a friend that too many books appear with endnotes.

Grammatically speaking, that sentence contains the implied verb being after the word it, so it's in the passive voice. To make it active, you'd write:

Recently I heard a friend suggest that too many books appear with endnotes.

What's the real problem with using passive voice? There are three. First, passive voice usually adds a couple of unnecessary words. Second, when it doesn't add those extra words, it fails to say squarely who has done what. That is, the sentence won't mention the actor with a by-phrase (The book was written vs. The book was written by Asimov). Third, the passive subverts the normal word order for an English sentence, making it harder for readers to process the information. To put it a little more dramatically, "The impersonal passive voice [is] an opiate that cancels responsibility, hides identity, and numbs the reader." Sheridan Baker, "Scholarly Style, or the Lack Thereof" (1956), in Perspectives on Style 64, 66 (Frederick Candelaria ed., 1968).

The active voice has palpable advantages in most contexts: it saves words, says directly who has done what, and meets the reader's expectation of a normal actor–verb–object sentence order.

The hedging in the previous sentence—"in most contexts"—is purposeful. That is, sometimes you'll be justified in using the passive voice. There's no absolute prohibition against it—and anyone who tries carrying out such a prohibition would spoil a piece of writing. Among the times when you'll want the passive in a given sentence are these:

- When the actor is unimportant.
- When the actor is unknown.
- When you want to hide the actor's identity.
- When you need to put the punch word at the end of the sentence.
- When the focus of the passage is on the thing being acted on.
- When the passive simply sounds better.

Still, professional editors find that these six situations account for only about 15% to 20% of the contexts in which the passive appears.

That means you ought to have a presumption against the passive, unless it falls into one of the categories just listed.

**B. The Double Passive.** The problem here is using one passive immediately after another. E.g.:

- "This document refers to the portion of the votes entitled to be cast by virtue of membership in the union." (Votes are not entitled to be cast; rather, union members are entitled to cast votes.)
- "Had the new vaccine been intended to have been injected into the patient, he would have been warned to avoid drinking alcohol." (A possible revision: If the new vaccine had been intended for injection into the patient . . . )
The problem is common with the verb seek (and sometimes attempt), especially in legal contexts—e.g.:

- "But the inference sought to be drawn in such a case would have to be that the parties had, at the time of the acquisition of the property, communicated to one another a common intention to acquire the property in equal shares." Shiranikha Herbert, "Home Truths About Sharing the Mortgage," Guardian, 29 Apr. 1992, at 23. (A possible revision: But the inference in such a case would have to be that when the parties acquired the property, they communicated to one another a common intention to acquire it in equal shares.)

- "There is no evidence that any improper influence was sought to be exercised by me or anybody else over any official decision." President Bill Clinton, as quoted in "The Whitewater Inquiry," N.Y. Times, 8 Mar. 1994, at D20. (A possible revision: There is no evidence that I or anybody else tried to influence any official decision.)

- "The investigation began after fake $20 bills were attempted to be passed at Key Bank on Main Street." Ben Beagle, "Funny Money Still a Mystery," Livingston County News (Geneseo, N.Y.), 11 June 2015, at A4. (A possible revision: The investigation began after fake $20 bills were recognized at Key Bank on Main Street.)

H.W. Fowler wrote that "monstrosities of this kind . . . are as repulsive to the grammarian as to the stylist" (FMEU1 at 121).

A few double passives are defensible—e.g.: "Offerings made in compliance with Regulation D are not required to be registered with the SEC under the Securities Act." As Ernest Gowers noted, "In legal or quasi-legal language this construction may sometimes be useful and unexceptionable: Diplomatic privilege applies only to such things as are done or omitted to be done in the course of a person's official duties. / Motion made: that the words proposed to be left out stand part of the Question" (FMEU2 at 139). But these are of a different kind from are sought to be included and are attempted to be refuted, which can be easily remedied by recasting. The principle is that if the first passive-voice construction can be made active—leaving the passive infinitive intact—the sentence is correctly formed. Here, in Fowler's famous example, a recasting of the first passive verb form into the active voice clarifies the sense:

| Passive/Passive: | The prisoners were ordered to be shot. |
| Active/Passive:  | He ordered the prisoners to be shot. |
| Active/Passive:  | He ordered the prisoners shot. |

But in the following example, a recasting of the first passive verb into the active voice does not make sense:

| Passive/Passive: | The contention has been attempted to be made. |
| Active/Passive:  | He attempted the contention to be made. |

The last-quoted sentence is un-English. Sense can be restored to it by casting both parts in the active voice:

Active/Active: He attempted to make the contention.

A final caution against the passive: "The difference between an active-verb style and a passive-verb style—in clarity and vigor—is the difference between life and death for a writer." William Zinsser, On Writing Well 111 (5th ed. 1994).

**passivist.** See pacificist.

**pass muster.** This phrase began as a military term meaning "to undergo review without censure." In widespread use since the 18th century, by the 19th it had spread into the language generally, in the sense "to prove worthy"—e.g.:


- "When the deal was announced in April, Gingrich's aides were confident it would pass muster in the ethics panel." Marc Lacey & Janet Hook, "Panel Stiffens Terms for Gingrich to Pay Penalty," Ariz. Republic, 16 May 1997, at A1.

The phrase is mangled in various ways, as by writing *past muster*—e.g.:


- "Despite such strong backing, the design must past [read pass] muster with the Secretary of the Interior . . . ." Steve Litt, "The Mall, Unhallowed," Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 11 May 1997, at 18.

Quite apart from that error, the phrase invites condiment-inspired puns—e.g.: "The seventh and newest Wienermobile to crisscross America is a bite-sized vehicle compared to Oscar Mayer's beloved hot-dog fleet. But the 'mini' has proved this summer to, um, pass mustard." Tom Alesia, "Oscar Mayer Takes Bite Out of Wienermobile," Wis. State J., 6 Aug. 2008, at A1. Sadly, it's no joke sometimes—e.g.:


- "Cleanup hitters are judged much more by their run production than their on-base percentage, but Jeff Crawford could pass muster [read pass muster] on either count." Chris Kennedy, "Crawford Igniting Bombers," Republican (Springfield, Mass.), 10 June 2008, at C2.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *past muster for pass muster: Stage 1 Current ratio (pass muster vs. *past muster): 277:1
2. *past muster for pass muster: Stage 1 Current ratio (pass muster vs. *past mustard): 1,389:1

**Language-Change Index** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l-li.)

**Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but . . . **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but . . . **Stage 5:** Fully accepted. Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
password; passcode. The latter is a neologism created in an effort to keep up with modern technology. In the computer age, a password is often not a word at all; instead, it’s merely a combination of characters (letters and numbers). Hence the term passcode, born in the early 1990s.

Like many other neologisms, this one may be short-lived: password isn’t likely to be bumped from the language. Indeed, those who object to a password that consists of the digits in one’s birthdate, for example, are probably being too literal.

past. This word occurs in many redundant phrases, such as *past history, *past track record, and *past experience, in which the noun denotes something that by its very nature is rooted in the past. See redundancy. For a misuse, see passed.

Language-Change Index
past in redundancies such as *past history, *past experience: Stage 3

pastille (= [1] a solid air-freshener; or [2] a soothing throat lozenge) is the standard spelling. *Pastil is a variant.

Current ratio: 9:1

pastime is sometimes misspelled *pasttime. The misspelling derives from a misunderstanding of the word’s origin: pastime derives from pass (v.t.) + time, not past + time.

Language-Change Index
pastime misspelled *pasttime: Stage 1
Current ratio: 231:1

past master (= a true expert) is now so spelled, though originally (in the 18th century) the phrase was *passed master. Today, though, *passed master is considered erroneous.

*past master. See pass master.

pastoral (= [1] typical of country life; involving a peacefully bucolic existence, or [2] of, relating to, or involving the duties of a priest or minister toward his or her congregation) is pronounced /pas-tә-ral/ (AmE) or /paḥs-tә-ral/ (BrE)—not /pa-stә-ral/.

pastorale /pas-tә-ral/ (= a piece of music evoking rustic or bucolic life), an Italian loanword, predominantly forms the plural pastorales. The Italianate plural pastorali is a chiefly BrE variant.

Current ratio: 2:1

Past-Participial Adjectives. See irregular verbs (b) & adjectives (f).

*pastime. See pastime.

patella (= kneecap) has predominantly formed the Latinate plural patellae (/pa-tә-tee/) since the 18th century. Patellas is a homegrown variant that is seldom used.

Current ratio (patellae vs. patellas): 12:1

patent, n., v.t. & adj. In the adjectival sense of “obvious, apparent,” the preferred pronunciation is /payt-әnt/. In all other senses and uses, the pronunciation is /pat-әnt/.

paterfamilias (= [1] the male head of a household, [2] a patriarch, or [3] a male leader of a movement, campaign, discipline, etc.) is pronounced /pat-әr-fә-mil-ee-әs/. Pl. patresfamilias—the anglicized variant *paterfamilias being extremely uncommon. See plurals (a), (b).

Current ratio: 8:1

pathos. See bathy.

patina (/pat-ә-na/ or [less good] /pa-tee-na/)—meaning “a film or crust on an object formed from age or use”—has been the standard form since the 18th century. *Patine is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 62:1

patricide. See parricide.

paucity (= dearth, scarcity) indicates a small quantity, not a complete lack of something, as this sentence erroneously suggests: “It would have had the inevitable result of demonstrating the total paucity or lack [read lack or absence] of evidence from which any jury could conclude that a reasonable man would have acted as the appellant did.” “Provocation Issue for Jury,” Times (London), 18 July 1994, Features §. The mistaken phrases *complete paucity and *total paucity emerged in the 1940s and 1950s.

Language-Change Index
paucity misused to mean “a complete absence”: Stage 1

pause, vb., is now sometimes used transitively. The major dictionaries differ in their treatment of the transitive sense <President Bush paused his vacation for a press conference>. The first edition of the OED (1928) listed pause as an intransitive verb only. In the OED Supp. (1982), R.W. Burchfield defined pause transitively in the sense “to cause to stop temporarily,” with but two examples, from 1542 and 1908. W2 (1934) notes that the transitive—more specifically, the reflexive—sense is “obsolete.” American dictionaries didn’t start recording the transitive sense as a live form until the early 1990s.

Although the transitive sense was historically marginal at best, something happened in the 1970s and 1980s to change all that: people started pausing their cassette tapes and later their VCRs instead of putting them on pause. So a simple technological change probably led to the revival of a long-dormant idiom.

pavilion. See spelling (a).

B. And pay up. The phrasal verb pay up means "to discharge (a debt) completely." Pay may refer to partial or total payments. Because of this slight differentiation, up is not a needless particle. See phrasal verbs.

C. Put paid. See put paid to.

pay dirt. Two words in AmE and BrE alike.

payer; payor. Although payor (corresponding to payee) predominates in legal writing, payer is better and much more common in other contexts. See -ER (A).

Current ratio: 3:1

pay (one's) respects (= to show polite respect for someone by appearing personally) is the set phrase, but some writers have begun to write the singular respect instead of respects: "McGovern and his wife tried to tour the building and view the displays, but it wasn't easy with well-wishers seeking to pay their respect [read respects]." John Knaggs, "McGovern Easy to Admire," Austin Am.-Statesman, 12 Oct. 1995, at A15. That wording may be more logical than the accepted usage to pay their respects; the well-wishers each showed the same respect for McGovern. But logic must yield to the universally accepted idiom. To pay one's last respects is to show respect for a dead person by attending a funeral or visiting a grave.

payor. See payer.

payroll is occasionally misspelled *payrole, a blunder dating from the early 1900s—e.g.:


• "One of the most appealing ideas they floated is lowering the payroll [read payrol] tax." A Budgetary Train Wreck, Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 23 Dec. 1994, at A47.

• "It reports that Barca are keen to remove the Dutch striker from their payroll [read payrol]." Niall Couper, "Football: Press Watch," Independent, 24 May 2004, Sport §, at 54.

For the confusion between role and roll, see role.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
payroll misspelled *payrole: Stage 1
Current ratio: 24,905:1

pay up. See pay (b).

peaceful; peaceable. Generally, peaceful refers to a state of affairs <reach a peaceful resolution> <a peaceful morning spent fly-fishing>; peaceable refers to the disposition of a person or a nation <as calming and peaceable a show as Mister Rogers' Neighborhood>; peaceable kingdom. The two words overlap some, but the differentiation is worth encouraging.

Although we now think of peaceful as the more usual word, from 1650 to 1800 peaceable occurred with far greater frequency. Such are the vicissitudes of words.

peace of mind; piece of (one's) mind. Whereas peace of mind is calm assurance, a piece of one's mind is something a person says in a fit of pique. But the two are surprisingly often confounded—e.g.:


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*piece of mind for peace of mind: Stage 1

peaked, adj., = sickly, pale, anemic-looking. The word is pronounced /pee-kad/, not /pik-ad/ or (worse yet) /peekt/.

*peak (one's) interest. See pique.

*pean. See paean.

pearl. In the context of knitting, see purl.

pecan (= [1] a long thin sweet nut with a dark red shell, or [2] the tree that produces this nut) is predominately pronounced /pi-kahn/ in AmE—but also, in certain regions, /pi-kan/. The latter is a BrE pronunciation, along with /pee-kan/.


Current ratio: 6:1

pecs. This is the standard casuism, a shortened form of the word pectorals (= chest muscles). The word is used figuratively as well as literally—e.g.: "Democrats got a chance to flex their political pecs." Reynolds Holding, "California Candidate for the Supreme Court," S.F. Chron., 15 Sept. 2002, at D3. Cf. biceps, quadriceps & triceps.

Two variant forms are *pecs and *pecks, but they are comparatively infrequent and should be discouraged—e.g.: "Clad only in bathing trunks, they posed, flexed and strutted. West leered, inspected and fluttered her eyelashes in excitement." K.J. Evans, "Bill Miller (1904–): Mr. Entertainment," Las Vegas Rev.-J., 2 May 1999, at A56.

Pectoral is pronounced /pek-tar-rol/, not /pek-tor-ol/.

peculate. See defalicate (A).

pecuniary; pecunious. The suffixes distinguish these words. Pecuniary = relating to or consisting of money. Pecunious = moneyed; wealthy. Its opposite is impecunious (= destitute). See impecunious.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, 1–li.)
The adverb corresponding to pecuniary is pecuniarily—e.g.: “As even the pecuniarily impaired can tell you, the greenback is graced by George Washington.” Jack Cox, "Baron of Boodle," Denver Post, 10 July 1997, at E1.

pedagogue (= a teacher, often a pedantic one) is the standard spelling. *Pedagog is a variant. (Cf. anal. log. catalog(ue) & dialogue.) For a comment on the potential decline of the -ue form, see -agog(ue).

pedagogy (= the study or practice of effective teaching) is predominantly pronounced /ped-ә-goh-juh/ in AmE, but sometimes also /ped-ә-gah-juh/. The latter is the BrE pronunciation.

The standard corresponding adjective is pedagogical (/ped-ә-goh-jik-әl/) = of, relating to, or involving the study or practice of effective teaching. The second, a needless variant, has the liability of being confused with pedagogical. The latter is the BrE pronunciation. The standard corresponding adjective is pedagogical /ped-ә-goh-jik-әl/ = of, relating to, or involving the study of the philosophy and methods of punishment and treatment of people found guilty of crime. For a malapropism, see penile.

pedagogic /ped-ә-goh-jik-әg-ik/ (or, *pedagogical /ped-ә-goh-jik-әg-ik/)—pejorative having negative connotations and tending to insult or disparage—so spelled, though often mistakenly spelled *perjorative from the mid-20th century to the present day—e.g.: “By ‘radical’ I mean not the commonly used political perjorative [read perjorative] but the original definition.” Susan Jacoby, “Hers,” N.Y. Times, 14 Apr. 1983, at C2.


Though once pronounced /pee-jar-ә-tiv/ (or, in BrE, /pee-jar-ә-tiv/), the predominant (and fully acceptable) pronunciation today is /po-jor-ә-tiv/.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

pejorative misspelled *perjorative: Stage 1
Current ratio: 130:1

Peking. See Beijing.

pelvis (= the wide, curved bones on which the spine sits and to which the legs are joined) has two plurals: the ordinary pelvises and the Latinate pelves. In AmE, pelvises bumped out pelves as the predominant form in 2003. In BrE, pelves is on the upswing but still remains second to pelvises in frequency of occurrence—doubtless especially in medical writing.

pembal; punitive; penological. These words have distinct senses. Penal = of, relating to, or involving punishment or retribution. Punitive = serving to punish; intended to inflict punishment. Penological = of, relating to, or involving the study of the philosophy and methods of punishment and treatment of people found guilty of crime.

For a malapropism, see penile.

penalize (= [1] to subject to punishment, or [2] to treat unfairly) is most traditionally pronounced /pen-ә-liz/ in AmE and BrE alike. Today, however, /pen-ә-liz/ is widespread and acceptable in AmE.

penchant. Although the Gallic pronunciation /pah[n]/-shaw[n]/ is standard in BrE, it’s almost unknown in AmE—in which the anglicized /pen-chant/ is standard. See GALLICISMS.
pencil, vb., makes penciled and penciling in AmE, pencilled and pencilling in BrE. See spelling (b).

**pendent; pendant.** Pendent, adj., = hanging, suspended. Pendant, n., = something suspended, as an object on a chain around one’s neck.

**pending; impending.** Both terms apply to things that are about to occur, but in the best usage they denote very different things. What is pending is awaiting an outcome—e.g.: “Another precedent has resulted from a pending suit by the parents of an American-born teenager killed in a terrorist attack in Israel.” Bob Egelko, “11 Families Sue Saudis, Sudan for $3 Trillion,” *S.F. Chron.*, 16 Aug. 2002, at A1. What is impending is imminent (in the literal sense of the word, “hanging over one’s head”) and harmful—e.g.: “The phrase ‘Back to School’ strikes a chord of impending doom for most students.” Patrick Dunn, “Enrollment Rises in St. Thomas Aquinas’s 3rd Year,” *Albuquerque J.*, 15 Aug. 2002, West Side J. §, at 4.

Yet it is not uncommon for writers to use impending for pending, perhaps because they think the extra syllable adds gravitas. Whatever the reason, the slipshod extension threatens to deprive us of a useful word, as impending loses its connotations of danger or evil—e.g.:


- “He has had some good reasons for playing poorly in the majors this year—an inner-ear infection before the Masters, the impending [read pending] birth of his daughter at the U.S. Open, and being a new father at the British Open.” *“Funk, Furyk Lead by One,” Pitt. Post-Gaz.,* 16 Aug. 2002, at B8.

Occasionally, pending is used where the context calls for the more ominous connotations that impending provides—e.g.: “A blend of myth, history and contemporary comment, much affected by premonitions of the pending [read impending] World War II, it aptly conveys Orozco’s dour, apocalyptic vision of human fate.” Grace Glueck, “A Fire Born of Revolution,” *N.Y. Times*, 16 Aug. 2002, at E29.

**pendulum (= a swinging weight suspended from a pivot) forms the plural pendulums in all varieties of English—not *pendula.*

Current ratio: 2:1

**penultimate**. So formed—not *penetratable. See -able (b) & -atable.

Current ratio: 376:1

penile (= of, relating to, or involving the penis) is sometimes mistakenly written penal (= of, relating to, or involving punishment)—e.g.:

- “For men whose impotence can’t be solved simply by switching medications, he said there are a growing number of treatment options, including hormonal treatment, medication injected directly into the penis, external vacuum pumps that can be used to produce an erection or penal [read penile] implants.” Mary Powers, “Impact on Sex Drive Often Left Unspoken,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), 8 Dec. 1991, at C3. (This example cries out for a serial comma.)


See malapropisms.

Whereas penal is pronounced /pee-nal/, penile is pronounced /pee-nil/.

**penal implants for penile implants:** Stage 1

penitentiary (= a state or federal prison) is an Americanism in its modern sense—the word once having denoted a place in a monastery for the confinement of those doing penance. Pennsylvania Quakers used the term in the late 18th century to name their prisons, where they instituted solitary confinement. Traditional BrE equivalents are house of correction and (in London) bridewell, both of which had become old-fashioned by the end of the 19th century.

**Penitentiary** is preferably pronounced /pen-i-ten-sha-reel/, in five syllables. Avoid the six-syllable /pen-i-ten-sha-er-eel/.

**pen name.** See pseudonym.

penological. See penal.

pentathlon. See -athlon.

*penuchle; *penuckle. See pinochle.

**penultimate** (= next-to-last) is sometimes misused for ultimate or quintessential—e.g.:

- “The classic surfer movie, ‘The Endless Summer,’ caught a new wave this week in Superior Court here. . . . In the complaint, *Hynson v. Brown*, 694180, Hynson claims that August was set up with a new car, a tavern and, eventually, a surfboard business by Brown, with proceeds from the penultimate [read ultimate or quintessential] surfer movie.” Marty Graham, “ ‘Endless Summer’ Surfer Says He Never Was Paid,” *L.A. Daily J.*, 13 Nov. 1995, at 32. (Could any movie be dubbed the next-to-last surfing movie of all time?)
**penumbra**

- "As our cover story points out, data warehouses have been sold by many vendors as the *penultimate* [read quintessential] business solution," Alan Alper, "Warehouse Wonders?" ComputerWorld, 1 Apr. 1996, at 7.
- "If you took Lachemann at his word, he was either the *penultimate* [read quintessential] ‘players’ manager’—covering up for each and every transgression—or flatly unqualified for the position," Mike Penner, "Taking One for the Team," L.A. Times, 7 Aug. 1996, at C1.

Sometimes, too, the word is misspelled *pentultimate* (perhaps through sound association with *pent-up*)—e.g.: "When Poole secured a 4–2 in the *penultimate* [read penultimate] race the scores were level at 42–42." Nigel Pearson, "Champion Rickardsson Is Great Leveller," Birmingham Evening Mail, 8 Apr. 2003, at 51. Cf. *paramount, tantamount & ultimately.*

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *penultimate* misused for *ultimate*: Stage 2
   Current ratio: 10,608:1

**penumbra.** Though most dictionaries list only the plural *penumbras*, one could hardly be faulted for anglicizing to *penumbras*. (See plurals (b).) E.g.: "They embroider controversial opinions with qualifiers, exemptions, tripartite analyses, *penumbras* and other devices that enable them to wriggle out of positions that infuriate Washington hostesses or the editors of the New York Times." Tony Snow, "Clarence Thomas, No Excuses," Cincinnati Enquirer, 7 July 1995, at A14.

   Current ratio (penumbras vs. penumbras): 3:1

**penumbral; *penumbrous*. The latter is a *needless variant.*

   Current ratio: 107:1

**peon.** See *paean.*

**people.** A. And *persons*. The traditional distinction—is now a pedantic one—is that *people* is general, *persons* specific. So one refers to 300 *people who had assembled* but to the *twelve persons on the jury*. *Persons* has been considered better for small, specific numbers. But *twelve persons on the jury* seems stuffy to many readers, and most native speakers of English (since about the mid-1970s) would say *twelve people on the jury*.

   In contexts like that, *people* has long been used and has come to be viewed as the more natural phrasing. Consider these examples:


   To the modern reader or speaker, these sentences seem a little unnatural or strained. By 1865 in BrE and 1880 in AmE, the collocation *some people* was more common in print sources than *some persons*. It’s understandable why the Associated Press and *The New York Times* recommend using *people over persons* except in quotations and in set phrases (e.g., *Missing Persons Bureau, third persons*).

   **LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

   people for persons in reference to small, specific groups: Stage 5
   Current ratio (three people vs. *three persons*): 2:1

B. And *state*. *A people* (collectively) is a great many persons united by a common language and by similar customs—usually the result of common ancestry, religion, and historical circumstances. *A state* is a great many persons, generally occupying a given territory, among whom the will of the majority—or of an ascertainable class of persons—prevails against anyone who opposes that will. *A state* may coincide exactly with one *people*, as in Japan, or may embrace several, as in the United States.

**Pepys.** The last name of Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), the English diarist, is pronounced counterintuitively: /peeps/. The adjective *Pepysian* is correspondingly pronounced /peep- see-an/.

**per-** as a prefix typically means “through,” as in *perspire* (= to emit sweat through the pores) and *pervade* (= to spread throughout). But in certain archaisms—such as *perchance, perervid, and perforce*—it’s an intensive. It’s a hidden intensive in *peruse.*

**per.** See a (b) & *as per.*

**per annum** is unnecessary for a year, *per year, or each year. Cf. *per diem.*

   Occasionally, the phrase is misspelled *per anum*—an embarrassment because the latter means “through the anus” (a medical euphemism actually appearing in some discussions of sex crimes). E.g.:

   - “[I]ndustrial growth in the same period averaged between 9 and 10 percent *per annum* [read *per annum*]—an impressive performance by any standard.” Atul Kohli, *State-Directed Development* 187 (2004).

   Whatever the interest rate a debtor must be charged, it’s revolting to think of money being paid that way. Surely it’s better to pay in the traditional way: through the nose.

   **LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

   *per annum* misused for *per annum*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (percent *per annum* vs. *percent per annum*): 414:1

**per capita; *per caput.* The first is the frequently used plural (“by heads”), the second the rare singular (“a head; by the head”).

**percent; *per cent; per cent.; per centum.* This sequence illustrates in reverse the evolution of this word, originally a phrase. The solid word became predominant in AmE about 1968; in BrE the two-word form predominates.
The plural of *percent* is *percent*; adding an -s, though not uncommon, is substandard.

In most writing, 75% is easier to read than 75 *percent* or (worse yet) seventy-five *percent*. Prefer the percentage sign when you can. Many styles, however, insist on spelling out *percent*.

AmE writers refer to something’s being *at such-and-such a percent*; BrE writers refer to its being *on the percent*—e.g.: “According to a MORI poll in today’s Times, Labour finds itself *on 56 per cent* and the Conservatives on 23.” Stephen Bates & Martin Linton, “‘Tory Poll Rating Hits Record Low,’” *Guardian*, 26 Aug. 1994, at 1. Note also the BrE two-word spelling of *per cent*.

**percentage. A. Number.** Even though this word is technically a singular, it’s usually construed with a plural verb when followed by *of* plus a plural noun (or when the *of*-phrase is implied)—e.g.:

- “Women often have little say about finances at home or at work, while a greater percentage than ever before are the sole breadwinners.” Amy Kaslow, “Helping Women Seen as Boosting World Prosperity,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 Aug. 1995, Economy §, at 1.

But when the sentence is inverted, and the verb precedes the noun, a singular verb is required. That is, even though you say a *higher percentage of them are* you, also say there is a *higher percentage of them*. E.g.: “No statistics exist to prove or disprove the widespread perception that there are [read *is*] a higher percentage of lesbians than of gay men in the military.” *A (Quiet) Uprising in the Ranks,* *Newsweek*, 21 June 1993, at 60.

**B. And percentage point.** Writers must be careful with *percentages* and *percentage points*. For example, if the unemployment rate rises from 4% to 6%, both of these statements are true: *Unemployment is up* two percentage points, and *Unemployment is up* 50%. If you’re a politician, which sentence you decide to use depends on whether your party is in or out of office.

**per centum. See percent.**

**perceptible.** So spelled—not *perceptable*. See -ABLE (A). For a misuse, see *perceptive*.

Current ratio: 1,309:1

**perceptive (= keenly intuitive) for perceptible (= appreciable, recognizable) is an infrequent error**—e.g.:


- “These are but some of the protests against Ottawa’s waste—something the auditor general documents every year with no perceptive [read perceptible] effect on Ottawa’s spending.” Peter Worthington, “MP Details Ottawa Waste,” *Toronto Sun*, 13 Feb. 1996, at 11.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*perceptible* misused for *perceptible*: Stage 1

**perchance** is archaic for *perhaps*. It’s often used in mockery or self-mockery—e.g.:

- “Because his offensive skills run to zero, Dennis Rodman baits whomever he can into rutting with him, perchance to draw the technical [foul], perchance better to forward his image that night on SportsCenter.” Thomas Stinson, “Murder and Mayhem? No, It’s the NBA,” *Atlanta J.-Const.*, 13 May 1995, at F7.
- “The composition of the crowd began to change as exultant figures of the left and centre came to partake of the excellent champagne, and perchance to gloat.” Rian Malan, “Election ’97: One Last Spin Precedes a New Messiah,” *Independent*, 4 May 1997, at 18.

See archaisms.

**percolate** (= [1] of a liquid, light, or air] to pass slowly through a permeable material, or [2] [of ideas] to spread as if by effervescence) is pronounced /par-ka-lit/—not /par-kyә-layt/.

**per diem**, a Latinism, means “for or by the day” <per diem fee>. Sometimes it makes more sense to write a *day* <$50 a day> or *daily* <daily fee>. (See a (b).) Although it has been defended when it is positioned before the noun it modifies <per diem allowance>, *daily* is usually an improvement. When used as an adjective, *per diem* is rarely the best available phrase.

As a noun (an Americanism), *per diem* has designated a daily stipend, especially for travel and living expenses, since the early 1800s. It is firmly established and well accepted. Cf. *per annum*.

**peremptory. See preemptive.**

**perfect.** See *adjectives (B) & more perfect*. **perfectible.** So spelled—preferably not *perfectable*. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 23:1

**perervid.** See fervent.

**perimeter.** See parameters (b).

**period-dots.** See punctuation (f).

**periodic; periodical.** These two have undergone differentiation. *Periodic*, the more general word, means “occurring at regular intervals” <periodic reviews of employee performance>. (The word also has specialized meanings in mathematical and scientific contexts.) *Periodical* is now usually restricted
to mean “published at regular intervals” <periodical newsletters>. And, of course, periodical is used as a noun meaning “a publication issued at regular intervals” <the doctor’s office subscribed to a dozen or more periodicals>.

period of, for a. This phrase is usually verbose—e.g.: "If your grandchildren or great-grandchildren lived with you for a period of a year or more [read for a year or more], section (d) of this bill would ensure that they would always be able to visit with the grandparent that kept them." “Grandparents Visitation Bill Far Better Than Existing Law,” Ark. Democrat-Gaz., 10 Feb. 1991.

period of time is usually unnecessary in place of either period or time. Cf. *time period.

PERIODS. See punctuation (l).

Periphrasis (/pә-rә-fә-sә/) = a roundabout way of writing or speaking. Many a technical writer uses “jargon to shirk prose, palming off periphrasis upon us when with a little trouble he could have gone straight to the point.” Arthur Quiller-Couch, On the Art of Writing 108 (2d ed. 1943). See doublespeak, euphemisms, jargon & redundancy.

perjure (= to swear falsely) is now used only as a reflexive verb—e.g.:

- “So which is it that bothers you—that wives no longer obey their husbands, or that they no longer perjure themselves by promising to do so?” Judith Martin, “Dive into Problem,” Houston Chron., 27 July 1997, at 2.
- “This is a society, Griffin said, where . . . ‘a bigot can disguise himself as a police officer’ and perjure himself during O.J. Simpson’s high-profile murder trial.” Lola Sherman, “Diversity in Workplace Called Essential by Barrios Panelists,” San Diego Union-Trib., 13 Aug. 1997, at B3.
- “He also said the feds encouraged witnesses to perjure themselves by giving false testimony and gave ‘sweetheart deals’ to witnesses who should face criminal charges.” Michael O’Keeffe, “Oxi Morons,” N.Y. Daily News, 3 July 2015, at 62.

perjured, adj.; perjurious; *perjurious; *perjurial; *perjuried. Perjured is now the usual adjective (a past-participial adjective) corresponding to perjure—e.g.: “One defendant was acquitted, and the case against another was dismissed before trial after the perjured testimony was exposed.” Robert D. McFadden, “Three More in Precinct Are Accused,” N.Y. Times, 7 Apr. 1995, at B1.

Perjurious is somewhat broader because it means “involving perjury” as opposed to the more specific sense of perjured (= characterized by perjury). So it’s possible to speak of a person’s perjurious tendencies but not of perjured tendencies. *Perjurious and *perjurial are needless variants.


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*perjuried for perjured: Stage 1

perjurer. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *perjuror. Current ratio: 69:1

*perjurial; *perjuried; perjurious; *perjurous. See perjured.

*perjuror. See perjurer.

permanence; permanency. These two, both of which appear frequently, share the sense “the quality or state of being permanent.” But while permanence emphasizes durability <the permanence of the snow>, permanency emphasizes duration <the permanency of death>. Since the 1830s, permanence has occurred more frequently in English-language print sources than permanency.

permissible. So spelled—not *permissable. See -ABLE (a).

Current ratio: 288:1

permission; acquiescence. Permission connotes an authorization to do something, whereas acquiescence connotes the passive failure to object to someone’s doing something.

permissive; *permissory. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 1,473:1

permit. As a noun meaning “an official document granting the right to do something,” permit is stressed on the first syllable: /por-mit/. As a verb meaning either “to consent to expressly or formally” or “to enable,” permit is stressed on the second syllable: /par-mit/. It is a formal word. See allow.

permute; *permurate. Permute is both older and more common than *permurate, a back-formation and needless variant.

Current ratio: 10:1

pennicky. See persnickety.

perorate (/pә-rә-rayt/) = to conclude a formal address. E.g.: “But he makes clear that he believes in an escape from suffocating rules and a return to initiative. Civil servants should be given guidelines, but to get things done they must seize the day. As he perorates: ‘One basic change in approach will get us going: [etc.—to end of speech].’ In short, what Mr. Howard is trying to do with this thoughtful little book is drive us all sane.” Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “A Call to Deregulate Rules and Regulations,” N.Y. Times, 19 Jan. 1995, at C22.

But the word is sometimes misused for orate—e.g.:
• “As directed by Kirk Jackson, the best moments fashion Wadsworth’s body into a conflation of father and son: While perorate [read orates] against homosexuality’s evils, Daddy is annoyed by the wig he finds on his head.” Steven Drukmn, “Cameos,” Village Voice, 13 Sept. 1994, at 104.

The noun is peroration (/par-o-ray-shan/) — e.g.: “Even before the peroration—Fellow Americans, fellow Democrats, I offer you for the Presidency of the United States, that son of the Texas hills, that tested and effective servant of the people: Lyndon B. Johnson”—the big Texas delegation had begun to roar.” Robert A. Caro, The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate 821 (2002).

PERPETUATE

perpetuate. See perpetuate.

perpetuable. So formed—not *perpetuatable. See -ABLE (D) & -ATABLE.

perpetual (= continuing forever; everlasting) is sometimes misused for continuous—e.g.: “Mr. Rushdie, 46, has lived in almost perpetual [read continuous] hiding since Feb. 14, 1989, when his novel ‘The Satanic Verses’ was condemned as blasphemous by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran, who called for his death.” Douglas Jehl, “In a Rebuke to Tehran, Clinton and His Top Aides Meet Rushdie,” N.Y. Times, 25 Nov. 1993, at A1. At the writing of that sentence, Rushdie had not yet lived forever; it couldn’t have been perpetual hiding. See ADJECTIVES (B).

PERSONALITY


See MALAPROPSIMs.

perquisite; prerequisite. Perquisite (often shortened to perk) = a privilege or benefit given in addition to one’s salary or regular wages <executive perquisites such as club memberships>. Prerequisite = a previous condition or requirement <applicants must satisfy all five prerequisites before being interviewed>. Although MWDEU says there is “almost no evidence of the words’ being interchanged,” the confusion certainly does occur—e.g.:

• “Have executive salaries, bonuses and other corporate prerequisites [read perquisites] been cut, or will the proposed rate increase maintain them?” “Sorry, Wrong Numbers,” Wash. Post, 11 July 1993, at C8.


per se 685
almost always after the adjective or noun it modifies, today it is often used before, especially in legal contexts—e.g.:

- “Derivatives are not per se unsuitable or risky.” Interview with Richard Cortese, Compliance Rptr., 15 May 1995, at 9.
- “Another reason is that in Town of Newton, the Supreme Court decided 5–4 that release-dismissal agreements are not per se invalid.” Monroe Freedman, “Treading On, or Trading Off, Rights?” Recorder (S.F.), 17 May 1995, at 6.

When used in this way, per se typically means “always,” “absolute,” or “absolutely.” When in its usual position as a postpositive adjective, the phrase takes no punctuation, even though its English equivalents (in itself, of itself, as such) are ordinarily framed by commas. E.g.:


The former AmE pronunciation (/pәr-see/) has lost out to /pәr say/, which is now almost universal.

That pronunciation may explain the phonetic misspelling that occurs surprisingly often (*per say*)—e.g.:

- “But [Tony] Kushner, being Kushner, is not content to lay it all out in such a pat manner. He’s less interested in history, per say [read per se], than the history of history—and the soul of now.” Nina Metz, “‘Bright Room’ Has Unshakable Impact,” Chicago Trib., 22 Oct. 2005, Weekend §, at 30.
- “I don’t think this is going to solve the poverty problem in New York per say [read per se], but it’s real money and it’s a serious beginning towards a larger strategy,’ he said.” Jill Gardiner, “Mayor Budgets Anti-Poverty Outlays,” N.Y. Sun, 19 Dec. 2006, N.Y. §, at 1 (quoting Michael Bloomberg).
- “The limitations aren’t going to be the dollars per say [read per se] as to what we can pay a coach,” Jeff Sheldon, “Questions and Answers,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 8 Mar. 2007, at C7 (quoting Joel Maturi, University of Minnesota athletic director).

**Language-Change Index**

*per say for per se*: Stage 1
Current ratio (per se vs. *per say*): 445:1

**persevere** is pronounced /par-sә-veer/. Because the word is frequently a victim of the intrusive -r- (/par-sar-veer/), it is often misspelled *perservere*. The corresponding noun, perseverance (/par-sә-veer-an[t][s]/), has been similarly victimized. See **pronunciation** (b), (c) & **spelling** (a).

**persistence** (= tenacity of purpose; doggedness) has been the predominant form of the word in all varieties of English since the 18th century. *PERSISTency is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.*

Current ratio: 24:1

**persecute.** See **prosecute**.

**persnickety; pernickety.** The older form, pernickety, has been standard BrE since the word was first used in the early 19th century. It was also standard AmE till about 1980, when pernickety became predominant. Today pernickety is about five times as common in print as pernickety in AmE—e.g.:

- “Normally we’re pretty pernickety about cheese steak sandwiches, but Skinny J’s version . . . was, while not authentic, pretty darn good.” Eric H. Harrison, “Skinny J’s Choices Are Wide,” Ark. Democrat-Gaz., 3 Sept. 2015, Style §, at 51.

**-PERSON.** See **sexism** (c).

**persona** is singular, not plural—*personas* (which is preferable) or *personae* being the plural. But writers sometimes also misuse *personae* as a singular—e.g.: “But instead of writing another original screenplay, Tarantino has staked his reputation on a different approach: he has acquired rights to a best-selling crime novel from the hot author of Get Shorty and adapted it around the retro-hipster *personae* [read persona] of the ultimate 1970s blaxploitation babe, Pam Grier.” Jeffrey Ressner, “Back in the Action,” Time, 18 Aug. 1997, at 70.

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*persona non grata* (/par-soh-no na gray ta/ or /grah-ta/) [L. “an unwanted person”] is so spelled. In law the phrase refers most commonly to a diplomat who is not acceptable to a host country, but generally the phrase refers to anyone who is unwelcome. E.g.:

> “Whitney was believed to be damaged goods and was marked as *persona non grata* at the end of his three-plus years with the Florida Panthers.” Michael Arace, “All-Star Billing,” Columbus Dispatch, 17 Jan. 2003, at D1.

Some writers get misled by the much more common **LATINISM gratis** (/grat-is/), meaning “free, without charge,” and proceed to mangle the phrase—e.g.:

- “Couples who should know better are quickly becoming *persona non gratis* [read persona non grata] in several circles.” Judy Wells, “The Wells Watch,” Fla. Times-Union, 13 Feb. 2000, at D2. (Because of the plural sense, another wording would be preferable. See below.)
- “Through mid-August they . . . were *persona non gratis* [read persona non grata] to their fans.” Jay Greenberg, “Yes, It Really Is Happening,” N.Y. Post, 23 Sept. 2001, at 106. (Ditto.)
The Latin plural is *personae non gratae* (/par-soh-nee non gray-tee/, not /par-soh-nee/ or /-nay/), which can't be readily anglicized: *personas non grata doesn't work, and neither does *persona non gratas (or, worse yet, *personas non grata*). In the first two quotations above, a plural is called for: the writers would have been well advised to use *unwelcome, unacceptable, ostracized, or some other word. But what seems to be happening today is that *persona non grata is becoming freely singular or plural, as the sense requires. The antonym of *persona non grata is the less common *persona grata (= a person who is welcome). While the negative form occurs in both AmE and BrE, the positive form (infrequent as it is) appears far more often in BrE than in AmE.

**Language-Change Index**

*persona non gratis for persona non grata: Stage 1
Current ratio (persona non grata vs. *persona non gratis): 142:1

*personation. See impersonation.

persons. See people (A).

person . . . they; person . . . them. See concord (b).

perspective. See prospective.

perspicuous; perspicacious. Perspicuous is to *perspicacious as intelligible is to intelligent. Perspicuous* (/par-spik-yoo-ә-tee/) may be defined etymologically as “see-through-it-ive-ness.” It means “clear, lucid,” and it is applied to thought and expression—e.g.: “Jackson’s new lyrics are perspicuous, leaving no doubt as to their meaning.” Bill Eichenberger, “Jackson Wraps Sophisticated Sounds Around Naive Messages,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 21 July 1995, at E10. Perspicacious (/par-spi-kay-shas/) = penetrating in thought; acutely discerning; keen; shrewd <a writer as perspicacious as Susan Sontag>.

The noun corresponding to *perspicuous is perspicuity* (/par-spy-koo-ә-tee/)—e.g.: “The making of distinctions is the task of all philosophy, of course, but no one does it with the perspicuity and finesse of Isaiah Berlin.” Robert Craft, “Sir Isaiah’s Philosophical Bestiary,” *Wash. Post*, 16 Aug. 1992, Book World §, at 11.

The noun corresponding to *perspicacious is perspicacity* (/par-spi-kas-ә-tee/), meaning “keensness, insight, great intelligence.” Sometimes *perspicuity* incorrectly displaces it—e.g.: • “Dangerous even then, but what’s not to trust in a guy who orders orange juice with his dinner and showed the perspicacity [read perspicacity?] not to be excited about being bound for the Bills in Buffalo?” Cheryl Johnson, “Trial Brings Flashback to ’69: Married O.J. Put a Move on Her,” *Star Trib.* (Minneapolis), 5 Oct. 1995, at B3.

• “Indeed, His Gray Eminence believes that, if only those at City Hall had his visionary perspicacity [read perspicacity], Long Beach would now have a major football stadium, an NFL team, clean ocean water, great waves, a surplus of downtown parking, a surplus of tax revenue, no red ink-draining fish tank, and enough tourist trade to guarantee almost every businessperson in the city a profit.” Doug Krikorian, “Taking a Wait. See Approach to Torre,” *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, 2 Nov. 2007, at C1.

• “Before Japanese bosses celebrate, they may want to consider that this golden opportunity is hardly the result of business perspicacity [read perspicacity], Japanese companies had such a surfeit of unused capital because of poor corporate governance and fiscal management.” “Mergers and Acquisitions: The Japanese Are Coming (Again),” *Economist*, 4 Oct. 2008, at 92.

Worse yet, through word-swapping people have begun to confuse *perspicacity with pertinacity (= unyielding persistence, obstinacy)—e.g.: “It is still possible to beat the bogy of passenger airlines undercutting cargo rates; all it takes is good old persistence and perspicacity [read pertinacity] in finding the right product mix.” Brian Johnson-Tomas, “Look to Charters for Competitive Edge,” *Air Cargo World*, 1 Mar. 1994, at 17. On 31 August 1997, the day Princess Diana died after a car crash in Paris while being pursued by paparazzi, one television commentator referred to the “dogged perspicacity” of the photographers who hound celebrities. That’s a malapropism: he certainly didn’t mean to praise those photographers for being intelligent.

**Language-Change Index**

1. perspicuity for perspicacity: Stage 1
2. perspicacity for pertinacity: Stage 1

persuadable; *persuadable; *persuasible. The preferred form is *persuadable*. The others are needless variants. See -able (A).

What follows may seem like a one-off error, but usage mistakes are like cockroaches and ants: where you find one, you’re bound to find others. *Persuasibility (a variant of persuadability) has been misused for persuasiveness (= the quality of engendering belief or commitment) here: “Where status equality exists, then other factors such as the inherent persuasibility [read persuasiveness] of the arguments may be salient,” Elizabeth Chell, *The Psychology of Behaviour in Organizations* 103 (1987). Arguments can be persuasive but never persuadable. The fanciness of *persuasibility may have misled the writer.

persuade; convince. In the best traditional usage, one persuades another to do something but convinces another of something. The idea was to avoid convince to—the phrasing *she convinced him to resign* is traditionally viewed as less good than she persuaded him to resign.

Either convince or persuade may be used with a that-clause. Although persuade that occurs mostly in legal contexts, it does appear elsewhere—e.g.: • “But at the same time he’s persuaded that he has to take advantage of the message of tolerance that is part of
petit jury; petty jury. The first form is standard in AmE, the second in BrE. The terms are pronounced identically: /ˈpet-i juːr-/.

definition. See petit jury.

-Ph-. See pronunciation (d).

phantasm (/ˈfænt-əm/) = (1) a body of troops in close array; (2) a massed or organized group of individuals; or (3) a finger bone or toe bone. In senses 1 and 2, the plural is pl. phalanges; in sense 3, it’s phalanges. See PLURALS (b).

phantamus, pl. phalluses or (less good) *phalli. In modern print sources, phalluses is much more common—and has been so since about 1980. See PLURALS (b).

Current ratio: 2:1

phantasmagoria = a constantly shifting scene that is colorful or bizarre) is singular, not plural—e.g.: “An intimate, inward piece, it was a phantasmagoria of sound effects.” Ellen Pfeifer, “‘Sneakers’ Gives Tiny Audience a Big Treat,” Boston Herald, 31 July 1997, at 36.

The plural is phantasmagorias, but phantasmagoria is sometimes misused as a plural—e.g.: “The real-life Marshall Applewhite and his followers had already done that far more effectively than any of the phantasmagoria [read phantasmagogias] conjured up by Chris Carter and his award-winning team.” Damian Thompson, “The Brainwashing of America,” Daily Telegraph, 9 Aug. 1997, Features §, at 15.

Language-Change Index
phantasmagoria misused as a plural: Stage 1

*phantasy. See fantasy.

Pharisaic; *Pharisaical; *pharisaic; pharisaical. The first is the predominant word meaning “of, relating to, or involving the Pharisees,” members of an ancient Jewish sect who strictly observed the written laws and traditions of religion but who were criticized in the

petitio principii. See beg the question.
New Testament as being hypocritically self-righteous. By extension, the lower case word *pharisaical* (note the -al) has come to mean "observing the letter but not the spirit of religious doctrine; sanctimonious." *Pharisaical* is pronounced /fa-ra-say-ik/, *pharisaical* /fa-ra-say-i-kel/.

*Pharisaical* and *pharisical* are needless variants.

**pharmaceutical; **pharmaceutic. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 519:1

**phenomenon**

A. And **phenomena**. **Phenomenon** is the singular form, **phenomena** the plural. Writers have misused the plural form as if it were singular since the mid-19th century. The error persists—e.g.,

- "Not only was this *phenomenon* precipitated by the final growth in the price of gas, but by such other disclosures as prospective shallow water zones." Dev George, "Emphasis on Economy Continues as Industry Adjusts to Lower Prices," *Offshore*, May 1994, at 29. (Read: *This phenomenon* was precipitated not only by the final growth in the price of gas but also by . . . . [See PARALLELISM].)


- "‘One to One’ marketing has become the mantra of Internet commerce. . . . Customers who experience the One to One *phenomena* [read *phenomenon*] feel special." William Cunningham, "How to Win Truly Loyal Customer," *Cincinnati Post,* 21 Aug. 2000, at B7.

- "If the sky is clear during the moon’s early crescent phases, it’s also possible to see the entire dark disc of the moon faintly illuminated as well. This *phenomena* [read *phenomenon*] is possible because of earthshine, the reflection of sunlight off Earth and over to the moon." Dan Malerbo, "Vernal Equinox, New Moon," *Pitt. Post-Gaz.,* 16 Mar. 2015, at D7.

See **plurals** (b).

Surprisingly, the word is often misspelled *phenomenum*, especially in BrE—e.g.,

- "In Argentina, ego deflation on a national scale was first encountered as a local *phenomena* [read *phenomenon*]."


- "A press release from the publication arrives in the inbox saying that the social networking *phenomenon* [read *phenomena*] has become ‘a left-wing attack tool.’" "Business Diary," *Independent,* 18 Nov. 2009, at 42.

**Language-Change Index**

| 1. **phenomenon** as a singular: Stage 2 | Current ratio (a rare *phenomenon* vs. *a rare phenomena*): 60:1 |
| 2. **phenomenon** misspelled *phenomenum*: Stage 1 |

**B. As a Plural.** Conversely, the singular *phenomenon* is sometimes mistakenly used as a plural—e.g.: "These irregularities could explain several *phenomena* [read *phenomena*] in the earth including the well-known jerkiness in the planet’s rotational rate." George Alexander, "Cat Scans Used to Explore the Earth," *N.Y. Times,* 16 Dec. 1986, at C3. Cf. **criterion & media**.

**Language-Change Index**

*phenomenon* as false plural for *phenomena*: Stage 1

**C. And **phenomenons, **phenom(s)**. Even though *phenomena* is the accepted plural, some people erroneously write *phenomenons*—e.g.,

- “The seven-day week, alone among the components of the calendar, has always been thought to be a product of divine instruction or social convention, not set by natural *phenomenons* [read *phenomena*] as the day, month and year are.” Jon Nordheimer, "Sunday Afternoon Blues," *Kansas City Star,* 13 Oct. 1991, at G1.

- “One of the strangest *phenomenons* [read *phenomena*] in nature is the way a moose can disappear.” Craig Medred, "Are You Looking to Bag Moose?" *Anchorage Daily News,* 17 Aug. 1997, at F1.


But in the popular sense “a talented person who is achieving remarkable success and popularity,” *phenomenon* makes the plural *phenomenons*-Garth Brooks and Clint Black, two great *phenomenons* of country music, were present-. E.g.: "*Phenomenons* need not be phenomenal every week, especially when they fulfill so many agendas—youth and commercial, color and culture." Bud Shaw, "All Types of Fans Just Talkin’ Tiger," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 23 Aug. 1997, at D1.

In this last sense, the word is often replaced by the **casualism** **phenom**—e.g.,

- "He will join Loyola’s Colin Falls and Ohio high school *phenom* LeBron James in the game." Marlen Garcia,
philanderer

= a man who engages in brief love affairs

is the standard form. *Philander, n., is a need-
less variant. Of course, philander is the invariable
verb <after a life of philandering, he had little to show
for it but nine illegitimate children whom he hardly
knew>.

philatelist (= a stamp collector) is pronounced
/ˌfi-lə-təl-ist/ in AmE and BrE alike—not /ˈfi-lət-
ist/ or /ˈfi-lət-əl-ist/. The most common cognates
are philately /ˌfi-lə-təl-i/ and philatelic /fi-ə-təl-ik/.
Cf. numismatist.

Philippine Islands, often shortened to Philippines, is
so spelled. The native islanders are known as Filipinos,
a word deriving from the country’s name when it was
a Spanish possession: Islas Filipinas.

philology. See linguistics.

philosophical (= of, relating to, or involving philoso-
phers or philosophy) has been the standard form since
the late 17th century. *Philosphic is a variant. See -ic.

Current ratio: 10:1

phlegmatic (= having a slow, calm temperament) is
pronounced /ˈfleg-mət-ik/, with a hard -g-. This despite
the silent -g- in the corresponding noun phlegm
(= [1] mucus produced in the nose and throat, or

phony (= false, sham) is the standard spelling. *Pho-
ney is a variant.

Current ratio: 7:1

Phrasal Adjectives. A. General Rule.

When a phrase functions as an adjective preceding the noun
it modifies—an increasingly frequent phenomenon in
20th- and 21st-century English—the phrase should
ordinarily be hyphenated. Hence the soup is burning
hot becomes the burning-hot soup; the child is six years
old becomes the six-year-old child. Most professional
writers know this; most nonprofessionals don’t.

The primary reason for the hyphens is that they
prevent miscues and make reading easier and faster.
Following are examples drawn from four University of
Chicago Press books published from 1987 to 2002:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Author</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>absurd-sounding orders</td>
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<td>across-the-board discounts</td>
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<td>acute-care treatment</td>
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<td>agreed-upon answer</td>
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<td>AIDS-related complexes</td>
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<td>Anglo-American court</td>
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<td>average-cost compilation</td>
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<td>basing-point pricing</td>
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<td>best-known one</td>
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<td>bid-rotation schemes</td>
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<td>big-ticket item</td>
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<td>black-haired eagle-faced professor</td>
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<td>brain-bisected monkey</td>
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<td>broad-stroked depictions</td>
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<td>business-tort law</td>
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<td>certificate-of-need laws</td>
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<td>choice-of-evil situation</td>
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<td>class-action lawyers</td>
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<td>classical-formalist legal thinking</td>
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<td>common-carrier industries</td>
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<td>common-law character</td>
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<td>computer-software firms</td>
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<td>cost-minimizing output</td>
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<td>cost-reducing advantages</td>
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<td>court-imposed deadline</td>
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<td>court-ordered separation</td>
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<td>death-producing acts</td>
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<td>dealer-service theory</td>
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<td>delivered-price systems</td>
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<td>demand-creating activity</td>
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<td>downward-sloping line</td>
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<td>early-nineteenth-century settlers</td>
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<td>easy-credit charge account</td>
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<td>electrical-equipment conspirators</td>
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<td>English-speaking people</td>
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<td>evil-minded aggressor</td>
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<td>exclusive-dealing contracts</td>
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<td>face-to-face meetings</td>
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<td>far-ranging and free-thinking eclecticism</td>
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<td>first-run motion pictures</td>
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<td>five-judge tribunal</td>
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<td>flesh-and-blood individuals</td>
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<td>foreign-sounding name</td>
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<td>for-profit firms</td>
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<td>French-lace smuggler</td>
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<td>full-blown cartel</td>
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<td>garden-variety exclusive-dealing case</td>
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<td>government-owned business</td>
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<td>hard-and-fast, cut-and-dried, open-and-shut issue</td>
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<td>hard-core sexual conduct</td>
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<td>hard-eyed view</td>
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<td>hard-to-read writing</td>
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<td>head-on collision</td>
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<td>head-to-head competition</td>
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<td>high-echelon FBI officials</td>
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<td>higher-price outlet</td>
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<td>high-volume manufacturer</td>
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<td>hit-and-run statute</td>
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<td>HIV-negative person</td>
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<td>identical-looking ships</td>
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<td>illusion-ridden jurists</td>
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<td>industry-wide price-fixing committees</td>
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<td>information-technology personnel</td>
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<td>ink-dispensing writing utensil</td>
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<td>intellectual-property markets</td>
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<td>interest-group pressures</td>
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<td>Internet-related firms</td>
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</table>
Jaguar-driving playboy
joint-stock company
joint-venture route
judge-made rules
kidney-dialysis machine
large-scale production
law-school-sponsored training
long-run costs
long-standing problems
long-term care
loose-knit arrangement
low-cost sellers
lower-paying job
make-believe world
marginal-revenue curve
market-clearing level
market-definition cases
market-share trends
merger-to-monopoly movement
most-favored-nation clause
narrow-minded and out-of-date productions
never-published introductory essay
new-economy industries
nineteenth-century judge
no-distribution constraint
no-fault divorce
not-for-profit firms
now-classic treatise
odd-numbered license plates
office-supply stores
one-way window
original-equipment market
output-reducing effects
patent-misuse cases
pension-fund investments
point-by-point defense
policy-analysis spectrum
potential-competition doctrine
price-discriminating monopolist
price-fixing conspiracies
private-brand equivalent
profit-seeking efforts
quality-adjusted price
quality-enhancing advantages
raw-material costs
razor-sharp minds
restricted-distribution cases
right-hand side
right-wing group
run-of-the-mill cases
safe-driving billboard
sealed-bid basis
second-run showing
self-enforcing agreements
seventeen-year-old boy
shoe-machinery firms
short-run effects
single-firm monopoly
single-spaced pages
single-store grocery
sleeping-car business
small-business standpoint
still-mourned wartime president
subsequent-run motion pictures
supplier-customer relation
tacit-collusion case
third-party physician
third-year medical student
three-part harmony
thumbs-up sign
time-honored method
trademark-sharing cases
trade-secret law
treble-damage suits
Ulysses-and-the-Sirens strategy
university-educated, middle-class males
war-weary jury
well-authenticated cases
well-designed system
well-publicized suicide
well-recognized exception
writ-copying apprenticeship
yes-or-no question
zero-sum game

Reputable newspaper publishers are as conscientious about this point as reputable book publishers. What follows is a sampling of phrasal adjectives found in The Wall Street Journal during one week:

- 11-mile split
- 20-year lows
- 24-hour-a-day guards
- 30-year fixed loan
- 50-odd brands
- $55-a-barrel oil
- across-the-board cuts
- anthrax-tainted letters
- banking-supervision committee
- believe-it-or-not category
- big-is-better philosophy
- blue-blood, country-club Republicans
- bond-trading activities
- cash-starved telecom outfits
- cellular-phone networks
- central-bank officials
- client-confidentiality rules
- crop-dusting manuals
- decade-old U.N. sanctions
- Democrat-led Senate
- distressed-debt investors
- DVD-viewing programs
- energy-trading colossus
- farm-subsidies issue
- fast-track authority
- full-body patdown
- health-care coverage
- higher-income earners
- highest-ranking officers
- high-school students
- high-stakes bid
- homeland-security director
- inhaled-anthrax infection
- law-enforcement official

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)
Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
little-known presidential candidate
low-end commitment
low-income workers
market-share figure
me-too competition
mom-and-pop retail outlet
movie-theater industry
national-security briefing
natural-gas pipeline
no-documentation loans
note-receivable assets
one-way flight
optical-scan ballots
precinct-count device
precinct-counted optical-scan ballots
private-sector employees
public-health pandemics
punch-card ballots
real-estate prices
right-wing militia
round-the-clock bargaining
search-and-rescue operation
second-largest army
securities-trading unit
shell-shocked mothers
state-sponsored terrorism
stepped-up air campaign
stock-crippled Yahoo
third-largest oil producer
third-quarter loss
three-day visit
top-executive team
tough-girl raiment
treaty-member countries
U.S.-led campaign
venture-backed tech start-ups
Washington, D.C.-based airline-industry trade group
well-armed guerrilla fighters
wire-transfer services
working-class jury
zero-interest new-car loans

In any single issue of that newspaper, you will find many more hyphenated phrasal adjectives than these. Upon encountering a phrasal adjective, the reader isn't misled into thinking momentarily that the modifying phrase is really a noun itself. In other words, the hyphens greatly clarify the meaning. It matters a great deal, for example, where you put hyphens in last known criminal activity report.

Some guides might suggest that you should make a case-by-case decision, based on whether a misreading is likely. You're better off with a flat rule (with a few exceptions noted below) because almost all sentences with unhynphened phrasal adjectives will be misread by someone. (See PUNCTUATION (j).) The following examples demonstrate the hesitation or lack of clarity caused by a missing hyphen:

- “One last pop on this whole question of incivility of discourse, the much argued over [read much-argued-over] issue of whose speech has been more inflammatory and socially destructive than whose.” Meg Greenfield, “It’s Time for Some Civility,” Newsweek, 5 June 1995, at 78. (After much argued, the reader expects a noun; then over appears, unsettling the reader for a moment; then, in two milliseconds, the reader adjusts to see that much-argued-over is a phrasal adjective modifying issue.)
- “O’Neill is serving a 20- to 40-year state prison sentence in Dallas, Luzerne County, for a Northampton County conviction in 1994 on statutory rape, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse and corruption of minors charges.” Bob Laylo, “Children Testify on Sex Ring Abuse,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 20 Sept. 1996, at B1. (Read either statutory-rape, involuntary-deviant-sexual-intercourse, and corruption-of-minors charges or [better] charges of statutory rape, involuntary deviant sexual intercourse, and corruption of minors. [On the change from deviate to deviant, see deviant (A).]
- “This English as a second language text presents the different speaking styles for international students.” Ibid. at 243. (A possible revision: This English-as-a-second-language text presents the different speaking styles for international students.)

Readability is especially enhanced when the hyphens are properly used in two phrasal adjectives that modify a single noun—e.g.:

- 13-year-old court-ordered busing plan
- 24-hour-a-day doctor-supervised care
- county-approved billboard-siting restriction
- long-latency occupational-disease cases

Some writers—who those who haven't cultivated an empathy for their readers—would omit all those hyphens. Following are examples in which enlightened writers or editors supplied the necessary hyphens:

- “As a reader you are alerted by that direct, straight-to-the-heart-of-the-matter statement.” Lucile V. Payne, The Lively Art of Writing 65 (1965).
- “The survey was conducted by telephone Jan. 12–16, before the radio ads promoting the official-English bill were broadcast on Atlanta radio stations.” Elizabeth Kurylo & Rhonda Cook, “English-Only Bill Splits Georgians,” Atlanta J.-Const., 20 Feb. 1994, at A1.
- “The English-language bill’s sponsor, Sen. Mike Crotts (R-Conyers), said he is confident the legislation will pass the Senate.” Ibid. at A14.
- “‘Out of the way, out of the way!’ sang Mrs. Weasley, coming through the gate with what appeared to be a giant, beach-ball-sized Snitch floating in front of her.” J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows 119 (1st Am. ed. 2007).

For more on these hyphens, see PUNCTUATION (j).

B. Exception for -ly Adverbs. When a phrasal adjective begins with an adverb ending in -ly, the convention is to drop the hyphen—e.g.: “With the hotly-contested [read hotly contested] Second Congressional District primary six days away, supporters of Sen. Bob
Smith gathered last night just as curious about a race two years away and a candidate who hasn’t said yet whether he’s running,” M.L. Elrick, "Kemp Coy on Plans for 1996,” *Concord Monitor*, 8 Sept. 1994, at B1. But if the -ly adverb is part of a longer phrase, then the hyphen is mandatory (*the not-so-hotly-contested race*).

Meanwhile, be sure not to confuse adjectives ending in -ly with adverbs. A hyphen is proper—e.g.: “She was a *curly-haired* gamine, ghosting through the hawthorn hedge that bordered the main path.”


**C. Suspensive Hyphens.** When two phrasal adjectives have a common element at the end, and this ending portion (usually the last word) appears only with the second phrase, insert a suspensive hyphen after the unattached words to show their relationship with the common element. The hyphens become especially important when phrases are compounded in this way—e.g.:

- “It was a four- or five-times-a-year indulgence, if that.” Arthur Miller, “The Bare Manuscript,” *New Yorker*, 16 Dec. 2002, at 82, 85.

Occasionally writers omit the hyphens, resulting almost invariably in readers’ puzzlement—e.g.: “They lived in the small city of Apopka, Florida, located in the fern and foliage growing region [read instead in the fern- and foliage-growing region] north of Orlando.”

**D. Duration or Amount.** When phrasal adjectives denote durations or amounts, plurals should be dropped—e.g.: “The report doesn’t disclose whether Annie Bell was born after a normal nine months pregnancy [read nine-month pregnancy].” Likewise, one should write 14-hour-a-day schedule, three-week hiatus, 32-year-old Kansan, 2,000-bottle wine cellar, and 25,000-volume library. The exception is with fractions, in which the plural is retained <a two-thirds vote>.

**E. The Compound Conundrum.** When the first or last element in a phrasal adjective is part of a compound noun, it too needs to be hyphenated: *post-cold-war norms*, not *post-cold war norms*. Otherwise, as in that example, *cold* appears more closely related to *post* than to *war*. Writers frequently blunder by omitting one of the necessary hyphens—e.g.:

- “If Dian Parkinson has paid a price for leaving *The Price Is Right* after 18 years, you’d never know it. The bubbly former model, 41, just did a week of *game show-spoofing* [read *game-show-spoofing*] cameos on David Letterman’s show, and she’s launching an acting career.” *Life After ‘Price’ Is Right*, USA Today, 19 Nov. 1993, at D2.

Sometimes attaching a modifier to a one-word compound noun may require separating its elements. The problem arises when the adjective specifically modifies the first element of the compound, creating a new phrase that in turn modifies the second element. For example, *pillbox* is always written as a single word, but a box containing sleeping pills would have to be a *sleeping-pill box* (not a *sleeping-pillbox*). Similarly, in baseball we always make the term *baseline* a one-word compound when it stands alone, but when we use it to identify the line from home plate to first or third base, we have to split the elements to make *first-base line* or *third-base line*. Two more examples: although a *bookstore* is where we buy books, for secondhand books we go to a *used-bookstore* (not a *used-bookstore*). And although a *schoolteacher* teaches school, a *Sunday-school teacher* teaches Sunday school. Cf. *watermark*.

**F. Proper Nouns.** When a name is used attributively as a phrasal adjective, it ordinarily remains unhyphenated. E.g.: “The *Terry Maher strategy* put immediate pressure on rival bookshop chains.” Raymond Snoddy, “Book Price War Looms in Britain,” *Fin. Times*, 28–29 Sept. 1991, at 1. This becomes quite awkward, though, when the two words in a proper noun are part of a longer phrasal adjective *<the King County-owned stadium>* <a New York-doctor-owned building>. The only reasonable thing to do is rewrite *<the stadium owned by King County>* <a building owned by a New York doctor>.

**G. Phrasal Adjectives Following the Noun.** When they occur in the predicate, phrasal adjectives usually aren’t hyphenated: “This rule is *well worn*” —but “This is a *well-worn* rule.” Some exceptions are always hyphenated. Among them are these:

- cost-effective
- crystal-clear
- dyed-in-the-wool
- high-spirited
- ill-advised

**H. Foreign Phrases.** When used as adjectives, phrases taken from foreign languages generally hold together without the need for hyphens to prevent *mises*  <chors doëuvre tray> <chabeas corpus petition>  <ad hoc committee> <ex parte communications>.
Phrasal Verbs are verbs that comprise more than one word, often a verb and a preposition (acting as an adverbial particle). Hence politicians put up with the press, and vice versa; striking workers hold out for more benefits; arguing family members work out their problems; campers must make do with the supplies they have; legacies are handed down from one generation to the next; gardeners work to get rid of weeds; overworked employees, like candles left too long, burn out; boxers are knocked out—and pregnant women (in the vulgar dysphemism) knocked up. For a collection of these verbs, see G.W. Davidson, Chambers Pocket Guide to Phrasal Verbs (1982).

Rhetoricians have taken two positions on these verbs. On the one hand, some recommend using them whenever they’re natural-sounding because they lend a relaxed, confident tone—hence get rid of instead of the Latin-derived eliminate, phase out instead of gradually discontinue. On the other hand, because phrasal verbs often add to the number of words (though not syllables) in a phrase, some rhetoricians prefer avoiding them—hence handle instead of deal with, resolve instead of work out. In the end, this tension can’t be worked out as a matter of general principle: one’s judgment will depend on the context.

Four caveats are in order with phrasal verbs.

First, when using one, include the entire phrase and not just the primary verb. Don’t say that two things cancel each other if what they’re really doing is canceling each other out (or canceling out each other). And don’t say that you’re drawing the resources if you’re drawing on the resources.

Second, don’t use a phrasal verb if the adverbial particle is simply baggage that doesn’t add to meaning. So suffixes. The current ratio (phyla vs. *phylums) is 209:1. The first is the traditional and unpretentious AmE pronunciation; the second is the traditional BrE one. If you use the latter, be sure to pronounce the final -t!

piazza (= an open square in an Italian town) has predominantly made the anglicized plural piazas since the 18th century. The Italianate plural piazzes is little used in English.

Current ratio (piazas vs. piazza): 9:1

picaresque; picturesque. These words are quite different. Picaresque = roguish. Picturesque = fit to be the subject of a picture; strikingly graphic. Picaresque, adj. & n., can give rise to a miscue when used in conjunction with a reference to visual imagery. For a good example of this confusion, see MISCUES (A).

picayune. So spelled. See SPELLING (A).

pickaxe. So spelled—preferrably not *pickax. See ax.

picnic, v.i., makes picnicke and picnicked. Cf. mimic & panic.

picture (referring to a painting, drawing, photograph, or depiction), in Standard English, is pronounced /pi:k-chaer/- neither /pi:k-ər/ (sloppy) nor /pi:k-tyoor/ (pedantic and pretentious).

picturesque. See picaresque.
pidgin (fr. the Chinese pronunciation of the English word business) = a simplified form of language used for communication between nonnative speakers of a language <pidgin English>. Although some mid-19th-century writers used the form *pigeon English, that form is now regarded as mistaken—e.g.:• “Sparrows said he couldn’t stand the thought of having the actors speak the kind of pigeon [read pidgin] English often used in films about the Japanese.” David Zurawik, “Docudrama Elocutiously Adds Fiction to Fact, but the Total May Not Add Up to History,” Baltimore Sun, 5 Aug. 1995, at D1.
• “Her now 13-year-old son . . . has been raised ‘native’ and speaks pigeon [read pidgin] English like a two-year-old.” Bruce Kirkland, “Humor, Style Lost in the Jungle,” Toronto Sun, 7 Mar. 1997, Entertainment §, at 6.
• “The next few pages offered . . . sentences written in brief, almost pigeon-English [read pidgin-English] format that showed no flare or conscience for being creative, [but] rather just the primitive and somewhat failed first attempts at writing.” W.D. Jordan, The Boatman 199 (2010). (On the misuse of flare for flair in that sentence, see flare.)

It's pronounced like pigeon—namely, /pjih-an/.

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*pigeon English* for *pidgin English*: Stage 2

Current ratio (pidgin English vs. *pigeon English*): 6:1

piebald; skewbald. These terms refer to spots or blotches of color on animals’ coats. Although there is some overlap between the two, the basic distinction is this: piebald = spotted white and black; skewbald = spotted white and a color other than black (usu. brown).

Both words can function as either adjective or noun, and both most often refer to horses.

piece of (one’s) mind. See peace of mind.

Pierre, the capital of South Dakota, is pronounced /pwa/-r/, not /pee-air/.

*pigeon English*. See pidgin.

*pigmy. See pygmy.

pilaf; pilau; *pilaw. What do we call the dish consisting of rice, vegetables, and sometimes meat? In AmE, it's pilaf (/pee-lahf—not /pi-lahf/). In BrE, it's traditionally pilau (/pee-low/)—though since the 1960s pilaf has come into currency in BrE and since the mid-1990s seems to have been steadily ousting pilau. *Pilaw* is a variant spelling.

**pillar** for *pillory* is a malapropism, as Mr. Rush points out: “Norman Rush, author of the acclaimed novel *Mating*, reviewed a litany of malapropisms from television (I heard a Democratic congressman complain that in the House bank scandal, members of his party were being ‘pillared’—which sounds kind of honific to me’) to explain the problems of ‘language not anchored in a text.’” Peter Whoriskey, “Paradise Lost? Books’ Future Debated,” Miami Herald, 20 Nov. 1994, at A1. When the error occurs, it is mostly in speech—e.g.: “None of this is any fun. The school board has been frugal and is being pillared [read pilloried] for it,” he said.” Karl J. Karlson, “School Cuts Trouble Rice Lake,” Pioneer Press (St. Paul), 24 Apr. 1994, at B1.

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*pillar* misused for *pillory*: Stage 1

pilsner (= a lager beer) has established itself as the standard spelling. *Pilsener* is a variant that predominated in AmE till 1953 and in BrE till 1977. Some capitalize the first letter—after the Czech place name Pilsen (also Plzen)—but the word has been fully naturalized into English and needs no capital.

Current ratio (pilsner vs. *pilsener*): 9:1

pimento; pimiento. Both words come from the Spanish *pimenta* (= pepper), and both denote the European sweet pepper best known in the U.S. for its use in stuffed green olives. Pimento—which also denotes allspice and the allspice tree—is the more common spelling today. It’s the standard form in combinations such as *pimento cheese* and *pimento grass* (= St. Augustine grass). In reference to the pepper, though, *pimento* is more than twice as common as *pimiento* in general-interest publications, while *pimiento* is the accepted style in food magazines such as Bon Appetit and Gourmet. So neither form is realistically cancelable as a needlessly variant.

Current ratio (pimento cheese vs. *pimiento cheese*):

2:1

Current ratio (pimento pepper vs. *pimiento pepper*): 1:1

pinky; pinkie. In both AmE and BrE, pinky is an adjective meaning “rather pink.” But a distinction exists for the noun referring to the smallest finger: AmE prefers pinky, and BrE pinkie. Hence Americans write pinky ring, while Britons write pinkie ring.

PIN number. For this redundant acronym, see abbreviations (B).

pinochle; *pinocle; *penuchle; *penuckle. The first has been the standard spelling for the name of the card game since it began in the mid-19th century. The others are variant forms.

Current ratio (for first three headwords): 162:5:1

pint-sized, adj., is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Pint-size* is a variant.

Current ratio: 2:1

piquant (= [1] pleasingly tart or spicy, or [2] agreeably provocative) is pronounced /pee-kant/—preferably not
piquant (p/ektoo/), vb., = (1) to irritate; or (2) to excite or arouse. The most common phrase in sense 2 is pique one’s interest—e.g.: “He views the Internet primarily as a way to pique the interest of potential customers and to familiarize them with his gallery.” Holly Selby, “Galeries Reach Past Their Walls on Web Sites,” Houston Chron., 23 July 1997, Houston §, at 4. But some writers erroneously make the phrase *peak one’s interest—e.g.:

- “Travels to southern Italy peaked [read piqued] his interest in earthquakes and volcanoes, and in 1638 he climbed the rumbling Mt. Vesuvius to observe the crater first-hand, and this began a life-long interest in subterranean phenomena.” Nick Kanas, Star Maps 195 (2012).

See ergative verbs.

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*peak one’s interest for pique one’s interest: Stage 1
Current ratio (piqued my interest vs. *peeked my interest): 10:1

pitiable; pitiful; piteous; pitiless. Pitable = calling for or arousing pity. E.g.: “Most interesting is the resourcefulness of the little girl, who manages to engage her captor—who is equal parts monster and pitiable child—skillfully enough to keep herself alive.” Chris Petrakos, “A Peach of a Puzzle on Plum Island,” Chicago Trib., 18 May 1997, at C6.


The word piteous (originally “pious” or “compassionate”) “had become misused for pitiable as early as Shakespeare’s time: for him hearts could be piteous in the active sense and corpses in the passive.” Ivor Brown, I Give You My Word & Say the Word 235 (1964). Today piteous is an archaic and poetic synonym of pitiable—not a word for ordinary uses.


Pittsburgher; *Pittsburger. The first is the standard spelling; the second is a variant form.

Current ratio: 9:1

pixilate; *pixellate; * pixilate; *pixillate. The first is the standard verb meaning “to divide (an image) into pixels [minute areas of illumination on a display screen], esp. for display or storage in a digital format.” The other spellings are variant forms. The single -l-pixelated predominates in AmE and BrE alike.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 23:4:4:1

pixie (= a fairy or elf) has been the standard spelling since the 1920s. *Pixy is a variant.

*pixilate. See pixelate.

pizzeria. See pixelate.

pizzeria. The word for a restaurant specializing in pizza is often (if understoodly) misspelled *pizzaria—e.g.:


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pizzeria misspelled *pizzaria: Stage 1
Current ratio: 270:1

pizzicato (= a musical direction that a stringed instrument is to be plucked instead of bowed), an Italian loanword from the mid-19th century, has two plurals: pizzicatos and pizzicati. In both AmE and BrE, pizzicati has slightly predominated in recent years; pizzicatos has been closing the gap.

Current ratio (pizzicati vs. pizzicatos): 2:1

Place Names. A. As Adjectives. See adjectives (D).

B. British Practices with American Place Names. See names (E).

C. Pronunciation of Foreign Names. See names (C).

D. Names for Residents and Natives. See denizen labels.

place of abode. See abode.

place where. This phrase is perfectly idiomatic. There is no good reason to insist on place that. Cf. reason why.

plagiarize is often misspelled *plagarize or *plagerize. E.g.:

- “Corelli’s style was easier to plagiarize [read plagiarize] than Haydn’s; Haydn’s contemporaries and successors
were more taken with being original than being imitators.” John H. Baron, *Chamber Music* 1507 (2010).

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| plagiarize misspelled *plagiarize or *plagarize: |
| Stage 1 |

Current ratio (plagiarize vs. *plagarize): 2,058:1

**plaguy** (= annoying, disagreeable) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Plaguey* is a variant.

Current ratio: 2:1

*plain geometry. See plane geometry.*

**Plain Language. A. Generally.** Albert Einstein once said that his goal in stating an idea was to make it as simple as possible but no simpler. He also said: “Most of the fundamental ideas of science are essentially simple, and may, as a rule, be expressed in a language comprehensible to everyone.” *The Evolution of Physics* 29 (1938). If that’s true of science, surely it’s true of most other subjects.

But there is little reason for hope when so many writers seem to believe that to appear competent or smart, they must state their ideas in the most complex manner possible. Of course, this problem plagues many fields of intellectual endeavor, as the philosopher Bertrand Russell noted:

> I am allowed to use plain English because everybody knows that I could use mathematical logic if I chose. Take the statement: “Some people marry their deceased wives’ sisters.” I can express this in language [that] only becomes intelligible after years of study, and this gives me freedom. I suggest to young professors that their first work should be written in a jargon only to be understood by the erudite few. With that behind them, they can ever after say what they have to say in a language “understanded of the people.” In these days, when our very lives are at the mercy of the professors, I cannot but think that they would deserve our gratitude if they adopted my advice. Bertrand Russell, “How I Write” (1954), in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* 63, 65 (Robert E. Egner & Lester E. Denonn eds., 1961).

But the professors have not heeded Russell’s advice. Since he wrote that essay in the mid-1950s, things have gotten much worse in fields such as biology, economics, education, law, linguistics, literary criticism, political science, psychology, and sociology.

Consider the following passage from a tax statute, a 260-word tangle that is as difficult to fathom as any mathematical theorem:

> (a) in the case where the relevant number of cents is less than 50—the other amount shall be reduced by the relevant number of cents; or
> (b) in any other case—the other amount shall be increased by the amount by which the relevant number of cents is less than $1.

(12) Where, but for sub-section (5), this section would, by virtue of the preceding provisions of this section, have effect in relation to a relevant year of income as if, for the reference in sub-section (3) to $18,000, there were substituted a reference to another amount, being an amount that consists of a number of whole dollars and a number of cents (in this sub-section referred to as the “relevant number of cents”) then, for the purposes of the application of paragraph 4(b)—

(a) in a case where the relevant number of cents is less than 50—the other amount shall be reduced by the relevant number of cents; or
(b) in any other case—the other amount shall be increased by the amount by which the relevant number of cents is less than $1.

Income Tax Assessment Act [Australia] § 57AF(11), (12) (as quoted in David St. L. Kelly, “Plain English in Legislation,” in *Essays on Legislative Drafting* 57, 58 [David St. L. Kelly ed., 1988]).

That is the type of prose that prompts an oft-repeated criticism: “So unintelligible is the phraseology of some statutes that suggestions have been made that draftsmen, like the Delphic Oracle, sometimes aim deliberately at obscurity.” Carleton K. Allen, *Law in the Making* 486 (7th ed. 1964). See obscurity.

With some hard work, the all-but-inscrutable passage above can be transformed into a straightforward version of only 65 words:

If either of the following amounts is not in round dollars, the amount must be rounded off to the nearest dollar (or rounded up to the next whole dollar if the amount is 50 cents or more):

(a) the amount of the motor-vehicle-depreciation limit; or
(b) the amount that would have been the motor-vehicle-depreciation limit if the amount had equaled or exceeded $18,000.

Revision based on that of Gavin Peck (quoted in Kelly at 59).

Few would doubt that the original statute is unplain and that the revision is comparatively plain. True, to comprehend the revision, the reader must understand what a “motor-vehicle-depreciation limit” is, but some things can be stated only so simply.

But shouldn’t learned professionals be allowed complex verbiage? That is, shouldn’t they express themselves in more sophisticated ways than nonprofessionals do?

These questions need serious answers because they present the most serious impediment to the
plain-language movement. There are essentially four answers.

First, those who write in a difficult, laborious style risk being unclear not only to other readers but also to themselves. Because writing reflects thinking, if your thinking is obscure and convoluted your prose will be, too. And you’ll be less likely to appreciate the problems that are buried under such convoluted prose.

Second, obscure writing wastes readers’ time—a great deal of it, when the amount is totaled. An Australian study conducted in the 1980s found that lawyers and judges take twice as long deciphering legallyistically worded statutes as they do plain-language revisions. See Law Reform Commission of Victoria, *Plain English & the Law* 61–62 (1987). The same is surely true in other fields as well.

Third, simplifying is a higher intellectual attainment than complexifying. Writing simply and directly is hard work, and professionals ought to set this challenge for themselves. In fact, the hallmark of all the greatest stylists is precisely that they have taken difficult ideas and expressed them as simply as possible. No professional could do it, and most specialists can’t do it. Only extraordinary minds are capable of the task. Still, every writer—brilliant or not—can aim at the mark.

Fourth, the very idea of professionalism demands that writers not conspire against nonspecialists by adopting a style that makes their writing seem like a suffocating fog. We should continually ask ourselves how the culture stacks up when we consider the durable truth expressed by Richard Grant White: “As a general rule, the higher the culture, the simpler the style.”

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B. A Plain-Language Library. Those wishing to consult further sources in the field may find the following books helpful:


**plainly.** See clearly.

**plan.** See *preplan.*

**plane geometry**—so written—is sometimes mistakenly made *plain geometry.* E.g.: “Unlike most suckers, I never had to take plain [read plane] geometry or trig.” Gary Dunlop, “Blame It on X-Factor, Eh,” *Toronto Sun*, 15 May 1997, at 6.

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- *plain geometry for plane geometry*: Stage 1
  - Current ratio (plane geometry vs. *plain geometry*): 42:1

**planetarium** (= [1] a model of the solar system, or [2] a building or room for projecting images of the solar system), a word dating from the early 18th century, has predominantly made the plural *planetariums* since about 1800. But the Latinate plural *planetaria* has always been a rival, especially in BrE. In AmE, the decided preference today is for *planetariums.*

**plantain** (= [1] a popular garden plant with broad leaves spread close to the ground; or [2] a type of banana or banana plant) is pronounced /plan-tin/, not /plan-tain/ or /plan-tayn/.

**plantar fasciitis** (= inflammation and soreness of the bottom of the foot) is so spelled. Plantar derives from the Latin word *planta*, meaning “the sole of the foot.” The *fascia* [L. “a band or sash”] is the thin layer of tissue that encases or connects muscles, organs, and bones. There are fasciae (that’s the predominant plural, although *fascias* also exists) throughout the body. Literally, *fascitis* is the inflammation (-itis) of the *fascia*.

The phrase is pronounced /plan-tar fash-i-tis/ or (less well) /fay-shee-i-tis/. Some people blur the middle syllables of *fasciitis*, making it /fash-i-tis/, but this indistinct pronunciation probably accounts for misspellings—and so is to be avoided.

Not surprisingly, the phrase is often misspelled. Sometimes *plantar* becomes *planter*—e.g.: “Camby suffers from *planter* [read *plantar*] fasciitis.” Frank Isola, “Skidding Knocks Look Lost,” *Daily News* (N.Y.), 12 Nov. 2001, at 67. At other times, *fasciitis* loses one of its medial vowels because of the common mispronunciation—e.g.: “Francis . . . has been suffering from *plantar fasciitis* [read *fasciitis*] in his left foot.” Elliott Teaford, “Clipper Report,” *L.A. Times*, 26 Nov. 2001, at D13. And sometimes the whole phrase is mangled, with a superfluous possessive to boot (and boot hard)—e.g.: “She also developed *planter’s fasciitis* [read *plantar fasciitis*], a painful strain on the bottom of the foot.” “The Goal Is to Tri,” *Herald Am.* (Syracuse), 30 July 2000, at AA1.

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- *plantar fasciitis* misspelled in various ways: Stage 2
• “Now he will be off his feet for a while after surgery for planter’s wart.” Reid Hanley, “Season Too Short for Fremd’s Ridge,” Chicago Trib., 29 July 1998, at 5.

It doesn’t help that planter and planter are homophones: both are pronounced /plan-tәr/.

This example of folk etymology was first noted by Robert L. Chapman in 41 Am. Speech 238 (1966). For the etymology of planter, see plantar fasciitis. For more on folk etymology, see etymology (d).

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\textit{planter wart} mistakenly written

*planter’s wart: Stage 1
Current ratio: 17:1

\textit{plasterically} is the adverb corresponding to \textit{plastic}, adj. But some writers misspell it \textit{plasticly}, maybe on the analogy of \textit{publicly}—e.g.: “Then the boys escape and begin to track down Wolf’s long-lost brother, who lives out West in a strange colony of die-hard TV fans who have been \textit{plasticly} altered to resemble Captain Kirk, the Honeymoons, Perry Mason and so on.” Carolyn See, “Improvising a Brave New Nuked World,” L.A. Times, 1 June 1987, § 5, at 4. See -ic.

\textit{plasterically} misspelled *\textit{plasticly}: Stage 1
Current ratio: 391:1

\textit{plateful}. Pl. \textit{platefuls}, not *\textit{platesful}. See pluralis (g).
Current ratio: 63:1

\textit{platitude; plaudit}. A \textit{platitude} is a cliché statement—especially one that is expressed as if it were fresh and insightful <his speech was full of platitudes such as “Keep your chin up!”>. A \textit{plaudit} is an expression of praise or congratulation <as mayor, she won the plaudits of environmentalists and developers alike>.


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\textit{platitude} misused for \textit{plaudit: Stage 1
Current ratio (received plaudits vs. \textit{received platitudes): 47:1

\textbf{platus}. Pl. \textit{platypuses}. As one writer warns: “Don’t expect platypus spotting to be a close-up, cuddly affair. Platypuses (never platadi) are shy and elusive.” Sue Neales, “In Pursuit of the Platypus,” The Age, 2 Nov. 1996, at 3. Although H.W. Fowler and other respected usage commentators have always promoted the native-grown plural, writers sometimes go astray—e.g.:

• “How do you even start to invent a fractured, empty soul for your generation while there are kangaroos and duck-billed \textit{platy} [read \textit{platypuses}] boinging past your window?” Bruno Maddox, “Australia: Not That Boring,” N.Y. Times, 23 Feb. 1997, § 7, at 11.


• “\textit{Platyp} [read \textit{Platypuses}]” were disheartened in an attempt to show that they were fakes. We now know that \textit{platypi} [read \textit{platypuses}] are indeed real animals and can explain their odd characteristics in the light of what we now know about the unique evolution of the animal life of the Australian land mass.” Ian Marsh, Theory and Practice in Sociology 16 (2014).

Even if the first example was intended to be jocular, the humor would not have been diminished by the doubly alliterative -\textit{puses} form.

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*\textit{platy} for \textit{platypuses}: Stage 1
Current ratio (\textit{platypuses} vs. *\textit{platypi}): 23:1

\textbf{plaudit}. See \textit{platitude}.

\textbf{plausible}. So spelled—not *\textit{plausible}. See -able (a).

\textbf{playwriting; \textit{playwrighting}}. The second, a corrupt form of the first, is lamentably common—e.g.:


• “Kist said \textit{playwriting} [read \textit{playwriting}] is a way for her to communicate her ideas.” Melissa Hollandier, “Festival Brings Playwright’s Words to Life,” Daily Herlad (Chicago), 18 Apr. 2003, Neighbor §, at 1.


See spelling (a). For a similar error, see \textit{copyright}.

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*\textit{playwrighting} for \textit{playwriting}: Stage 1

\textbf{pleaded; *pled; plead} (as a past tense). \textit{Plead} has always been the predominant past-tense and past-participial form. From the early 1600s, \textit{pleaded} has appeared much more frequently in print sources than its rivals. Commentators on usage have long preferred it, pouring drops of vitriol onto *\textit{has plead} and *\textit{has pleaded}:
• “Pléad, sometimes wrongly used as the pret. of plead. The correct form is pleaded.” John F. Genung, Outlines of Rhetoric 324 (1893).

• “Say, ‘He pleaded guilty’ (not ‘pled’ or ‘plead’).” Sherwin Cody, Dictionary of Errors 118 (1905).

• “Careful speakers use pleaded.” Frank H. Vizetelly, A Desk-Book of Errors in English 167 (1906).

• “The past tense is pleaded. The use of pled or plead is colloquial.” C.O. Sylvester Mawson, Style-Book for Writers and Editors 178 (1926).

• “These past tense forms [plead and pled] are by some authorities condemned as entirely incorrect, and by others classified as colloquial. The correct past tense of please is pleaded, as ‘He pleaded illness as an excuse.’” Maurice H. Weseen, Crowell’s Dictionary of English Grammar and Handbook of American Usage 470 (1928).

• “The surely correct forms of the verb to please in the past tense and past participle are pleaded, has pleaded. Colloquially, plead and pled are used as the past tense.” Clarence Stratton, Handbook of English 245 (1940).

• “Plead is the approved past tense of plead. Thus: He pleaded (not ‘pled’ or ‘plead’) not guilty.” Alexander M. Witherspoon, Common Errors in English and How to Avoid Them 135 (1943).

• “The past and p.p. are pleaded. Pled is now colloq. or dial. (or Sc.).” Margaret Nicholson, DAEU at 427.

The problem with these strong pronouncements, of course, is that *pled* and *plead* have gained some standing in AmE, as the Evanses noted in the 1950s (although they mentioned only *pled*): “In the United States pleaded and pled are both acceptable for the past tense and for the past participle. In Great Britain only the form *pleaded* is used and *pled* is considered an Americanism” (DCAU at 372).

Indeed, *pled*, dating from the 16th century, is nearly obsolete in BrE, except as a dialectal word. Nor is it considered quite standard in AmE, although it is a common variant in legal usage—e.g.: “For his part, Igusa has pled [read pleaded] not guilty and could not be reached for comment.” “A Nest of Software Spies?” Business Week, 19 May 1997, at 100. It is less common outside legal writing, but it still shows up—e.g.: “I didn't mean anything—hey, are you okay? Don’t cry, Bella; he pled [read pleaded].” Stephanie Meyer, Eclipse 479 (2007).

Still, pleaded, the vastly predominant form in both AmE and BrE, is always the best choice—e.g.:


• “Many an interviewer has asked, begged and unsuccess- fully pleaded with him to come clean and reveal his name.” Aldore Collier, “Sinbad Talks About His Divorce, Single Parenthood and His Real Name,” Ebony, June 1997, at 84.

• “Abelardo Rojas, who ran Bustamante’s stash houses in New York, got caught, was extradited, and pleaded guilty.” Jeffrey Robinson, The Takedown 231 (2011).

The spelling *plead* as a past tense (for *pled*) appeared in the 18th century, apparently on the analogy of read > read. (Cf. lead.) If one needed a dialectal past tense, though, *pled* is surely the better choice because it can't be mistaken as a present-tense verb—but better yet (of course) is pleaded. E.g.:


• “Kaczynski, who was not present at Friday's hearing, has pled [read pleaded] not guilty to a 10-count indictment alleging that he was responsible for four bombings, including two fatal blasts in Sacramento.” Mental Defense Faces Challenge, Times Union (Albany), 1 Nov. 1997, at A2.

• “Finally, there is the case law allowing a defendant who has pled [read pleaded] guilty to a drink driving charge to argue special reasons, including ‘laxed drinks’ in mitigation of sentence.” Niamh Nic Daeid, Fifty Years of Forensic Science 112 (2010).

See irregular verbs (b).
plectra since the 18th century—though the home-grown plural plectrums began striking a chord in the 1990s.

Current ratio: 3:1

*pled. See pleaded.

pledgeable. So spelled.

pledgor; pledger; *pledgeor. The most logical spelling is pledger, not pledgor or *pledgeor—and pledger is 20 times as common as pledgor in AmE journalistic writing. But in legal contexts, pledgor is 50 times as common as pledger, largely because it is the regular correlative of pledgee. That spelling also predominates in books printed throughout the world. See mute e.

Current ratio (pledgor vs. pledger vs. *pledgeor in World English): 156:44:1

plenary (/plee-na-ree/ or /plen-a-ree/) is a formal word for full, complete, or entire. E.g.:

• "It is an axiom of the criminal law, in Massachusetts as in Michigan, that judges have plenary power to see that justice is done in their courtrooms." Nanny Trial: Too Lenient?, Detroit News, 12 Nov. 1997, at A12.

• "One of the plenary sessions at a recent meeting of the National Council of Catholic Women addressed environmental concerns." Jeffrey Weiss, "Christians Work to Save Environment," Fresno Bee, 15 Nov. 1997, at B6.

plentitude. So spelled. The word is derived from the Latin plenus "full"—the etymon also for plenary. Unfortunately, through confusion with the word plenty, the misspelling *plentitude (which first appeared in the 18th century) has become common—e.g.:


• "On one hand, the new image of feminine pleasure played into fantasies of sexual plentitude [read plentitude] that have long characterized pornography." Kristen Hatch, "The Sweeter the Kitten the Sharper the Claws," in Bad: Infamy, Darkness, Evil, and Slime on Screen 143, 150 (Murphy Pomerance ed., 2004).


Of course, the phrase a plentitude of can very often be shortened to a simple much or many.

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plentitude misspelled *plentitude. Stage 1

Current ratio: 11:1

plentiful; plenteous. No distinction in meaning being possible, writers should prefer the prevalent modern form, plentiful. Plenteous is archaic and poetic.

*plentitude. See plentitude.

plethora. According to the OED and most other dictionaries, this word refers (and has always referred) to an overabundance, an overfullness, or an excess. The phrase a plethora of is essentially an ornate equivalent of too many—e.g.: "Our electoral politics now is beset with a plethora of [read too many] players and a confusing clutter of messages." Steven E. Schier, "From Melting Pot to Centrifuge," Brookings Rev., 1 Jan. 2002, at 16. But sometimes, when not preceded by the indefinite article, the word is genuinely useful—e.g.:


• "For readers who can’t peruse hundreds of periodicals or read the plethora of short-fiction collections published each year, it offers the opportunity to dive into the current trends and fresh voices that define the modern American short story." Jean Blish Sierrs, "Short Story’ Series Strikes Gold Again," Chicago Trib., 10 Jan. 2002, Tempo §, at 2. (One hopes that the writer intended to suggest that there are too many such collections published each year.)

• "Mr. Daniels has said he plans to streamline cabinet agencies, citing for example their plethora of public-relations shops." Jeanne Cummings & John D. McKinnon, "Bush Budget Focuses on Homeland Defense and Economy," Wall Street J., 10 Jan. 2002, at A14.

Unfortunately, through misunderstanding of the word’s true sense, many writers use it as if it were equivalent to plenty or many. Although W11 seems to countenance this meaning, it is unrecorded in the OED and in most other dictionaries. And it represents an unfortunate degeneration of sense—e.g.:

• "Buffalo may seem like a boring city, but we’ve managed to produce a plethora [read plenty] of famous people, the Goo Goo Dolls, Ani DiFranco, David Boreanaz and now, Chad Murray." Amanda Pendolino, "Chad Murray: Tales from the ‘Creek," Buffalo News, 8 Jan. 2002, at N2.


• "The old policies did not anticipate a plethora [read series or group or lot] of suicide bombers." Letter of Scott Sutherland, "Body Scan," Orlando Sentinel, 10 Jan. 2002. (One suicide bomber is too many—so plethora doesn’t work.)

Phrases such as *a whole plethora of are likewise ill-considered—e.g.: "Then, once you get to the airport ticket counter, there’s a whole plethora [read a whole range or a wide variety] of biometric identifiers you could use to tie the background checks you’ve done to the individuals who present themselves at the ticket counter." Michael O. Hulley, "Secure in High-Tech Future," Boston Globe, 6 Jan. 2002, at F2.

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
The word is pronounced /plɛth-ə-ra/, not /pla-thor-/.

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*a plethora of misused to mean “plenty of”: Stage 1

**pleurisy; *pleuritis.** The first is the ordinary word for inflammation of the lining of the chest cavity. The second is a needless variant used by some in the medical profession.

Current ratio: 4:1

**plexus (= a complex network) forms various plurals.** *Plexuses* is the English plural (preferred). *Plexus* is the Latin plural. And *plexi* is an outright error. See plurals (b) & Hypercorrection (a).

**plow, n. & vb., is the standard spelling in AmE.** *Plough* has been the predominant BrE form since the 18th century.

**plum; plumb.** As well as being the name of a fruit and of the reddish-purple color of that fruit, *plum* is used figuratively as an adjective meaning “desirable,” especially to describe a job (a plum ambassadorship). *Plumb* as an adjectival describes something that is truly vertical (plumb line). Writers sometimes commit a Malapropism by misusing *plumb* for *plum*—e.g.:

- “Mark Golin, the one-time editor of *Maxim* and *Details*, is said to be a top contender to land the *plumb* [read *plum*] job of editing *Rolling Stone*.” Keith J. Kelly, “Golin Is Strong Candidate to Run New *Rolling Stone*,” *N.Y. Post*, 30 Apr. 2002, at 29.


The opposite error also occurs, though less frequently—e.g.: “Accompanying the boats are scores of suspended plaster *plum bobs* [read *plumb bobs*] that look like huge rain drops frozen in flight . . . . *Plum bobs* [read *Plumb bobs*] symbolize security because they stay level, even as a boat tosses in the waves.” Doug McCash, “3 Shows Venture Out of the Gallery Mainstream,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 1 June 2001, Lagniappe §, at 36.

The adjective *plumb*, “perfectly straight, vertical,” by dialectal extension of the “perfectly straight” sense, has come to mean “entirely, wholly” (<1*m plumb tired*). But some writers confuse the spelling by associating it somehow with fruit—e.g.: “Shelley, a 13-week-old springer spaniel, looks plumb tired [read *plumb* tired] during an obedience class at Temple Terrace Recreation Center on Tuesday night.” “Inside,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 16 Jan. 1993, Community Times §, at 1 (photo caption). See Dialect.

*Plumb* is also a verb meaning “to measure depth, esp. of water.” The confusion with *plum* occasionally persists with this sense as well—e.g.: “Her poetry is insightful in a way you might expect from someone who plumbs the depths [read *plumbs the depths*] of emotions and the mind.” Paula Wachowiak, “For Masters of Verse, It’s All Work and Word Play,” *Buffalo News*, 6 Sept. 2000, at D1.

**Language-Change Index**

1. *plumb assignment* for *plum assignment*: Stage 1
   Current ratio (*plumb assignment* vs. *plumb assignment*): 80:1

2. *plum tired* for *plumb tired*: Stage 3
   Current ratio (*plumb tired* vs. *plum tired*): 3:1

3. *plum the depths* for *plumb the depths*: Stage 1

**plurality.** See majority (c).

**Plural Possessives.** See possessives (b).

**Plurals. A. Generally.** Most nouns form their plurals simply by adding -s—thus books, songs, xylophones. But if a word ends with the sound of /l/, /sh/, /ch/, or /z/, the plural is formed by adding -es—thus buses, thrushes, churches, and buzzes. Occasionally, a single final consonant is doubled—thus fez makes fezzes.

Several exceptions exist in words derived from Old English, such as *child—children, foot—feet, goose—geese, louse—lice, man—men, mouse—mice, ox—oxen, tooth—teeth, woman—women.*

**B. Borrowed Words.** References to this subentry appear throughout this book. That’s not to say that each such term is discussed here but only that the principles governing the words are explained here.

Words imported into the English language from other languages—especially Greek, Latin, French, and Italian—present some of the most troublesome aspects of English plurals. Many imported words become thoroughly naturalized; if so, they take an English plural. But if a word of Latin or Greek origin is relatively rare in English—or if the foreign plural became established in English long ago—then it typically retains its foreign plural. See Garner’s Law.

One reliable guide is this: if in doubt, use the native-English plural ending in -s. That way, you’ll avoid the mistakes involved in Hypercorrection, which is rampant with false foreign plurals (as when people say or write *ignorami* instead of *ignoramuses*). H.W. Fowler called the benighted stab at correctness “out of the frying-pan into the fire” (*FMEU* at 416). Many writers who try to be sophisticated in their use of language make mistakes such as *ignorami* and *octopi*—unaware that neither is a Latin noun that, when inflected as a plural, becomes -i. The proper plural of the Greek word *octopus* is *octopuses;* the proper English plural is *octopuses.*

Those who affect this sort of sophistication may face embarrassing stumbles—e.g.: “A ‘big city’ paper with an editor as eminently qualified as I’m sure you are should know that the plural of *campus* is *campi* (not *campuses*). Just like the plural of *virus* is *viri* (not *viruses*), and the plural of *stadium* is *stadia* (not *stadiums*).” Letter to the Editor, *Dallas Morning News*, 22 Sept. 2002, at J3 (name withheld for obvious reasons). Although *stadia* has some basis as a plural in English
If you’re really stumped by a question of this kind, try looking at the Google Ngram Viewer, which will tell you which one of two or more possible plurals predominates in English-language books.

C. Nouns Ending in -f. Some words change in the plural from a final -f to -ves, but others simply become -fs. Following are the main ones that change:

- beef, beevs (types of meat or complaints)
- dwarf, dwarfs
- handkerchief, handkerchiefs
- kerchief, kerchiefs
- oaf, oats
- proof, proofs
- roof, roofs
- staff, staffs (except in music)

And these are the ones that preferably don’t change:

- beef, beefs
- calf, calves
- elf, elves
- half, halves
- hoof, hooves
- knife, knives
- leaf, leaves
- life, lives
- loaf, loaves

Note, however, that the plural of still life is still lifes.

D. Nouns Ending in -o. No consistent rules are possible for plurals of words ending in -o. But some weak guidelines can be ventured. First, nouns used quite often in the plural tend to end in -oes (embargoes, heroes, noes, potatoes, vetoes). The following plurals ending in -oes are predominant in English:

- archipelago
- buffalo
- calico
- cargo
- esperado
- domino
- embargo
- fresco
- go (a go at it)
- grotto
- hero
- hobo
- innuendo
- magnifico
- mango
- mosquito
- motto
- no
- peccadillo
- portico
- potato
- stucco
- tomato
- tornado

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language-Change Index</th>
<th>(For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l-li.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*).</td>
<td>Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
torpedo  torpedoes  
veto       vetoes     
volcano    volcanoes

Some are close calls. For example, American dictionaries tend to list *peccadilloes* before *peccadillos*, but that term is surely no more naturalized than *banjo* (which forms *banjos*).

Second, alien-looking words (e.g., *imbroglio*), proper names (e.g., *the Florios*—that is, the Florio family), words that are seldom used as plurals (e.g., *bravados*), words in which -o is preceded by a vowel (e.g., *portfolios*), and shortened words (e.g., *photo*) typically don’t take the -e-. Among the many plurals that don’t have an -e- before the pluralizing -s are these:

- albino  embryos
- arpeggio  folios
- avocado  gzebos
- cameo  mementos
- crescendo  piccolos
- curio  tuxedos
- dynamo
- quixotic
- soliloquy

Good dictionaries contain the preferred spellings. If it’s possible to cite a trend, the plurals with -e- seem very slightly on the decline. But it’s a slow, weak trend.

E. Nouns Ending in -y. If a word ends in a -y preceded by a vowel, the plural is formed by adding an -s—e.g.:

- alloy, alloys  money, moneys
- chimney, chimneys  monkey, monkeys
- donkey, donkeys  moray, morays
- journey, journeys  osprey, ospreys

But if a word ends in a -y that isn’t preceded by a vowel, the plural is formed by omitting the -y and substituting -ies—e.g.:

- bankruptcy, bankruptcies  pony, ponies
- guily, gullies  story, stories
- mercy, mercies  sty, sties
- opportunity, opportunities  supply, supplies

There are two exceptions in the second category. First are proper names: *Bushy* becomes *Bushys*, *Kingsly* becomes *Kingslys*, and so on. (See (f).) Second are words ending in -quy: *coloquy* becomes *coloquies*, and *soliloquy* becomes *soliloquies*.

Writers err especially by treating words in the first category as if they belonged in the second—e.g.:

F. Proper Names. Although few books on grammar mention the point, proper names often cause problems as plurals. The rule is simple: most take a simple -s, while those ending in -s, -x, or -z, or in a sibilant -ch or -sh, take -es. Thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular Form</th>
<th>Plural Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Adams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adams</td>
<td>Adameses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>Bushes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>Churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox</td>
<td>Coxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>Flowerses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>Joneses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levy</td>
<td>Levys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lipschutz</td>
<td>Lipschutzes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabiey</td>
<td>Rabieys (the -j is silent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shapiro</td>
<td>Shapiro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinz</td>
<td>Sinzes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Thomases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Plurals such as these are often erroneously formed by calling, say, Mr. and Mrs. Sinz *the Sinz, *the Sinz*, or *the Sinzes*. The last two forms, with apostrophes, merely result from confusion with possessives—and not even good possessives: the correct possessive is Sinz’s in the singular and Sinzes’ in the plural. See PUNCTUATION (A) & POSSESSIVES (B).

Otherwise well-schooled people have a hard time with names that end in -s. The Flowers couple really should be known as the *Flowerses*—that’s the only known plural that any traditional English grammar would countenance. When in February 2003 *The New York Times* ran a big article on the Jukes clan, the *Times* correctly (and repeatedly) referred to the family as the *Jukeses*—e.g.: “Now new information about the *Jukeses* has been found in archives at the State University of New York at Albany.” Scott Christianson, “Bad Seed or Bad Science?” *N.Y. Times*, 8 Feb. 2003, at A19. But the article also cited an 1877 book erroneously titled *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pau- perism, Disease, and Heredity*. To the list of evils in that title, the 19th-century author might have added “poor editing.”

G. Compound Nouns. Certain compound nouns and hyphenated terms make their plurals by adding -s to the main word—e.g.:

- aides-de-camp  knights-errant
- battles royal  maids of honor
- brothers-in-law  men-of-war
- commanders-in-chief  mothers-in-law
- consuls general  notaries public
- courts-martial  poets laureate
- editors in chief  postmasters general
- fathers-in-law  rights-of-way
- hangers-on  sergeants-at-arms
- heirs presumptive  sisters-in-law
- holes in one

The American and British practices differ on the method of pluralizing *attorney general*. See *attorney general*. See also POSTPOSITIVE ADJECTIVES.

A term in which the noun is more or less disguised adds -s at the end, as with all compounds ending in -ful:
A few phrases fall into this category, such as cul-de-sacs (see (b)) and Johnny-come-latelies.

But when the addition is merely a preposition, the -s- is added internally, as in hangers-on, listeners-in, lookers-on (more typically onlookers, lyings-in, and passersby).

H. Differentiated Forms. Despite the exceptional forms mentioned in (A)—the ones deriving from Old English (e.g., foot–feet)—in one instance there is an exception to the exception. When louse refers to a scoundrel or cad, the plural is always louses. See mouse.

I. Acronyms and Abbreviations. In general, form the plural of an acronym or initialism merely by adding -s with no apostrophe: CEO, CEOs; FAO, FAQs; IPO, IP0s; PC, PCs; PIN, PINs; POW, POWs; and so on. (But see (1).) This style, consistent with the overall modern trend toward simplicity, also applies where the short form ends in a sibilant sound <IMAXs> <MASHs> <SOSs>. Cf. dates (d).

There are two practical reasons for this preference. First, the acronym or initialism may also be used as a possessive—a form that does require an apostrophe—so the apostrophe should distinguish the two forms <the CEO’s schedule> <NASA’s budget>. Second, using an apostrophe to form a plural is one of the most common and persistent spelling errors, especially with names (as when someone erroneously refers to *the Bingham’s instead of [correctly] to the Binghams). Using apostrophes to form plurals of these short forms encourages that error.

Still, apostrophes are sometimes necessary. They are traditionally used with abbreviations containing capital letters and periods <M.B.A.’s>. They are needed to avoid confusion where the form uses lowercase letters <gif’s>. See (1).

Abbreviations—as distinguished from acronyms—usually form the plural by adding -s before the period <paras. = paragraphs> <assocs. = associates>. Some abbreviations, especially in citations, are formed by doubling one of the prominent letters in the word <exx. = examples> <MSS. = manuscripts> <pp. = pages>. Abbreviations of measurement generally do not change form <2 in.> <40 mi.>

As with POW and WMD, even if the first word is the main noun in the spelled-out form (prisoner of war, weapon of mass destruction), and the spelled-out version would pluralize that noun (prisoners of war, weapons of mass destruction), the abbreviated plural is nevertheless formed with -s at the end of the abbreviation (POWs, WMDs). A few writers mistakenly use the singular form as if the plural were internally understood—e.g.: "With it comes the end, I hope, of the hoopla and parades of the three POW [read POWs] that wandered aimlessly into enemy territory and were taken as prisoners for a few days." Letter of Violet Fredericks, Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 20 June 1999, A16.

Using RBI as a plural form (meaning "runs batted in") isn’t usual, but it does sometimes ill-advisedly appear—e.g.:

- "Jeter . . . is hitting .233 (10-for-42) in the postseason with no homers and only three RBI [read RBIs]." Jeff Horrigan, "Jeter’s Short at Plate," Boston Herald, 30 Oct. 2001, at 90.
- "Dave McGrath got the win, three hits, three RBI [read RBIs], scored three runs and went deep." Kevin Callanan, "Sun and Fun Senior Softball League," Orlando Sentinel, 5 Dec. 2001, at 8. (That sentence also illustrates both a lack of parallelism and an odd anticlimax.)
- "His bat came alive in the postseason, when he was 8-for-19 with three doubles, a triple and three RBI [read RBIs]." Tony Jackson, "Reds Acquire Pirates Pitcher," Cincinnati Post, 21 Dec. 2001, at B3.

J. Mass (Noncount) Nouns. A recent trend in the language is to make plurals for mass nouns—i.e., general and abstract nouns that cannot be broken down into discrete units and that therefore should not have plural forms. One example of this phenomenon is the psychologists’ and sociologists’ term behaviors (= actions), suggesting that the ways in which people behave are readily categorizable and therefore countable. Granted, one can have good or bad behavior, but not, traditionally speaking, a good behavior or a bad behavior. This is jargon.

Increasingly, though, speakers of English think of technologies and methodologies as being discrete things. And to weather forecasters, it makes perfect sense to speak of humidities and accumulations. In part, this trend seems to show two things: first, an affection for abstract terms; and second, a resulting tendency to reify those abstract terms. See count nouns and mass nouns.

K. Numbers and Decades. The modern trend is to form the plural of numbers and decades by adding -s with no apostrophe <par 4s> <the 2010s>. Some publication styles, notably that of The New York Times, still use the -s form with decades <the 1990’s>. But the reason for that newspaper’s unusual style does not apply to most writers: "Many publications omit such apostrophes, but they are needed to make . . . all-cap headlines intelligible and are therefore used throughout the paper for consistency." New York Times Manual of Style and Usage 261–62 (1999).

L. Words and Letters. The best way to form the plural of a word used as a word is to italicize it and append -s in roman type <trim the number of ofs to

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tighten prose. With letters, too, that approach usually works best <roll call was up to the Hs> <mind your ps and qs>. If italic type is unavailable, the apostrophe may be unavoidable <straight As> <no if’s, and’s, or but’s>. And to some writers, when the letter to be pluralized is s, the apostrophe may be irresistible <a straightforwardly followed by a series of Ss>. But two points bear emphasis. First, avoid the apostrophe if possible because its use as an incorrect plural form is so widespread that any use at all encourages error. Second, if despite that advice you do use the apostrophe to form the plural of one word or letter, use it the same way with plural words and letters elsewhere in the document to keep your style consistent.

M. Plural Possessives. See possessives (b).

plus, n., forms the plural pluses in AmE and BrE alike—preferably not *plusses.
ply (= fold) forms the plural plies. *Plys is incorrect. See plurals (e).
p.m. See a.m.
pneumonic. See mnemonic.
pocketful. Pl. pocketfuls—not *pocketsful. See plurals (g).
podcast > podcast > podcast. Avoid *podcasted.
podia. See podium.
podial. See pediatric.
podiatry. See *chiropr. 
podium = (1) a low wall serving as an architectural foundation; (2) a raised platform that a speaker or orchestra conductor stands on; dais; or (3) a stand for holding a speaker’s notes; lectern. Sense 3, once widely condemned as a misuse, has become commonplace. Holding a speaker’s notes; lectern. Sense 3, once widely used by orchestra conductors and others as a stand for various purposes other than holding notes—holding a speaker’s notes; lectern. Sense 3, once widely condemned as a misuse, has become commonplace.

podcast. Avoid *podcasted.
pod. See podium.
podium. See Fußteil.

Pointing words point or point to something. Pointing words may also refer to a phrase, clause, or sentence: ‘He had always had his own way, and this made him a poor roommate.’”The company trains their salesmen in their own school. This [more formally: This practice] assures them a group of men with the same sales methods.”’

1950) (bracketed language in original). Perrin's notation in his second example accurately describes the difference between this and this practice: it is a question of formality, not of correctness.

Actually, the grammarians' rule against vague reference is just that—a rule that forbids ambiguities of the kind illustrated here: "The most important activity is the editing of a college newspaper. This has grown with the college." (Ex. drawn fr. Richard Summers & David L. Patrick, College Composition 129 (1946).) What has grown with the college? Editing? The newspaper? The importance of editing the college newspaper? You simply cannot tell what the writer intended—if indeed the writer knew.

What the writer needs is a sensitivity to antecedents, whether explicit or implicit. Good writers routinely use pointing words to refer to something that, although clear, is less specific than a particular noun. Often the this or that functions as a summarizing word and means, essentially, "what I've just said"—e.g.:

• "As a language [English] is highly unified; more so than many tongues spoken by a far smaller number of people. This raises the question of the probable future of English." Albert H. Markwardt, American English 170 (1958).

• "Kanemaru and Takeshita have come so close to differing publicly in recent months that some analysts believe an open split may be only a question of time. This, however, overlooks the historical relationship between the two men." C. Smith, "Splitting Headache," Far Eastern Econ. Rev., 31 May 1990, at 15.

• "Over the past several weeks government bonds have recovered about half the ground they lost as interest rates rose earlier this year. That has evidently prompted money managers at investing institutions to pump some of their large cash reserves into stocks." "Prices Retreat for 3rd Session," Mainichi Daily News, 9 June 1990, at 5.

• "The Puritan hatred of Laud was well nigh insane. A leading MP speaks of the 'wicked tenets' of his Arminianism. This because the poor Archbishop believed in free will." A.L. Rowe, "Civil War Revisited," Fin. Times (Weekend), 27–28 Apr. 1991, at xvii.

• "By this fall, the Hollywood gossip was that Miramax might suffer huge losses on 'Gangs,' but Weinstein denies this." Ken Auletta, "Beauty and the Beast," New Yorker, 16 Dec. 2002, at 65, 69.

The test for knowing when the word this is acceptable in such a context is this: ask yourself, This what? If an answer comes immediately to mind, the word this is probably fine. If none comes immediately to mind, you probably need to add a noun. But a word of warning: inserting an abstract noun or noun phrase such as fact, idea, practice, or state of affairs often mars the style.

For a related problem with the relative pronoun which, also a pointing word, see remote relatives.

B. This vs. that. It isn't easy to explain precisely when to use the pointing word this and when to use that, or when to use the plural these and when to use those. Essentially this connotes proximity and immediacy in relation to the speaker or writer <this hat on my head>, while that connotes some distance and remove <that hat over there>. The difference can be quite subtle, and often either word works as well as the other.

point in time. This phrase, well known as mere verbiage, occurs most commonly in reported speech. But sometimes it sneaks into print—e.g.:

• "Corzine says the proposals would add only an extra $60 billion to federal spending when fully implemented, a point in time [read time] even he concedes may never come." Charles Stile & Jeff Pillets, "McCain, Giuliani and Franks Attack Corzine," Record (N.J.), 2 Nov. 2000, at A16.

• "At some point in time [read point], the family moved to Oklahoma City." "Jane Elizabeth Good Eckroat" (obit.), Daily Oklahoman, 6 June 2001, at D8.

• "Although still just sticks at this point in time [read point], roses will soon reward with new foliage and flowers." Judy Sharpe, "Time to Come Up Roses," Newcastle Herald, 9 June 2001, at 17.

The clumsy phrase is occasionally made worse by being preceded by particular. Stick with a simple substitute such as time, point, now, moment, and the like.

point of fact. See fact (b).

point of view. See viewpoint.

point out; point to; point up. Point out = to call attention to <she pointed out the four withering geraniums> <he pointed out the health benefits of eating lots of vegetables>. Point to = to direct attention to (as an answer or solution) <they could point to no good reason for closing the facility>. Point up = to illustrate <this case points up a key pitfall of the prosecutors' seeking capital punishment>.

poky; pokey. Poky, adj., = (1) inactive, sluggish, slow <the poky golfers in front of us>; (2) cramped and uncomfortable <a poky lecture hall>; or (3) badly dressed, shabby <the poky teenage styles of the 1990s>. Pokey, n., is a casualism meaning "jail."

pole. See poll.

poleaxe. So spelled—preferably not *poleax. See ax.

Current ratio: 2:1

policemn, n.; polemical, adj. Although polemic can be an adjective as well as a noun, it is better confined to noun uses <a long-winded polemic>. Reserve polemical for the adjectival uses <polemical writings>.

police, though a collective noun, is generally construed as a plural both in AmE and in BrE <the police aren't here yet>. The word is pronounced /pə-ˌliːz/—not /pə-ˌleez/. See pronunciation (b).

police officer. See sexism (c).
policy; politly. "Policy, by far the more common word, means "a concerted course of action followed to achieve certain ends; a plan." It is more restricted in sense than politly, which means (1) "the principle upon which a government is based"; or (2) "the total governmental organization as based on its goals and policies." Sense 2 is more usual—e.g.: "[Here is] what Therese perceives to be the problem: excessive tolerance and liberal hand-wringing by a politly too faint to punish and hold accountable those who daily erode a sense of safety and well-being for the majority of citizens in our small metropolis." Jere W. Chapman, "View from the Streets," Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 31 Aug. 1997, at A23.

category holder; *category owner. Category holder is preferably spelled as one word. *Category owner is a needlessly variant.

category-making should be hyphenated. See decision-making.

*category owner. See category holder.

Political Correctness today primarily refers to the phenomenon of stifling views and attitudes contrary to those of the enlightened intelligentsia of the left, especially as regards social and political issues. It is a kind of planned intolerance for the expression of ideas that run counter to liberal orthodoxies. One sees it in language, when a vocal minority insists on the avoidance of certain terminology considered discriminatory or offensive, and especially insists on the use of euphemisms and doublespeak; in debate, when contrarian views are excoriated for their very utterance; and in everyday life, when the timid refuse to express an idea in any but the most anodyne way. A host of new sensitivities have been launched: ableism, ageism, lookism, sizeism, weightism, and the like.

Of course, the phrase politically correct in its modern application was originally intended as a kind of self-mocking oxymoron, since political views by their nature cannot be "correct" or "incorrect." Surprisingly, the phrase dates back to the 1930s, but it wasn't until the late 1980s that the idea spread and came into vogue. The abbreviation PC or P.C. spread with equal rapidity.

In all social arguments in which not just public intellectuals but also propagandists become embroiled, words and phrases get distorted as accusations and counteraccusations are hurled by one side against the other. Meaningful debate can become impossible. Even the phrase political correctness sometimes seems to lose all meaning.

For two entries in which the question of political correctness is at the fore, see anchor baby and illegal immigrant.

*politicize. See politicize.

politically; politly. Politically (/pa-lit-i-klee/) = in a political way; in a way that involves politics. Politly (/pol-i-tik-le/) = in a politic (i.e., judicious or prudent) way. The latter, of course, is much less common—e.g.: "Is that a duck or a cormorant?" Bruce Babbitt asked, resting his paddle on his chino-covered leg, looking at a distant water bird. 'We have both,' raft guide Katy Strand told him politicly. Peter Bacque, "Babbitt Links Cleaner James to Federal Law," Richmond Times-Dispatch, 19 Oct. 1995, at B1. Cf. impolitic.

politicize; *politicize. The first is standard. It means (1) "to talk about or engage in politics"; or (2) "to make (something) political or to make (a person, group, or the like) politically aware or active." *Politicize, a needlessly variant, is less than 1% as frequent. But it does occur—e.g.: "This incident demonstrates the ability of special interest groups to politicize [read politicize] the research funding process." Tammy L. Lewis & Lisa A. Vincler, "Storming the Ivory Tower," 20 J. College & Univ. Law 417, 460 n.149 (1994). See politick.

Language-Change Index
*politicize for politicize: Stage 1 Current ratio (politicize vs. *politicize): 301:1

politic, v.i.; politicize. Politick, a back-formation from politics, was formerly disparaged as a nonword. But today it is fully accepted as meaning "to engage in partisan political activities." Politize has the similar sense "to act the politician," but also the broader sense "to render political" <politicizing judicial elections>.

politically. See politically.

politics may be either singular or plural. Today it is more commonly singular than plural <politics is a dirty business>, although formerly the opposite was true. As with similar -ics words denoting disciplines of academics and human endeavor, politics is treated as singular when it refers to the field itself <all politics is local> and as plural when it refers to a collective set of political stands <her politics were too mainstream for the party's activists>. Cf. semantics.

polity. See policy.

poll (= [1] the place where one votes in an election, [2] the number of votes recorded in an election, or [3] a survey conducted to gauge candidates' support in a campaign) is sometimes confounded with its homophone pole (= [1] a long stick or post, [2] the northernmost or southernmost point on a planet, [3] one of two opposite ideas or beliefs, or [4] one of two points at the ends of a magnet or battery). E.g.:


polyandry. See polygamy.
polyarchy (= a democratic political structure with no entrenched majority but equally contesting minorities) is sometimes confused as meaning "a group of states" or something less clear—e.g.: "Looking to the future, Brown sees a world in which superpower bipolarity, the cohesion of alliances and the sovereignty of states have all eroded, moving the world toward a system of 'polyarchy' with new problems and challenges." John C. Campbell, "New Forces, Old Forces and the Future of World Politics," Foreign Affairs, Summer 1988, at 1114. See governmental forms.

polygamy; polyandry; polygyny. The first is the broadest term, referring to a person's being simultaneously married to more than one spouse. Polyandry is the practice of having more than one husband; polygyny is the practice of having more than one wife. See bigamy.

Polygamy is pronounced /pa-ly-ga-mi/. Polyandry is pronounced /pol-ee-an-dree/ or /pol-ee-an-dree/. Polygyny is pronounced /pa-lij-a-nee/.

polygraph. Although polygraph is pronounced /pol-ee-graf/, the related forms are pronounced quite differently: polygraphy /pa-li-gra-fe/, polygrapher /pa-li-graf-er/, polygraphic /pol-ee-graf-ik/. The pronunciations are analogous to those involving photograph and its cognates.

polygyny. See polygamy.

pomace (= [1] the residue left after squeezing the juice out of a fruit, vegetable, fish, etc., or [2] something smashed into a pulpy mass) is pronounced /pom-ee-s/.—not /pom-is/.

pommel; pummel. Pommel should be reserved for the noun meaning "a knob on the hilt of a sword or at the front of a saddle." It commonly appears in the gymnastics phrase pommel horse. Pummel is the preferred spelling of the verb meaning "to hit with, or as with, the fists." The verb derives from the noun: a person sometimes pummelled another with the hilt of a sword, back when that sort of thing was fashionable. Gradually, however, the -u- spelling began to appear—probably because of the word's traditional pronunciation: /pam-əl/ (/pam-əl/ is a variant pronunciation for the noun). Today, pummel is about 15 times as common as the verb pommel in print. The gerund pummeling means "a beating."


pompon; pompon. The decorative tuft of strands used by cheerleaders was originally called by its French name, pompon, which in English dates from the late 19th century. This spelling is still quite common, even preferred in some current dictionaries. E.g.: "In case Red Bone wasn't enough, the Chinese organizers brought in a red-clad cheerleading squad which danced to Latin beat music waving little fans instead of pompoms during breaks." Peter Fimrite, "Jumpin' Cyclists Are Smash in China," S.F. Chron., 22 Aug. 2008, at D8.

But usage has shifted toward pompon in recent years because so many people misheard the word, and because of the linguistic tendency toward reduplicative sounds—e.g.:


Today, the newer form, pompon, is sanctioned both by the AP Stylebook (2008) and by The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage (1999). And pompon outranks pompon by a 4-to-1 ratio in modern journalism and by a 2-to-1 ratio in books. It has been the predominant form only since the 1990s.

Pompon (with the variant spelling pompon) is also a generic name for flowers with small blossoms that resemble the decorative tufts, such as dahlias and chrysanthemums. About as far from that pleasant mental picture as you can get is another definition for the hyphenated pom-pom: an automatic gun or cannon mounted as part of a set (especially pairs), as on a battleship.

**Language-Change Index**

pompon for pompon: Stage 5
Current ratio (pompons vs. pompons): 2:1

ponderous = (1) (of a thing) heavy, slow, awkward, or (2) (of writing or ideas) long and tedious, even impenetrable. The ponder part may hint at meditation, but while heavy thought may be ponderous, ordinary self-reflection is not—e.g.: "I was away at college during his illness, however, and barely got to know that gentler man. It would take many years, and many ponderous [read contemplative] walks, to understand his absence in my life." Sandra Miller, "The Man in the Park," Hartford Courant, 9 June 2002, Northeast §, at 3.

The word is sometimes misspelled without the medial -e-, perhaps on the analogy of wondrous—e.g.: "Such a ponderous [read ponderous] thing is only fit to be buried at the bottom of the sea." Paul Edward Parker,

**Language-Change Index**

1. ponderous misused for contemplative: Stage 1
2. ponderous misspelled *pondrous: Stage 1

Current ratio: 795:1


**Pontius Pilate** is so spelled, but increasingly it is incorrectly written *Pontius Pilot—e.g.:

- “He is no Joan of Arc or Joseph of Arimathea; no Mary Magdalene or Pontius Pilot [read Pontius Pilate]:” Kathleen J. Martin, Indigenous Symbols and Practices in the Catholic Church xv (2013).

Current ratio: 144:1

**populace. A. And population.** Both refer to the human inhabitants of a geographic region. The difference is in connotation: population is a neutral term, while populace suggests the rabbler or common folk—with a rather superior tone.

**B. And populus.** The adjective populous (= heavily populated) is surprisingly often confused with the noun populous—e.g.:

- “And this is how—in part—the body politic will select the governor of the nation’s fourth most populous [read populous] state.” Daniel Ruth, “Say Hello to the Lieutenant of Obscurity,” Tampa Trib., 16 Sept. 2006, Metro §, at 1.

**Language-Change Index**

populace misused for populous: Stage 1

Current ratio (more populous vs. *more populous): 996:1

**populous; populist.** Populous (= thickly populated) for populist (= of, relating to, or involving a movement claiming to represent the whole of the people) is a startling error—e.g.:

- “The advent of the Jacksonian era and its emphasis on democratic populous [read populist] ideals ... promoted ... the notion that ... judges should be popularly elected.” Norman Krivosha, “Acquiring Judges by the Merit Selection Method,” 40 Sw. L.J. 13 (1986).
- “It seems to me that we take this grand populous [read populist] approach when we want to avoid responsibility for that decision,” said South Central Los Angeles member Rita Walters. “The board needs to be the one making the decision. We are the elected officials.” Beth Shuster, “L.A. Board to Vote on Year-Round Plans,” Daily News (L.A.), 30 Jan. 1990, at N1.

**Populist** is also sometimes misused for popular—e.g.: “In the 1992 election, the lines blurred even further, as candidates sought to expand the ways in which they used populist [read popular] media forums, becoming regulars on talk shows, like Larry King’s, usually reserved for authors publicizing books or actors promoting pictures.” Maureen Dowd, “Selling Chips? Or Is It Quayle? It’s All a Blur,” N.Y. Times, 29 Jan. 1994, at 6.

For a similar mistake—*populace for populous*—see **populace (b).**

**porcupine** (the animal with quills) is pronounced /por-k-yә-prin/—not /por-kee-prin/ (a childish pronunciation).

**pore** (= to read intently) is sometimes misspelled pour (= to make [a liquid] flow downward). This blunder occurs in writing not pored over carefully enough by a good proofreader—e.g.:

- “Pouring [read Poring] through the book, one is struck both by [read by both] the warmth and depth of the musicians.” Jeff Bradley, "James Comes into Its Own," Denver Post, 24 Nov. 1996, at G15. On the lack of parallelism there, see both (A).
- “Banking was arguably already the most regulated industry in America. Even at Carver—a small player on a field of financial giants—four government regulators pour [read pore] over our books annually and impose financial controls.” Deborah C. Wright, "A Hit on Harlem, " N.Y. Post, 9 Oct. 2006, at 21.

This mistake probably appears primarily because the verb pore appears less often in print than in speech.

**porpoise.** The standard pronunciation is /porp-әs/, not /por-poyz/ (a spelling pronunciation). Cf. tortoise.

**Porsche** (the car) is acceptably pronounced /porsh/ or /por-shә/.
porte cochère (/port koh-shair/) = (1) a large gateway and passageway that allows vehicles to pass into an inner courtyard; or (2) an overhanging structure, usu. projecting from a building’s entrance, that protects vehicles and their occupants from the elements. Although Margaret Nicholson termed sense 2 “erroneous” (DAEU at 433), it has long been standard AmE. In fact, it’s the primary sense today.

Although the French phrase is written porte cochère, the grave accent is now omitted in AmE. See diacritical marks.

portent (¼ to foretell or foreshadow), like forebode, has negative connotations—e.g.:

• “A Washington Post report from a fishing village near the mouth of the Mississippi River portends more of the same kind of trouble—only this time on an unexpectedly massive scale.” William Snider, “Fish Kills Are Spreading Nationwide,” News & Record (Greensboro), 28 Sept. 1997, at F3.

• “At the end of October the crash of Hong Kong’s stock market seemed briefly to portend a global crash.” “The IMF and Asia,” Economist, 22 Nov. 1997, at 20.

• “Disgustingly graphic yet not specifically threatening expressions may sometimes portend disruption.” Jill Joline Myers et al., Responding to Cyber Bullying 67 (2011).

It’s unwise to try to use the word in neutral or positive senses. Some other verb, such as augur or presage, might suffice, or maybe even a simpler word such as bring—e.g.: “Most medical advances portend [read bring] hope for the sick and the disabled.” Barbara Yost, “No. 7 Proved to Be Lucky in Pregnancy—This Time,” Ariz. Republic, 23 Nov. 1997, at EV2.

portentous (= [1] ominous, prophetic; [2] wondrous; [3] solemn; or [4] self-important, self-consciously somber) is so spelled. But the word is sometimes incorrectly written *portentious* or (less often) *portentous*. E.g.:


• “Most portentious [read portentous] is an article in May’s Esquire magazine by the radio personality and Sinatra expert Jonathan Schwartz, which states the widespread rumour (and half hopes) that the elder Mr. Sinatra, who turns 80 in December, has finally decided to stop performing.” John Marchese, “Owning the Name but Not the Fame,” N. Y. Times, 30 Apr. 1995, § 1, at 45.

• “Given all the portentous [read portentious] state-of-the-world rhetoric that has surrounded the project, the big surprise at the Refugio hearing was how comforting, normal the objections seemed.” Peter Canali, “‘Texans Ponder Where Superhighway Might Take Them,’” Boston Globe, 4 Mar. 2008, at A2.

Dwight Bolinger explains the origin of the error: “Portentious sounds like pretentious, there is a vague association of meaning, and the suffix -tious is more substantial and possibly more frequent than simple -ous, so we begin to get portentious.” Language: The Loaded Weapon 42 (1980).

**Language-Change Index**

1. portentous misspelled *portentious*: Stage 1
   - Current ratio: 104:1

2. portentous misspelled *portentious*: Stage 1
   - Current ratio: 1,630:1

**Portmanteau Words.** Lewis Carroll improvised this term to denote words formed by combining the sounds and meanings of two different words. (Linguists use the term blend.) Carroll gave us chortle (chuckle + snort) and galumph (gallop + triumph). Thus aerobicise derives from aerobic exercise; insinuendo combines insinuation with innuendo; and quasar is from quasi and stellar. Other recent innovations are avigation, from aviation and navigation; pictionary, a picture-filled dictionary; and videobut for video debut.

Most portmanteau words are nonce-words that do not gain currency; others, like brunch (breakfast + lunch), become standard. Among portmanteau coinages are these:

advertorial (advertisement + editorial)
Amerasian (American + Asian)
asylee (asylum + refugee)
breathalyzer (breath + analyzer)
brotel (brothel + hotel)
cockapoo (cocker spaniel + poodle)
defamacast (defamatory + broadcast)
docudrama (documentary + drama)
docudrama (documentary + drama)
documentary (editorial + factual)
edocumentary (editorial + factual)
frenemy (friend + enemy)
futilitarian (futile + utilitarian)
galimony (gal + alimony)
galumph (gloomy + grumpy)
guessestimate (guess + estimate)
infomercial (information + commercial)
jazzercise (jazz + exercise)
jocoserious (jocose + serious)
jadogue (labrador retriever + poodle)
ligger (lion + tiger)
microsexual (metropolitan + heterosexual)
mockumentary (mock + documentary)

**Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, I–II.)**

**Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but . . . . **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but . . . . **Stage 5:** Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
motel (motor + hotel)  
etiquette (Internet + etiquette)  
Oxbridge (Oxford + Cambridge)  
palimony (pal + alimony)  
perma-press (permanent + press)  
quell (quell + squelch) (see *quell)  
radiocast (radio + broadcast)  
simulcast (simultaneous + broadcast)  
slumlord (slum + landlord)  
smog (smoke + fog)  


For a good collection, see Dick Thurner, Portman- 

eu Diary: Blend Words in the English Language, Including Trademarks and Brand Names (1993).

possess. The phrase is possessed of is an old-fashioned phrase meaning “possesses, owns” <they are possessed of three houses>. The phrase is possessed by or is possessed with means “is obsessed by” or “has no control over” (usu. something undesirable, even demonic) <he is possessed by the need to control others> <she is possessed with her desire for food>. Sometimes pos-

sessed of gets dispossessed of its rightful place—e.g.: • “Even though Scott is possessed with [read is possessed of] such a talent, he labored in obscurity until only recently.” Steve Bryant, “Singer’s Voice Among a Pantheon of Great Artists,” Phil. Trib., 14 Nov. 1997, at E3.

• “And, Caruso added, his old friend is possessed with [read is possessed of or, better, has] an uncanny ability to change people’s minds.” Tony Freemantele, “Livingston’s Background Speaks Well,” Houston Chron., 16 Nov. 1998, at 1.

• “He also is possessed with [read is possessed of] an on/off switch and a tremendous grasp of diplomacy.” Steve Buckley, “Love—Hate with Subban,” Boston Herald, 8 May 2014, at 60.

LANGUAGE—CHANGE INDEX  
is possessed with misused for is possessed of: Stage 1  
Current ratio (is possessed of vs. is possessed with): 11:1

possessive; possessory. The terms possessive and pos-

sessor have undergone DIFFERENTIATION. Possessive = (1) exhibiting possession or the desire to possess <she dealt with him in a possessive, domineering way>; (2) [in grammar] denoting possession <a possessive pronoun>. Possessory = (1) of, relating to, or involving a possessor <her possessory rights over the farm>; (2) arising from possession <possessor interest>; or (3) that is a possessor <possessor caretaker>.

POSSESSIVES. A. Singular Possessives. To form a sin-

gular possessive, add -s to most singular nouns—even those ending in -s, -ss, and -x (hence Jones’s, Nicholas’s, witness’s, Vitex’s). E.g.: “Noting Congress’s move to regu-

late maternity hospitalization, managed-care advoca-

tes predict that politicians would legislate health care.” Kent Jenkins et al., “Health Care Politics,” U.S. News & World Rep., 1 Dec. 1997, at 24. The traditional approach of the AP Stylebook (see, e.g., the 1996 6th ed.) was to use nothing more than an apostrophe if the word already ends in -s. In the 2002 edition, the AP editors came up with a hairsplitting rule to use only the apostrophe (no additional -s) for (1) a word that ends in -s if it is followed by a word that begins with s-, and (2) a singular name that ends in -s (pp. 200–01). But most authorities who aren’t newspaper journalists demand the final -s for virtually all singular possessive (e.g., Bill Forbis’s farm, not Bill Forbis’ farm). See the very first rule of William Strunk Jr. & E.B. White, The Elements of Style 1 (3d ed. 1979).

There are four exceptions to this rule. (1) The pos-

sives of personal pronouns do not take apostro-

phes (ours, yours, its, theirs). In particular, the word its is possessive; it’s is the contraction of it is (see its). (2) Biblical and Classical names that end with a /zaz/ or /ezz/ sound take only the apostrophe:

Aristophanes’ plays  
Jesus’ suffering  
Moses’ discovery  
Xerxes’ writings

No extra syllable is added in sounding the posses-

sive form. (3) If a corporate or similar name is formed from a plural word, it takes only the apostro-

phe. Hence General Motors makes General Motors’, not *General Motor’s—e.g.: “A merger by General Motors will excite great interest in an enforcement agency simply because of General Motor’s [read General Motors’] size.” E.W. Kintner, An Antitrust Primer 95 (2d ed. 1973). And United States has always made United States’, not *United States’. (4) According to the traditional rule, a sibilant possessive before sake takes merely an apostrophe, without an additional -s—

hence for appearance sake, for goodness sake, and for conscience sake. See (n).

B. Plural Possessives. For most plural possessives, use the ordinary plural form and add an apostrophe to the final -s. Smith’s, Joneses’, bosses’, octopuses’. The one exception is for plurals not ending in -s, for which -s is added as in the singular possessive: brethren’s, children’s, men’s, women’s.

Writers sometimes confound the singular and plu-

ral possessives, most commonly by misusing the sin-

gular for the plural—e.g.:

• “Asses were ‘generally the property of the poor,’ who used to keep them as beasts of burden and for their milk, which is more nutritious and closer to human milk than cow’s [read cows’] milk is; in the 1750s, some London shops sold ass’s [read asses’] milk, usually under the sign ‘Ass and Foal.’” Tony Fairman, “How the Ass Became a Donkey,” 10 English Today 29, 34 (1994).

• “I don’t much admire the Wales’s [read Wales’s] taste in expensive schools.” Peter Preston, “Good Schooling Is Just
a Passing Fancy," Guardian, 16 June 1995, at 9. (The reference was to the Prince and Princess of Wales.)

- "Arielle found me in the girl's bathroom [read girl's bathroom (because it's a school bathroom)] on the floor, during my math class." Paige Love-Rose, Beauty 106 (2011).

C. Absolute Possessives. The words hers, ours, theirs, and yours are sometimes termed "absolute" or "independent" possessives because they occur when no noun follows. No apostrophe appears in these words, which are often in the predicate <the house was ours> <the fault was theirs>. Sometimes, though, they can occur as subjects <hers was a gift that anyone would envy>. See understood words.

Occasionally, an absolute possessive occurs when it shouldn't—usually in combination with ordinary possessives. E.g.: "If a new relationship breaks up, your teen may feel very protective of you and feel stress about both yours [read your] and his or her vulnerability." Jeff Lindenbaum, "Dating After Divorce?" Seattle Times, 2 Nov. 1994, at E2.

D. Double Possessives. Some people erroneously stigmatize a friend of mine or an acquaintance of John's, in which both an of and a possessive form appear: "The double possessive is redundant, and it should be avoided in careful speech and formal writing. In short, don't be too 'possessive'; i.e., redundant, when indicating possession or ownership in your writing or speech. Form the possessive case by adding an 's or by using the preposition of: Just don't get carried away and do both at the same time." Michael G. Walsh, "Grammatical Lawyer," Practical Lawyer, Jan. 1996, at 12.

But this age-old idiom has appeared consistently since the days of Middle English. And it is widely approved:

- "The double genitive [i.e., double possessive] is required whenever a word indicating ownership is placed after of. For example, he found a bone of the dog's and he found a bone of the dog mean different things; and he found a toy of the child is meaningless." DCAU at 142–43.

- "By an old and well-established English idiom, sometimes called the double genitive, possession may be shown by two methods at the same time, by an of-phrase and by a possessive form of the substantive. 'You are no friend of mine.' [Possession is shown by the prepositional of-phrase and by the possessive form mine.] R.W. Pence & D.W. Emery, A Grammar of Present-Day English 345 (2d ed. 1963).

- "Using both the s- and of- genitives together is an English idiom of long and respectable standing. It is especially common in locutions beginning with that or this and usually has an informal flavor: 'that boy of Henry's'; 'friends of my father's'; 'hobbies of Jack's'. It is useful in avoiding [an] ambiguity: . . . 'Jane's picture' is resolved either as 'the picture of Jane' or 'the picture of Janes.'" Porter G. Perrin, Writer's Guide and Index to English 625 (Karl W. Dykema & Wilma R. Ebbitt eds., 4th ed. 1965).

The double possessive appears in good writing and typically causes no trouble. Occasionally, however, it can be improved on—e.g.: "Many colleagues of Dr. Siegel's [read of Dr. Siegel's colleagues] have said they were shocked by the allegations about a man whom they have long considered to be a reserved, somewhat academic person." Elisabeth Rosenthal, "Hospital Chief Denies Harassing Aide," N.Y. Times, 1 Sept. 1995, at A13.

Of course, the double possessive is impossible to avoid in constructions with personal pronouns <a friend of mine> <that attitude of his>.

E. Joint Possessives: John and Mary's house. For joint possession, an apostrophe goes with the last element in a series of names. If you put an apostrophe with each element in the series, you signal individual possession. E.g.: John and Mary's house. (Joint)

America and England's interests. (Joint)

America and England's interests. (Individual)

In the last two examples, interests is plural (regardless of the possessives) merely as a matter of idiom: we typically refer to America's interests, not America's interest. With pronouns, each element is always possessive <your and his time-share>.

On consecutive pages of a book, Frank Rich gets the rule reversed: "The remainder of the time . . . is devoted to Lawrence Kasha's and David Landay's book [read Lawrence Kasha and David Landay's book]." Frank Rich, Hot Seat 168 (they coauthored it). / "They've also performed radical surgery on Molière and Coward's famous heroes [read Molière's and Coward's famous heroes]." Ibid. at 169 (Molière and Noel Coward never cowrote anything!).

Again: "At times Mr. Levinson's and Mr. Link's script [read Mr. Levinson and Mr. Link's script] threatens to rekindle durable narrative devices from Damn Yankees and Camelot." Frank Rich, Hot Seat 207 (1998) (they coauthored the script). And again: "Ms. Howe takes a specific character's concern—the battle-scared Ariell's hatred of men, Faith's ecstatic anticipation of motherhood, Holly's and Leo's [read Holly and Leo's] growing sexual attraction—and distills it into a concentrate of intoxicating feeling." Ibid. at 499 (the attraction is mutual). Yet again: "To see Hecht's and MacArthur's [read Hecht and MacArthur's] 1928 valentine to the press now, in Jerry Zaks's attractively cast and appropriately slam-bang revival at the Vivian Beaumont, is also to appreciate it as a play." Ibid. at 501 (Hecht and MacArthur were coauthors).

Other reputable writers have likewise been thrown off—e.g.: "Plays of this kind had become very popular on the London stage, with dramas such as Beaumont's and Fletcher's [read Beaumont and Fletcher's] recent Philaster and the revival of the favourite Mucedorus." Peter Ackroyd, Shakespeare 481 (2005) (they were coauthors).
**F. Names as Adjectives.** When a proper name is used as an adjective, it isn’t a possessive and therefore doesn’t take an apostrophe. Hence “the Cubs [not Cubs’] game is at 1:00 today.” The following example incorrectly uses an apostrophe because the name *Fields* (referring to a single person) is being used adjectivally: “One source who attended the fundraiser said it generated at least $50,000 for the Fields’ [read Fields] campaign.” “Scuttlebutt,” Gambit (New Orleans), 14 Nov. 1995, at 8. With a title instead of a name, the apostrophe would be needed <the mayor’s campaign>.

**G. Possessives of Names Made with Possessives.** It is common for businesses to be named with a proper single name in possessive form, such as *McDonald’s*. Although possessive in form, these are functionally nouns, as in *McDonald’s brings you a new kind of meal.* How, then, does one make a possessive of the noun *McDonald’s*? Literally, it would be *McDonald’s’s*, as in *Try McDonald’s’s dinner combos!* But good phrasing requires the *dinner combos* at *McDonald’s*. It is also quite defensible to write *McDonald’s dinner combos* (the name functioning as a kind of possessive) or *the McDonald’s dinner combos* (the name functioning attributively).

**H. Inanimate Things.** Possessives of nouns denoting inanimate objects are generally unobjectionable. They have risen steadily in frequency of occurrence since the late 19th century, perhaps chiefly because they allow writers to avoid awkward uses of of—e.g.: *at day’s end, at the water’s edge, the book’s title, the article’s main point, the system’s hub, the envelope’s contents, the car’s sticker price*. See of (A).

The old line was that it’s better to use an "of phrase rather than the ’s to indicate possession when the possessor is an inanimate object. Write *foot of the bed, not the bed’s foot.*” Robert C. Whitford & James R. Foster, Concise Dictionary of American Grammar and Usage 96 (1955). *Foot of the bed,* of course, is a set phrase, so the example is not a fair one. As a general principle, though, whenever it’s not a violation of idiom, the possessive in’s is preferable <the hotel’s front entrance> <the earth’s surface>.

But such possessives can be overdone. For example, avoid using the possessive form of a year—e.g.: “Mr. Rogers, 41, took the show by storm in 1993, winning 28 blue ribbons and the Show Sweepstakes with a total of 1,120 points (which really upped the ante: 1992’s winner [read the 1992 winner] scored only 387 points).” Anne Raver, “A Big Flower Show One Loves to Hate,” N.Y. Times, 2 Mar. 1995, at B5.

**I. Phrasal Possessives.** Avoid phrasal possessives when possible, so that you don’t end up with sentences like this: “That strange man who lives down the block’s daughter was arrested last week.” (Read: *The daughter of that strange man who lives down the block was arrested last week.*) The form with of, though slightly longer, is correct. Sometimes, too, the sentence can be fixed in some way other than by inserting an of—e.g.: “These statements do let women in on the man in question’s view of our half of humanity.” (Read: *These statements do let women in on how the man in question views our half of humanity.*)

As always, there are exceptions—two of them. With a phrase such as *mother-in-law,* the possessive is acceptable and widely used <my mother-in-law’s sister>. The other established phrasal possessives are variations on *anybody else’s:* “Once alerted, the janitor could find no one else’s umbrella.” See else’s.

**J. Attributive Nouns Ending in -ed.** Words ending in -ed become awkward as possessives. This happens primarily in law. With such phrases as *the insured’s death* and *the deceased’s residence,* it’s better to use an *of-phrase—hence the death of the insured and the residence of the deceased.* (Or you might try the decedent’s residence.) See *insured.*

**K. Possessives Followed by Relative Pronouns.** The relative pronoun *who* stands for a noun; it shouldn’t follow a possessive because the possessive (being an adjective, not a noun) can’t properly be its antecedent. In the sentence that follows, *Esterhazy’s* is a possessive adjective modifying the *understood word voice,* but the writer meant *who* to refer to *Esterhazy:* “Or there may have been inimical voices raised among the committee, such as Palffy’s or Nikolaus Esterhazy’s, *who just then had had an unpleasant brush with the composer.*” George R. Marek, *Beethoven 382* (1969). (Read: *Or inimical voices may have been raised within the committee, such as those of Palffy or Nikolaus Esterhazy. The latter had just had an unpleasant brush with the composer.* The poor grammar in the original sentence raises another question: to whom does the *who* refer—Esterhazy alone, or both Esterhazy and Palffy? The revision assumes that the reference is to Esterhazy alone. Otherwise, the wording would be *both of whom.*

**L. Units of Time or Value.** The idiomatic possessive should be used with periods of time and statements of worth—hence 30 *days’ notice* (i.e., notice of 30 days), *three days’ time, 20 dollars’ worth,* and several *years’ experience.* E.g.:

- “Under Japanese law, 10 judges of the 15-member Supreme Court, the nation’s top court, must be legal experts with at least 10 years experience [read 10 years’ experience].” “Japanese Supreme Court May Soon Seat 1st Woman,” Ariz. Daily Star, 15 Jan. 1994, at A2. In that sentence, of course, it would also be possible to write with at least 10 years of experience.
- “The three fashion-industry veterans with more than 80 years’ experience [read 80 years’ experience] among them were clearly ready for a vacation.” William Kissel, “Fashioning a Home,” *Celebrated Living,* Fall 2002, at 54.

This usage was dealt a real setback in 2002 with the release of the hit movie *Two Weeks Notice* [read *Two Weeks’ Notice*], starring Hugh Grant and Sandra Bullock. It might have been an even bigger hit if the good-usage crowd hadn’t boycotted the movie on principle. Cf. six months pregnant under *pregnant.*

**M. Titles of Books, Films, and the Like.** Do you say *Turabian’s “A Manual for Writers” or Turabian’s “A Manual for Writers”*? The former is correct.
"Manual for Writers"? That is, if you’re introducing a title with a possessive, do you include an article (A or The) that begins the title? Including the article gets the full title of the book, but omitting it seems less stilted. Eric Partridge liked the former phrasing (U&E at 333); others prefer the latter (e.g., Words into Type 136 [3d ed. 1974]). In fact, though, either style is likely to bother some readers.

Kingsley Amis has found a sensible approach: "Speakers of English understandably feel that a noun, or modifier-plus-noun, will take a maximum of one article or possessive or other handle and shy away from saying anything like 'Graham Greene's The Confidential Agent' or 'Anthony Burgess's A Clockwork Orange' or 'A.N. Other's He Fell Among Thieves' . . . To behave properly you have to write, for instance, 'Graham Greene's thriller, The Confidential Agent' and 'Anthony Burgess's fantasy of the future, A Clockwork Orange' and 'Kafka's novel [or whatever it is] The Castle.'" The King's English 121 (1997).

N. Goodness' sake and conscience' sake. The traditional view is that in the phrases for goodness' sake and for conscience' sake, no final -s is added to the possessive. In practice, writers follow this exception with goodness but not with conscience (the prevalent form in AmE being the almost unpronounceable consequence's sake). The reason is probably that for goodness' sake is so common. In fact, 50% of the time in modern prose, writers omit the possessive altogether, making it for goodness' sake.

The best course is probably to stick with the traditional forms so that they're parallel; goodness' sake and consequence's sake. See conscience's sake.

O. Fused Participles. On the need for the possessive case before an -ing participle, see fused participles.

Possessive with Gerund. See fused participles.

possessory. See possessive.

possible. A. And practicable. Practicable (= feasible; possible in practice) is only a little narrower than possible (= capable of happening or being done). The more problematic words are practical and practicable. See practical.

For a mistake related to these words, see impracticability.

B. For necessary. This error occasionally appears in the odd, unidiomatic phrase *more difficult than possible—e.g.: "The movie goes overboard trying to make the parents' day more difficult than possible [read necessary]." Frank Gabrenya, "All in a Day's Work," Columbus Dispatch, 20 Dec. 1996, at E14.

C. As a Noncomparable Adjective. See adjectives (b).

possum. See opossum.

post facto. See ex post facto.

posthaste. See post posthaste.

post hoc (= [of, relating to, or involving] the fallacy of assuming causality from temporal sequence) for ex post facto or after-the-fact is a common error. E.g.: "They argue that . . . the Court's written opinions are therefore just 'post-hoc' [read after-the-fact] rationalizations' of their earlier decision on the merits." Forrest Maltzma & Paul J. Wahlbeck, "Strategic Policy Considerations and Voting Fluidity on the Burger Court," Am. Pol. Sci. Rev., 1 Sept. 1996, at 581.

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post hoc misused for ex post facto or after-the-fact: Stage 1

post hoc, ergo propter hoc (L. "after this, therefore because of this") denotes the fallacy of confusing sequence with consequence. E.g.: "The Feb. 5 Dispatch editorial linking the major decrease in the number of licensed gun dealers with a minor decrease in homicides illustrates the first fallacy taught in any logic course: post hoc, ergo propter hoc (after this, therefore because of this). The rooster's crow does not cause the sun to rise." Letter of Kevin Cantos, "Licensing Unrelated to Drop in Slayings," Columbus Dispatch, 22 Feb. 1997, at A11.

Two common usages, since for because (acceptable) and consequent for subsequent (unacceptable), exemplify the fallacy: they originated when speakers and writers confused causality with temporality. See post hoc.

posthumous, introduced into English in the early 17th century, acquired a nonetymological -h- from its very beginnings as an English word. The Latin etymon postumus means "last" or "late-born." But the -h- was added in a 1619 book about Ben Jonson: "He [Jonson] . . . was posthumous, being born a month after his father's death." (Quoted in OED.) The OED notes that the -h- was added "through erroneous attribution to humus the earth, or (as explained by Servius) humare to bury." So exhumae is not in fact cognate with posthumae at all. In any event, the well-established
but erroneous -h- should have no bearing on the pronunciation, which is properly /pos-chuu-mәs/—not /pohst-hyoo-mәs/ or /palst-hyoo-mәs/.

postilion (= a person who rides the leading left-side horse of a team of horses drawing a carriage) has been the standard spelling since the 1840s. *Postillion is a primarily BrE variant.

postmortem. See autopsy.

Postpositive Adjectives follow the nouns they modify, generally because they follow Romance rather than Germanic (or English) syntax. They exist in English largely as a remnant of the Norman French influence during the Middle Ages, and especially in the century following the Norman Conquest. The French influence was most pronounced in the language of law, politics, religion, and heraldry.

In fields in which French phrases were adopted wholesale—syntax and all—they often passed into the English language unchanged, even though in English, adjectives otherwise almost invariably precede the nouns they modify. Following is a list of frequently used phrases with postpositive adjectives:

- accounts payable court-martial
- accounts receivable heir apparent
- ambassador-designate knight-errant
- annuity certain minister extraordinary
- attorney general notary public
- battle royal postmaster general
- body politic president-elect
- condition precedent secretary general
- condition subsequent steak tartare

On the troublesome issue of pluralizing the nouns in phrases such as these, see plurals (g).

At least two common English nouns, matters and things, often take postpositive adjectives that are ordinarily prepositive. Hence we say that someone is interested in matters philological or things philosophical.

Sometimes a writer will attempt to create a prepositive adjectival phrase where properly the phrase would normally and most idiomatically be postpositive. The result is ungainly indeed: "The commanded-of injuries [read The injuries commanded of] occurred on the practice field late Thursday."

There is, however, a tendency in modern writing to make prepositive phrasal adjectives out of what would formerly have been postpositive. So instead of having payments past due, we just as often see past-due payments.

postscript. See P.S.

*potable drinking water. This phrasing is redundant, since what is potable is drinkable—e.g.: "By hygiene I mean not only the use of toilets and the preservation of potable drinking water [read potable water] but a rational acceptance of birth control and an attitude neither phobic nor reckless toward sex." William A. Henry III, *In Defense of Elitism* 29–30 (1994). See redundancy. Its having appeared as early as 1900 is no recommendation of it. The phrase spread rapidly from 1960 to 2000.

potency; *potence. Oddly, potency is more common in the positive, and impotence in the negative. See impotence.

Current ratio (potency vs. *potence): 126:1

potentiality, dating from the 17th century, is jargonistic when used (as it usually is) merely for the noun potential. E.g.: "They must seek to find meaning for their life, and to give something unique from their potentiality [read potential] for experience." Catherine Proctor, "Recovering Addicts Are Encouraged to Realign Their Ideals," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, 10 May 1997, at A9.

The one justifiable sense of potentiality is "the state or quality of possessing latent power or capacity capable of coming into being or action" (SOED)—e.g.: "In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, . . . the potentiality of the human race is born again." James Agee (as quoted in John Kolbe, "Grandpa’s Words of Wisdom," *Ariz. Republic*, 6 July 1997, at H5).

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potentiality for potential: Stage 1 Current ratio (their potential vs. *their potentiality): 169:1

potful. Pl. potfuls—not *potful. See plurals (g).

pour. For the misuse of this verb for pore, see pore.

P.P.S. See P.S.

practical; practicable. Though similar, these words should be distinguished. Practical = manifested in practice; capable of being put to good use. Its opposite is theoretical.

Practicable (/prak-ti-ka-bal/) = capable of being accomplished; feasible; possible. E.g.:

- "Officers were instructed to hold the apprehended person for delivery to an officer of the other jurisdiction as soon as practicable," Mark A. Hutchison, "Legality of Police Pacts Questioned," *Sunday Oklahoman*, 6 Apr. 1997, at 1.

For a mistake related to this word, see impracticability. For comments on the negative forms, see impractical.

Occasionally practicable is misused for practical—e.g.: "The articles in The Syracuse Newspapers and comments by the Syracuse SkyChiefs Board of Directors were very interesting and extremely practicable [read practical]." Letter of John Anthony, "There's Already Doubt About '98 SkyChiefs," *Post-Standard* (Syracuse), 11 Sept. 1997, at D2. See possible (a).

In both words, the first syllable is stressed: /prak-ti-kәl/ and /prak-ti-ka-bәl/.

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practicable misused for practical: Stage 1
practice; practise. In AmE, practice is both the noun and the verb. (Until about 1915, practise was the standard verb in AmE. For some reason AmE adopted practice as the verb about the time of World War I.) In BrE, practice is the noun and practise the verb.

praying mantis is the correct spelling, not *preying mantis. Even though this insect preys on others, its name comes from the way it holds its front legs raised, as if in prayer. But some writers misunderstand the etymology—e.g.: “On Sunday, the 6-10 praying mantis [read praying mantis] look-alike pitched seven innings, whiffed 14 and retired after throwing 130 pitches.” Frank Luksa, “Series Reaches Striking Climax,” Dallas Morning News, 14 July 1997, at B1.

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praying mantis misspelled *preying mantis: Stage 1

Current ratio: 17:1

preachify, a derogatory word dating from the 18th century, means “to preach in a factitious or a tedious way” (OED). E.g.: “The Rev. John Crum was preachifying when a loud voice bellowed ‘Salvation,’ which was followed by a snort that folks said sounded like a frightened horse.” John Switzer, “Leatherwood God—e.g.: “He asked the audience to vote for politicians who solve problems, not simply because they promise to do so. But this also occurs in print surprisingly often—e.g.: “He asked the audience to vote for politicians who solve problems, not simply because they promise to do so. But this also occurs in print surprisingly often—e.g.:” The same is true of the misuse of precedent—e.g.: “Criminal cases, because of speedy-trial requirements, take precedence [read precedence] over civil cases.” Stuart Eskcnazi, “Texas Files $4 Billion Tobacco Lawsuit,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 29 Mar. 1996, at A1, A10. Misusages of this type are extremely common among journalists not accustomed to writing about the law.

Likewise, precedence sometimes ousts precedent in the phrase set a precedent—e.g.:


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1. *taking precedent for taking precedence: Stage 1

Current ratio (taking precedence vs. *taking precedent): 44:1

2. *setting a precedence for setting a precedent: Stage 1

Current ratio (setting a precedent vs. *setting a precedence): 101:1

precedent, adj., is inferior to previous or prior, except when used as a postpositive adjective in a phrase such as condition precedent. E.g.: “This rule in no respect impinges on the doctrine that one who makes only a loan on such paper, or takes it as collateral security for a precedent [read prior] debt, may be limited in his recovery to the amount advanced or secured.” This adjective is best pronounced /pri-seed-ant/, although /pre-si-dant/ is acceptable. For the noun form of precedent, see precedence (b), (c).

*preceed. See precede.

preceptorial (= teacherly) is the standard form. *Preceptoral is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 14:1

precipitancy; *precipitance. See precipitation.
precipitate, adj.; precipitous, *precipitant. These words are quite different, though often confused. Precipitate /pri-sip-i-tat/ = sudden; hasty; rash; showing violent or uncontrollable speed. This word is applied to actions, movements, or demands. Precipitous = like a precipice; steep. It is applied to physical things—rarely to actions, unless the metaphor of steepness is apt.

Precipitous is frequently misused for precipitate—e.g.:
- “This type of hypertonic dysfunction often results in precipitous [read precipitate] labor—labor that lasts less than 3 hours from the start of uterine contractions to birth.” 1 N. Jayne Klossner, Introductory Maternity Nursing 432 (2006).

Perhaps the second example is excusable if we picture a graph with a sharp drop, or if we visualize a decline; but if “sudden” meant, precipitate is the word.


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precipitous misused for precipitate: Stage 4
precipitation; precipitancy; *precipitance. Precipitation = (1) something that condenses from a vapor and falls (as rain or snow) <a forecast of freezing precipitation overnight>; or (2) the bringing about of something suddenly or unexpectedly <precipitation of a riot>. Precipitancy = sudden or rash haste <we shouldn’t act with precipitancy>. Although precipitation has sometimes overlapped with precipitancy, this overlap is undesirable. Finally, *precipitance is a needless variant of precipitancy.

precipitous. See precipitate.

precision; precissian; precisionist. Precision = accuracy. Precisian = a person who adheres to rigidly high standards (often with regard to moral conduct). (The first two are homophones: /pri-sizh-an/.) Precisionist = a person who prizes absolute correctness of expression and performance, esp. in language and ritual.

preclusive; *preclusory. The latter is a needless variant.

*precondition, a 19th-century neologism, is usually unnecessary in place of condition—e.g.: “For months the Government tried in vain to persuade him that he and the ANC should abandon some of the cornerstones of their strategy as a pre-condition [read condition] for future negotiations.” Fred Bridgland, “Freedom Brings Mandela His Greatest Challenge,” Sunday Telegraph, 11 Feb. 1990, at 3.

predacious; *predaceous. See predatory.

predate = (1) /pree-dayt/ to have existed before (something else); or (2) /pri-dayt/ to devour as prey; prey upon. Sense 2, not recorded in most dictionaries, is a newfangled back-formation from predation. And it doesn’t fill a void: prey is an age-old verb that does the job. E.g.:
- “If the wolf population becomes too large, these meat animals are preyed [read preyed] upon, thus diminishing the supply of food for the hunters and their families.” “Wolf Overpopulation Cuts into Food Supply,” Anchorage Daily News, 18 Feb. 1996, at D2.
- “Some additional differences exist between predatory and herbivorous sea snails in details of the shell, but some of these stem from the fact that predatory sea snails themselves are preyed [read preyed] upon.” Joseph Heller, Sea Snails 152 (2015).

For sense 1, see antedate.

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predate misused for prey, vb.: Stage 1

predatory; *predictive; *predatorial; predatory; *predacious; *predaceous. For the sense “preying on other animals,” predatory is the most usual term. *Predative and *predatorial are rare Needless Variants.

Predacious and *predaceous might also be classed as needless variants. But because predatory has extended senses <a company’s predatory actions against its competitors> <predatory young men who target naive girls>, some biologists prefer predacious. Even if we allow that term—though the possibility of true differentiation seems remote—the by-form *predaceous should still be avoided.

predestine, vb.; *predestinate, vb. Although Merriam-Webster dictionaries might lead you to believe otherwise, predestine has been the standard form since the mid-19th century. *Predestinate, as a verb, is a needless variant. But the adjective by the same spelling is a synonym of predestined: it is pronounced /pri-des-ti-nat/. It might be considered a needless variant as well. But none of these pronunciations were foreordained.

Current ratio (predestined vs. *predestinate): 10:1

predicable; *predictable. *Predictable is an error for either predicable (= capable of being asserted) or (more predictably) predictable—e.g.: “The conclusion

predominant; predominate, adj. The latter is a needless variant for predominant. In good usage, predominate is the verb, predominant the adjective. Readers may be confused by predominate as an adjective because it is the same form as the verb, so predominant should be reserved for this job—e.g.:


3. "As he looked images would suggest themselves and he would select and paint the one that he wished to impose as the predominate [read predominant] image." Peter Banks & Jonathan Evens, The Secret Chord (2012).

Cf. preponderant.

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predominate misused as an adjective for predominant: Stage 1
Current ratio (predominant role vs. *predominate role): 96:1

predominate, vb.; dominate. Predominate is an intransitive verb: either it stands alone, or it needs a preposition after it, such as in, on, or over. But some writers have begun making it transitive, with a direct object. The trend should be resisted—e.g.:


3. "Today, trucks, boots, cowboy leather jackets and Mexican rock predominate the scene [read predominate on a Saturday night at the zocalo (main plaza)], 'machismo' vibrates in the air, stories of flashy money mingle with drug trafficking." Kirsten Appendini, "From Where Have All the Flowers Come?" in Women Working the NAFTA Food Chain 128, 135 (Deborah Barndt ed., 2004).

Dominate, by contrast, can be either transitive (the challenger dominated the champ from the opening bell) or intransitive (athletes dominate over scholars in the school's social hierarchy).

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predominate used as a transitive verb: Stage 1

Preemptive. What is preeminent is unique: it stands above all others of its kind. So an indefinite article (a or an) is usually illogical with the word—e.g.: "The second [day] will be devoted to the archive of Charles Negre, a pre-eminent [read an eminent or the preeminent] practitioner of French primitive photographs." Carol Vogel, "Inside Art," N.Y. Times, 1 Feb. 2002, at E34.

To call more than one person or thing preeminent in the same field is to break the word's sense—e.g.: "Kissell said that Williams and Stan Musial, two of the preeminent [read best] hitters of their generation, got their hits in different ways." Tom Timbermann, "Martinez Is Unhappy with First Half but Feels More Relaxed at Plate," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 6 July 2002, Sports §, at 4.

Preemptive; preemptory; preempest. The adjectives most commonly used and distinguished are preemptive and preemptory. Preemptive = (1) of, relating to, or involving preemption (<the agency's preemptive powers>; or (2) preventive, deterrent (<a preemptive strike>). Preemptory = (1) incontrovertible; or (2) imperious, domineering. Sense 1: "Fortunately, Deaver gave Henry the hook before he could issue the usual preemptory command." Alexander Cockburn, "The End: Convention Seals Post-History Case," Phoenix Gaz., 17 Aug. 1996, at B9. Sense 2: "In these books, the author's twisty, improbable plots feel implausible and contrived; her poised authorial manner, preemptory and pinched." Michiko Kakutani, "Her Serene Tyranny, a Mistress of Mayhem," N.Y. Times, 16 May 1997, at C29.

Preemptory (= of, relating to, or involving a preemp-)t) properly appears only in rare legal uses. Yet it is sometimes confused with preemptive—e.g.:

1. "In a statement, Continental said it was disappointed the city had filed the preemptory [read preemptive] suit and noted it has been negotiating for several months to get modifications to the lease." Beverly Narum, "Denver Sues as a preemptory [read preemptive] move against inflation." Jerry Heaster, "Economy Has Survived Half of 1996," Kansas City Star, 30 June 1996, at F1.

2. "When stress is certain to occur, preemptory [read preemptive] emotional reactions tend to mimic (predict) those that will subsequently occur in response to the expected stressor." Christian Waugh et al., Biobehavioral Resilience to Stress 117, 125 (Brian J. Lukey & Victoria Tepe eds., 2008).

And it's also occasionally misused for preemptory, no doubt from a false association with preempt—e.g.:

1. "On Friday, Judge John Ouderkerk of State Superior Court dismissed a black woman after a challenge for cause and a black man after a preemptory [read preemptory] challenge by the prosecutor. In making preemptory [read preemptory]
challenges, lawyers do not have to give a reason for wanting a prospective juror dismissed.” “Jury Queries Resume in Beating Case,” N.Y. Times, 8 Aug. 1993, at 17.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. preemtopy misused for preemptive: Stage 1
   Current ratio (preemptive strike vs. *preemptory strike): 209:1
2. preemptory misused for preemptory: Stage 1
   Current ratio (preemptory challenges vs. *preemptory challenges): 57:1

preferable. So spelled.

preexisting. So spelled.

preface; foreword. Technically, a preface is a book’s front matter that is written by the author. A foreword is contributed by someone other than the author. See foreword.

prefatory; *prefatorial; *prefacial; *prefatial. The last three terms are needless variants of the first.

prefect (= [1] a chief administrative officer or magistrate; or [2] esp. in BrE a senior student in private school vested with disciplinary authority) has the corresponding adjective prefectorial <prefectoral authority>. The term *prefectoral is a needless variant.

The similarly spelled prefectorial is in good use as the adjective corresponding to prefecture (= [1] an administrative district; or [2] the office of a prefect). Sometimes prefectorial is wrongly displaced by one of the other terms—e.g.: "The Duke of Kent this morning met Mr. Toshitami Kaihara, Governor of Hyogo Prefectorial [read Prefectural] Government, Kobe.” “Court Circular,” Times (London), 25 Nov. 1996, at 26. *Prefectual is a misspelling that appears from time to time—e.g.: “Donations from the seminar will be used toward the construction of the Okinawan Prefectorial [read Prefectural] Martial Arts Pavilion, to open in 1997 in Okinawa.” James Black, “Karate: Demonstration at Nassau CC,” Newsday (N.Y.), 23 Feb. 1995, at A59.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. *prefectorial misused for prefectorial: Stage 1
   Current ratio (prefectural vs. *prefectorial): 17:1
2. prefectorial misspelled *prefectual: Stage 1
   Current ratio: 178:1

prefer. It is quite idiomatic to prefer one thing to another, or one thing over another. But the two things being compared must be grammatically and logically parallel: “Everyone, after all, would prefer working in a pleasant working environment to an unpleasant one.”

Robert Levering, A Great Place to Work ix (1988). (A possible revision: Everyone, after all, would prefer a pleasant working environment to an unpleasant one.) See parallelism.

It is not idiomatic, however, to couple prefer with than, as sometimes occurs with the infinitive—e.g.: “I prefer to write things out in longhand than to type them up.” Perhaps this instead: I prefer to write things out in longhand rather than to type them up. Or: I prefer to write things out in longhand, not to type them up.

preferable, inherently a comparative adjective, shouldn’t be preceded by more—e.g.:”

• “All hands involved have decided that inconveniencing Suns fans is eminently more preferable than [read much more preferable to] risking the chance that just one person in the known universe misses a chance to see Michael Jordan.” Milton Kent, “Baseball Catches Up in Ratings,” Baltimore Sun, 26 Apr. 1995, at C2.

• “The fact that they won after bowling so badly in Glamorgan’s first innings was a reminder of how four-day cricket is infinitely more preferable [read preferable].” “Cricket: Cronje Calls Up Heavy Artillery,” Daily Telegraph, 2 Sept. 1995, at 21. (On the use of infinitely in this example, see infinitely (b).)

• “If, instead of considering size as an attribute or criterion, we focus on our objectives, we can say that, with respect to safety, the large car is more preferable [read preferable].” Ernest H. Forman & Mary Ann Selly, Decision by Objectives 21 (2001).

See comparatives and superlatives & adjectives (b).

Also, the word takes to, not than—e.g.:

• “The timing of eating candy is also crucial, he said, adding that once a day after dinner is preferable than [read preferable to] all day long when bacteria can build up and cause tooth decay,” Barri Bronston, “Trick or . . . Toothpaste?!” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 27 Oct. 1997, at C1.

• “The complexity of intensional contexts aside, Levinson’s argument that there could not be a state of affairs that necessitated another state of affairs more preferable than [read preferable to] it is simply not convincing.” Jay David Atlas, Logic, Meaning, and Conversation 178 (2005).

• “For definiteness suppose that all criteria are positively oriented, i.e. their larger values are more preferable than [read preferable to] the smaller ones.” Vadim P. Berman et al., “Interval Value Tradeoffs Methodology and Techniques of Multicriteria Decision Analysis,” in User-Oriented Methodology and Techniques of Decision Analysis and Support 144, 145 (Jaap Wessels & Andrzej P. Wierzbicki eds., 2013).

Preferable is accented on the first syllable, not the second: /pref-ә-rә-bal/, not /pri-fәrә-bal/. See pronunciation (b) & class distinctions.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. *more preferable for preferable or much preferable: Stage 3
   Current ratio (much preferable to vs. *more preferable than): 2:1
2. *preferable than for preferable to: Stage 1
   Current ratio (preferable to vs. *preferable than): 121:1
3. preferable mispronounced /pri-fәrә-bal/: Stage 2
PUFES, NEGATIVE. See negatives (a).

pregnant. The phrase six months pregnant takes neither a hyphen before nor an apostrophe after months. The construction is not analogous to the idiomatic possessive with units of time or value that it superficially resembles (e.g., six months’ time). In those phrases, the main word (e.g., time) is a noun, whereas pregnant is an adjective. Further, the sense of the construction is different: “six months of time” (idiomatic possessive) vs. “pregnant for six months” (no possessive at all). E.g.: “Mrs. Bennett, three months pregnant, works at a mental-retardation facility in neighboring Temple.” Nathan Levy, “Strain on a Small Town,” Wash. Times, 27 Mar. 2003, at C11. For more on the idiomatic possessive with units of time or value, see possessives (l).

preheat. The prefix generally adds nothing to the verb. In recipes and other food contexts, make it “heat the oven to 325°.”

prejudge; forejudge. The latter, in one of its senses, is a needless variant of prejudge, the usual term. See forejudge.

prejudgment (= the act of prejudging) has been predominantly so spelled throughout the English-speaking world since the 18th century. *Prejudgement is a variant spelling. Cf. judgment.

Apart from the noun sense, the word is used adjectivally in law to describe something that takes place before a judgment has been rendered <prejudgment garnishment of wages> <prejudgment interest>.

prejudice, n. & v.t. In addition to the well-known sense of bias (n.) or to make biased (vb.), prejudice is also a legalism for harm (n.) or to harm (v.t.). In ordinary discourse, it is a lawyer’s pomposity—e.g.: “After the 1994 courtroom defeat, Ms. Sullivan sued her attorneys, arguing that they had pressured her to buy a house, and that this would prejudice [read hurt] her case.” Ellen Joan Pollock, “The Long Goodbye,” Wall Street J., 19 May 1997, at A1.

Sometimes the past participle prejudiced in this legal sense can cause a misbattle because some readers might take it to mean “having a strong bias against (something)—e.g.: “The Louisiana revocatory action is available to a creditor who is prejudiced at the time by a fraudulent transfer made by his debtor.” Albert Tate Jr., “The Revocatory Action in Louisiana Law,” in Essays on the Civil Law of Obligations 133 (Joseph Dainow ed., 1969).

prejudicial. A. And prejudiced. Prejudicial (= tending to injure; harmful) applies to things and events; prejudiced (= harboring prejudices) applies to people. The meaning of a sentence can frequently be made clearer by using harmful in place of prejudicial.

Occasionally, writers misuse prejudicial for prejudiced, especially in the negative form—e.g.: “AIDS is unprejudicial [read unprejudiced], knows no gender bias and should be everyone’s nightmare.” Letter of Sandy Sagen, “AIDS Stereotype,” Sacramento Bee, 18 Oct. 1996, at B9. Actually, of course, it would be an understatement to say that AIDS is highly prejudicial: the writer said the opposite of what she meant.

B. And pre-judicial. The hyphen makes an important difference. Pre-judicial = of, relating to, or involving the time before a person became a judge <pre-judicial career>. Cf. re-pairs.

prelate (= a bishop, cardinal, or other important priest in a Christian church) is pronounced /pre-lit—/—not /pre-layt/.

preliminary to for before is a silly pomposity—e.g.: “She brings in to him the ‘last water,’ preliminary to [read before] saying grace.” Sylvia Barack Fishman, Follow My Footprints 121 (1992). Cf. prior.

prelude is pronounced either /pré-l-yood/ or (less good) /pray-lood/.

*premia. See premium.

premier, adj.; premiere, n. Aside from the part-of-speech distinction, three observations are in order. First, premier, the adjective meaning “first in importance or rank,” is often pretentious in place of first or foremost. Second, premiere, the noun meaning “a first performance,” has come into standard use as a verb <the new sitcom premieres in October>. (See functional shift (d).) Third, the accent is no longer used in the noun—hence premiere, not *première. See dia-critical marks.

In AmE, the two words are homophones: both are preferably pronounced /pri-meer/. In BrE, premier is pronounced /prém-yä/, and premiere is pronounced /prém-ee-d/.

premise; *premiss. In the sense “a previous statement or proposition from which another is inferred as a conclusion,” premise has always predominated in AmE and has predominated in BrE since about 1950. *Premiss is a chiefly BrE variant.

premises (= a house or building) has a curious history. Originally, it denoted in law the part of a deed that sets forth the names of the grantor and grantee, as well as the things granted and the consideration. Then, through hypallage, it was extended to refer to the subject of a conveyance or bequest, specified in the premises of the deed. Finally, it was extended to refer to a house or building along with its grounds. In short, someone who says, “No alcohol is allowed on
these premises” is unconsciously using a popularized technicality.

The term is always used in the plural—e.g.:

- “The paint was peeling from its exterior, its rooms were empty and the premises were condemned by selectmen.” Fred Hanson, “Old School Becomes a Jewel,” Patriot-Ledger (Quincy, Mass.), 3 Oct. 1994, at F8.
- “These premises were originally let in 1957 by the appellant's predecessor in title.” Paul Magrath, “Variation of Lease Did Not Create New Tenancy,” Independent, 14 Sept. 1995, at 12.
- “The movements of pigs, feedstuffs, vehicles, and people onto and off the premises were traced to identify possible sources of the virus and limit the spread of infection.” Anna Rovid Spickler et al., “Descriptions of Recent Incursions of Exotic Animal Diseases,” in Emerging and Exotic Diseases of Animals 52, 58 (Anna Rovid Spickler et al. eds., 4th ed. 2010).

It is pronounced /prem-i-siz/, not /-siz/. Un fortunately, some people (misunderstanding the term and its history) have begun referring to *this premise when they mean “this piece of property.” In 2003, a famous San Francisco steakhouse sported an unidiomatic, ill-premised sign inside the front door: “No alcohol may be taken off this premise.” The sign is still there in 2016.

*premiss. See premise.

premium. The standard plural has been premiums since the 18th century. The form *premia is hopelessly pedantic—e.g.:

- “Suppose that an insurance scheme is established and administered in such a way that insurance premiss [read premiums] are not affected by riskiness of the portfolio.”
- “This means that assets associated with nondissolvable risks will carry risk premiss [read premiums]. But, how can we measure such risk premiss [read premiums] objectively when buying assets is essentially a matter of subjective preferences?” Salih N. Neftci, Principles of Financial Engineering 315 (2d ed. 2008).

See plurals (b).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*premia for premiums: Stage 1

Current ratio (premiums vs. *premia): 22:1

premonition (= an odd feeling that something bad is imminent) was traditionally pronounced /prem-ә-nish-on/, but in the mid-20th century /prem-a-nish-an/ became standard in both AmE and BrE alike.

prenuptial; antenuptial. From 1800 to about 1960, antenuptial was the predominant term in all varieties of English. About 1955, prenuptial became predominant in BrE, and by the 1970s AmE had followed suit. Oddly, antenuptial is omitted from many English-language dictionaries, although it appears routinely in legal writing in AmE; it’s a needless variant.

Prenuptial is pronounced /pree-nap-shal/ or /pree-nap-chal/. But some speakers wrongly add an extra syllable: /pree-nap-chal/. This mispronunciation sometimes occurs with nuptial as well. See nuptial.

A prenuptial agreement is commonly if informally called a prenup. See casualisms (c).

preowned. In the 1970s, preowned became a common euphemism for used. Used-car dealers are especially fond of this doublespeak—e.g.: “Why settle for an Accord or Taurus when you can have a preowned Cadillac for about the same price?”

preparatory; *preparative, adj. Preparatory is the standard term. *Preparative, adj., is a needless variant. But as a noun, preparative legitimately means “something that prepares the way for something else.” Preparatory, adj., is pronounced /prep-a-rә-tor-ee/ or /pro-par-a-tor-ee/.

When used in the sense “to prepare for,” preparatory is pure JARGON. E.g.: “Personnel of the 582nd Medical Ambulance Co. are trying to create a mailing list preparatory to holding [read to prepare for] their first reunion.” “Military Reunions,” News & Record (Greensboro), 10 Sept. 1997, at R2. The phrase is likewise pretentious in place of before—e.g.: “That was the same campaign in which [Clinton] attacked the Bush administration for doing too little to stop the slaughter in Bosnia, preparatory to [read before] getting elected president and letting it continue for another four years.” Paul Greenberg, “Communist China: Our Most-Favored Tyranny,” Tulsa Trib. & Tulsa World, 22 Feb. 1997, at A12. Cf. preliminary to & prior.

*preplan, a nonword that took root in the 1930s and 1940s, is illogical for plan because planning must necessarily occur beforehand. E.g.:

- “Ninety percent of wasting time and standing in line can be eliminated with a little preplanning [read planning] and some common sense.” Mark H. McCormack, What They Don’t Teach You at Harvard Business School 212 (1984).
- “In return you get an interactive touch screen display that will beep a warning if you take a wrong turn and stray from its preplanned [read planned] route.” Michael Koster, “No Need to Ask Directions,” Santa Fe New Mexican, 26 Apr. 1997, at C1.
- “The success of a rescue operation is predicated upon the preplanning [read planning] that an organization employs in advance of the mission. A written preplan [read plan] identifies the hazards within the local jurisdiction, the need for specific types of rescue capabilities, and the operational procedures for conducting rescue tasks.” Tom Vines & Steve Hudson, High-Angle Rope Rescue Techniques: Levels I & II 208 (4th ed. 2014).

See illogic (A).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*preplan for plan: Stage 2

Current ratio (planned vs. *preplanned): 192:1

preponderant; *preponderate, adj. The latter is a needless variant that occurs predominantly
in the adverb *preponderately—e.g.: “The statistical pater . . . has thus far indicated that AIDS and its transmission are preponderately [read preponderantly] linked to homosexual practices.” “AIDS: At Risk from Being Too Squamish,” Daily Mail, 29 June 1992, at 6.

Use preponderate only as a verb—e.g.: “Its market share has declined each year as cars equipped for unleaded gasoline have preponderated, and lead gas is projected essentially to disappear by about 1990.” Daniel Rosenheim, “Getting the Lead Out Won’t Be a Gas,” Chicago Trib., 17 Feb. 1985, at C1. Cf. *predominant.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*preponderately for preponderantly: Stage 1
  Current ratio (preponderantly vs. *preponderately): 47:1

PREPOSITIONS. A. The Preposition Quotient. In lean writing, it’s a good idea to minimize prepositional phrases. In flabby prose, a ratio of one preposition for every four words is common; in better, leaner writing, the quotient is more like one preposition for every ten or fifteen words.

Five editorial methods can tighten sentences marred with too many prepositions. First, the prepositional phrase can be deleted as surplusage; for example, it’s often possible in a given context to change a phrase such as *senior vice president of the corporation to senior vice president—if the corporate context is already clear.

Second, uncovering zombie nouns often eliminates as many as two prepositions each time; hence *is in violation of becomes violates. Third, it’s sometimes possible to replace a prepositional phrase with an adverb; so *she criticized the manuscript with intelligence becomes she criticized the manuscript intelligently. Fourth, many prepositional phrases resolve themselves into possessives; hence *for the convenience of the reader becomes for the reader’s convenience. And finally, a change from passive voice to active often entails removing a preposition; so the ball was hit by Jane becomes Jane hit the ball. See of (A).

B. Ending Sentences with Prepositions. The spurious rule about not ending sentences with prepositions is a remnant of Latin grammar, in which a preposition was the one word that a writer could not end a sentence with. But Latin grammar should never straitjacket English grammar. If the superstition is a “rule” at all, it is a rule of rhetoric and not of grammar, the idea being to end sentences with strong words that drive a point home. (See sentence ends.) That principle is sound, of course, but not to the extent of meriting lockstep adherence or flouting established idiom.

The idea that a preposition is ungrammatical at the end of a sentence is often attributed to 18th-century grammarians. But that idea is greatly overstated. Bishop Robert Lowth, the most prominent 18th-century grammarian, wrote that the final preposition “is an idiom, which our language is strongly inclined to: it prevails in common conversation, and suits very well with the familiar style in writing.” A Short Introduction to English Grammar 137 (rev. ed. 1782). The furthest Lowth went was to urge that “the placing of the preposition before the relative is more graceful, as well as more perspicuous; and agrees much better with the solemn and elevated style.” Ibid. That in itself is an archaic view that makes modern writing stuffy; indeed, Lowth elsewhere made the same plea for *hath: “Hath properly belongs to the serious and solemn style; has to the familiar.” Ibid. at 56. But in any event, Lowth’s statement about prepositions was hardly intended as a “rule.”

Winston Churchill’s witticism about the absurdity of this bugaboo should have had it laid to rest. When someone once upbraided him for ending a sentence with a preposition, he rejoined, “That is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put.” Avoiding a preposition at the end of the sentence sometimes leads to just such a preposterous monstrosity.

Perfectly natural-sounding sentences end with prepositions, particularly when a verb with a preposition-particle appears at the end (as in follow up or ask for). E.g.: “The act had no causal connection with the injury complained of.” When one decides against such formal (sometimes downright stilted) constructions as *of which, on which, and for which—and instead chooses the relative that—the preposition is necessarily sent to the end of the sentence: “This is a point on which I must insist” becomes far more natural as “This is a point that I must insist on.” And consider the following examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correct and Natural</th>
<th>Correct and Stuffy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>people worth talking to</td>
<td>people to whom it is worth talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are you thinking about?</td>
<td>About what are you thinking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the man you were listening to</td>
<td>the man to whom you were listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a person I have great respect for</td>
<td>a person for whom I have great respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a habit I want to stick to</td>
<td>a habit to which I want to stick</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1947, a scholar summed up the point: “Those who insist that final prepositions are inelegant are taking from the English language one of its greatest assets—its flexibility—an advantage realized and practiced by all our greatest writers except a few who, like Dryden and Gibbon, tried to fashion the English language after the Latin.” Margaret M. Bryant, “The End Preposition,” 8 College English 204 (Jan. 1947). Is more authority needed? Here it is:

- “If the sense is clear and the effect is smooth, there is no reason for avoiding the final preposition. It would be absurd to object to What are you looking for? and require...”
the very awkward For what are you looking?” Janet Rankin Aiken, Commonsense Grammar 149 (1936).

- “Nor did the obsession that English sentences should ape classical models unduly influence [Joseph] Addison, an eighteenth-century writer remarkable for his fluent, easy, and polished diction. Indeed, so frequently did he end his sentences with a preposition that such a conclusion has been referred to as ‘the Addisonian termination.’ And, whatever pedants may say to the contrary, English people will continue to say, easily and unselfconsciously: ‘He is the man I spoke to.’ This is what I was thinking of: ‘What are you talking about?’ ‘Who did you go with?’ ‘Speak when you are spoken to.’” W.P. Jowett, Chatting About English 176 (1945).

- “Though by its very name a preposition is ‘placed before’ a noun, modern English idioms allow, and has always allowed, it to be placed after, and often as the last word in the sentence.” G.H. Vallins, Good English: How to Write It 154 (1951).

- “In some expressions the preposition is by the custom of the language forced to the end.” G.H. Vallins, Better English 61 (4th ed. 1957).

- “In regard to the placing of the preposition, we should do well to divest ourselves of the notion that it is ‘an inelegant word to end a sentence with’ and that, just because it is called a pre-position, it must therefore ‘be placed before.’” Simeon Potter, Our Language 101 (rev. ed. 1966).

- “Though I doubt that many persons still take it seriously . . . perhaps there are still those who need to be gently told that no self-respecting writer or speaker has ever bothered to conform to this most errant of all imagined rules of grammar.” Ellsworth Barnard, English for Everybody 101 (1979). / “Nobody would ask, ‘To what is the world coming?’ rather than ‘What is the world coming to?’” Ibid. at 111.

Good writers don’t hesitate to end their sentences with prepositions if doing so results in phrasing that seems natural:


- “When we grow older and have something to write about we often don’t write letters because we are afraid of being dull. And that is a very good thing to be afraid of.” S.P.B. Mais, The Writing of English 22 (1935).

- “Ganesa, who is every reader, found his attention continually held and did not ask to be let off.” Gorham Munson, The Written Word 31 (rev. ed. 1949). / “Falling into the wrong word-environment for your new word is a hazard to watch out for.” Ibid. at 91.

- “The great majority of reviews give an inaccurate or misleading account of the book that is dealt with.” George Orwell, “I Write as I Please,” in Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays 164, 167 (1950).

- “The peculiarities of legal English are often used as a stick to beat the official with.” Ernest Gowers, Plain Words: Their ABC 13 (1954).

- “In the structure of the ‘coherent sentence,’ such particles are necessary, and, strip the sentence as bare as you will, they cannot be entirely dispensed with.” G.H. Vallins, The Best English 30 (1960).

- “Poetry, as Dr. Johnson said, is untranslatable and hence, if it is good, preserves the language it is written in.” Anthony Burgess, A Mouthful of Air 136 (1992).

- “It was the boys in the back room, after all, whom Marlene Dietrich felt comfortable drinking with.” Russell Baker, “Sexwise It’s the Pits,” N.Y. Times, 17 Apr. 1993, at 15.

See which, that & functional shift (f)

C. Redundant Prepositions. Writers often repeat prepositions unnecessarily when there are intervening phrases or clauses. E.g.: “Sue is survived by her beloved husband, Roy C. Walker, with whom she shared her life with for 63 years.” Sue A. ‘West Walker” (obit.), Austin Am.-Statesman, 14 July 1995, at B4. (Delete the second with.) Paul McCartney, in his hit song “Live and Let Die,” made a similar error: “But if this ever-changing world in which we live in makes you give in and cry, just live and let die.” McCartney might have improved the lyrics by writing in which we’re livin’.

D. The Wrong Preposition. A marginally useful guide in determining what preposition goes with a given verb is to look to the verb’s prefix. Thus inhere in, comport with (L. com- “with”), attribute to (L. ad- “to”), and so on. But the exceptions are many. For example, impute takes to, prepare takes for, and recoil takes from.

In any event, more and more writers seem to have difficulty using the right preposition in various idioms—e.g.:

- Down used superfluously: “Free the Juice,” a street pickeret’s sign proclaimed in one of the opening scenes last year as the grand circus trial pitched down [read pitched] its tent. Francis X. Clines, “And Now, the Audience Rests,” N.Y. Times, 8 Oct. 1995, at 4. (One puts up a tent or pitches it, but does not erect it by pitching it down.)

- In for to: “We may even live in a style in [read to] which we never dreamed we could become accustomed.” Sheridan Baker, “Scholarly Style, or the Lack Thereof” (1956), in Perspectives on Style 64, 72 (Frederick Candelaria ed., 1968).

- Of for about: “National League umpire Bruce Froemming, angered by Montreal pitcher Jeff Fassero’s critical comments of [read comments about] a fellow umpire, rebutted the Expos starter’s complaints Tuesday.” “Ump Cries Foul at Remarks Made by Montreal’s Fassero,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 29 May 1996, at C5. (One makes comments on a thing or about a person. One makes criticism of a person or a thing. But here the writer confounded the two phrases.)


- To for in: “To show he is serious, Mr. Kwasniewski resigned his membership on Saturday to [read in] the political party that he founded.” Jane Perlaz, “Polish Leader Vexed by Final Hurdle: His Past,” N.Y. Times, 29 Nov. 1995, at A3. (BrE would make it membership of, but in AmE it’s membership in.)

- To for of: “The military . . . can only hope that these same children will remain ignorant to [read of] the military’s history of sacrificing the long-term health of its troops.


**E. Prepositions as Particles or Adverbs.** See functional variation (f).

**prerequisite. A. And requisite.** Rarely is prerequisite used with the degree of punctilio that Eric Partridge prescribed: "Properly, a prerequisite has to be obtained or fulfilled before a requisite can be attended to. In short, prerequisite is rarely permissible." "Vigilans" [Eric Partridge], *Chamber of Horrors* 114 (1952).

B. And presentiment.** See presentiment.

**prerogative (= a right that someone has by reason of position or prominence) is pronounced /pri-rog-ə-tiv/—not /pree-rog-a-tiv/.

**presage, n. & vb. A *presage* (/pres-ij/) is either an omen—something that portends a future occurrence—or an intuition that something is going to happen, especially something bad. To *presage* (/pres-ij/ or /pri-say/) is to foreshadow, foretell, or predict. Elster recommends distinguishing the pronunciation of the verb from that of the noun (BBBM at 389).

**prescience (= foreknowledge or foresight) is preferably pronounced /presh-ants/ in AmE and /prez-ee-ants/ in BrE. The old-fashioned AmE pronunciations were /presh-shints/ and /prez-shiee-ints/.

The corresponding adjective *prescient* is similarly /presh-ant/ (AmE) or /prez-ee-eant/ (BrE)—or, in old-fashioned AmE, /pree-shint/ or /pree-shhee-int/.

**prescribe.** See proscribe.

**presentation (= a talk, an award ceremony, a way of showing something, etc.) is pronounced /prez-an-tay-shan/ or (less good) /pree-zan-tay-shan/.

**presentiment; presentment.** A *presentment* is an odd feeling that something bad will soon happen; a premonition. The word is pronounced /pri-zent-mant/—not /pri-sen-ti-mant/ or /pree-zen-ti-mant/. A *presentment* is (1) a formal statement of an issue to be decided by a court of law, (2) a grand jury’s formal written accusation made on its own initiative, or (3) the formal production of a negotiable instrument for acceptance or payment. The word is pronounced /pri-zent-mant/.

**presently** contains an ambiguity. In the days of Shakespeare, it meant “immediately.” Soon its meaning evolved into “after a short time” (perhaps because people exaggerated about their promptitude). This sense is still current. Then, chiefly in AmE, it took on the additional sense “at present; currently.” This use is poor, however, because it both causes the ambiguity and displaces a simpler word (now or, if more syllables are necessary, at *present* or currently)—e.g.: “Carol presently [read now] has a one-elephant show (I am not making this up) going at the Clarion Hotel in downtown San Diego.” Mike Harden, “Writer, Elephant Paint a Pretty Picture Amid GOP Circus,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 14 Aug. 1996, at A6.

“But the waiting list for such a kidney is presently [read now] 35,000 patients long.” Richard Jerome, “A Father’s Gift,” *People*, 26 May 1997, at 52.

“A truly innovative program, such as the original Windows operating system, might well receive a degree of protection akin to that presently [read now] available.” Mathias Klang & Andrew Murray, *Human Rights in the Digital Age* 133 (2005).

Cf. *momentarily.* See also at the present time.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX presently for now or currently: Stage 4

**present time, at the.** This phrase is wordy for now.

**present writer.** Unless self-mockery is intended, this phrase is today generally considered inferior to I or me. Common throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, it is now in decline. See first person.

**preservation; *preserval.*** The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 118,003:1

**presidency. A. And presidency.** *Presidency* = the office or function of a president. *Presidence* = the action or fact of presiding.

B. And president. In AmE, you can either run for the presidency or run for president. Technically, the former is better, but the latter is extremely common among educated speakers.

**Presidents’ Day; *President’s Day; Presidents Day.** The spelling as a plural possessive is best and most common. It’s also the original spelling. Until 1971, Lincoln’s Birthday (12 February) and Washington’s Birthday (22 February) were both observed as federal holidays. In 1971, President Richard Nixon proclaimed that the two holidays would be combined.
L.A. Times

Death Is No Stranger to the Young, " says David Campbell. "Kathleen Doheny, "'Natural' someone who doesn't even have the nomination yet June 1999, presidential candidate George W. Bush said—choo-әs/, not /pri-

See spelling (a). Pronounced properly, the word

ward, impudent. The word is so spelled, though May 1995, at B8. Attorney General Race, "(Louisville), 21

with Larry Forgy, the party's presumptive '50 is used as a

warranting inferences; or (2) based on presumptive

See assumption.

descriptive assumption.

presumptuous = (1) giving reasonable grounds for presumption or belief; warranting inferences; or (2) based on presumption or inference. Sense 1: "In investigating deaths, '50 is used as a presumptive age for natural death," says David Campbell." Kathleen Doheny, "'Natural' Death Is No Stranger to the Young," L.A. Times, 23 May 1995, at E3. Sense 2: "He's also running on a slate with Larry Forgy, the party's presumptive nominee for governor." Joseph Gerth, "Scott Seems Confident in Attorney General Race," Courier-J. (Louisville), 21 May 1995, at B8.

Presumptuous = arrogant, presuming, bold, forward, impudent. The word is so spelled, though *presumptuous is a common error (especially in BrE)—e.g.:


• "It is a disgraceful and presumptuous [read presumptuous] neglect of what is a compelling battle." Alan Lee, "Teamwork Makes Warwickshire the Title Favourites," Times (London), 21 Aug. 1995, Sport §.

• "We may have been a little presumptuous [read presumptuous] in reacting as we did but we were not presumptuous [read presumptuous] in a degree that the agent could seriously condemn." Philip Pettit, "The Capacity to Have Done Otherwise," in Relating to Responsibility: Essays for Tony Honoré on his Eightieth Birthday 21, 33 (Peter Cane & John Gardner eds., 2001).

See spelling (a). Pronounced properly, the word has four syllables: /pri-zump-choo-as/, not /pri-zump-shas/.

Presumptive is often misused for presumptuous. In June 1999, presidential candidate George W. Bush said that it would be "presumptive [read presumptuous] for someone who doesn't even have the nomination yet to be laying out the list of potential vice presidents." George W. Bush (as quoted in Ken Herman, “Bush Ticket Could Be Split on Abortion,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 24 June 1999, at A1). He wasn't alone:


• “But she thinks it would be presumptive [read presumptuous] of them to think they could attract endangered animals to their little habitat, which now includes about 45 acres.” Sue Lowe, “One-time Cornfield Now Prairie, Wetlands,” South Bend Trib., 1 Feb. 1999, at B1.

• “Former Secretary of State Warren Christopher, a Gore representative, complained yesterday that Bush was being presumptive [read presumptuous] by assuming he's president-elect before the courts have ruled on the issue of hand recounts in Florida.” Zachary Coile, “Bush Using Electoral Timeout to Practice Being Presidential,” S.F. Chronicle., 4 Dec. 2000, at A5.

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1. presumptuous misspelled *presumptuous: Stage 1 Current ratio: 140:1

2. presumptive misused for presumptuous: Stage 1

pretence. See pretense.

pretend as though for pretend that (by analogy to act as though) is unidiomatic.

pretense; pretence. The first is the AmE spelling; the second is BrE.

preterit(e), n. & adj. This grammatical term refers to past tenses, but it fell into disuse during the 20th century because of the ambiguity contained within it. That is, some writers have used it to mean "the simple past tense," but others want it to include past participles. And in any event it smacks of sesquipedality, since past expresses the same idea. But if you must know how to spell it, preterite is standard in AmE and BrE alike. Preterit is a chiefly AmE variant.

preterit (/pree-tәr-mit/) = to overlook or ignore purposely—e.g.: "I pretermit, because it is unworthy of serious notice, the argument from social welfare priorities," William A. Stanmeyer, “Toward a Moral Nuclear Strategy,” Policy Rev., Summer 1982, at 59 n.13.

The word doesn't properly mean "to prevent, preclude, or obviate," but some writers use it that way—e.g.:


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preterit misused for prevent, preclude, or obviate: Stage 1
**preternatural** (pre-tər-nəch-ar-əl/) has several meanings, all with the core idea of “unnatural.” It may mean “unexplainable,” similar to **supernatural** (<preternatural phenomenon>). It used to mean “contrary to nature,” often to describe a symptom of disease (<preternatural swelling>), but that usage has faded. A new meaning has emerged, though, “extraordinary,” especially to describe a talent (<a preternatural gift for music>). Sometimes the word’s senses collide when the writer means “extraordinary” but not at all “unnatural”—e.g.: “Scherfig is as warm and welcoming as her movie. A **preternatural** [read natural? stunning?] blonde, like many Scandinavians, she has a robust laugh that echoes through a hotel room.” Ruthe Stein, “The Language of Love,” <em>S.F. Chron.</em>, 2 Feb. 2002, Sunday Datebook §, at 51.

**pretextual** (= based on a pretext), coined in the 1950s, is sometimes wrongly written *pretextual*. “If the employer satisfies this burden, then the employee is provided with a ‘full and fair opportunity’ to demonstrate that the employer’s rationale is **pretextual** [read pretextual], i.e., that it was not the actual motivating pretext, then the issue of discrimination must be submitted to a jury for a determination.” Hyman Lovitz & Sidney L. Gold, “Standard of Proof Set in Title VII Cases,” <em>Legal Intelligencer</em>, 26 Oct. 1993, at 8. Cf. **contextual** & **contractual**.

**pretty**, adv., is still considered informal or colloquial <a pretty good drawing>. It sometimes conveys a shade of doubt—**pretty clear** being less certain in some **pretty good** cases—e.g.: “Impressed by Maggie’s brashness, Roe and her amazing ability to lie on a dime and **prevaricate**; to lie—e.g.: “[I]mpressed by Maggie’s brashness and her amazing ability to lie on a dime and **prevaricate** at will, Kaz installs her in their guest house.” Michael Wilmington, “Ugly Duckling Tale Doesn’t Have a Fairy Ending, but Never Takes Flight,” <em>Chicago Trib.</em>, 8 June 2007, Movies §, at 5.

Odds, the word is sometimes confused with **procrastinate**, especially in BrE—e.g.: “I never make art in the studio,” says [Cornelia] Parker. ’I make it in the space. That way, you have to make very good, quick decisions. You can’t **prevaricate** [read procrastinate]. You just have to get on with it.” Geoff Edgers, <em>Boston Globe</em>, 6 Dec. 2006, at K14. See **word-swapping**.

Occasionally, it’s hard to decipher what the writer intended—e.g.: “There is certainly no other evidence from any source that Einstein was ever romantically interested in this young woman, whose mother he eventually married and who thus became his beloved stepdaughter. But the author **prevaricates** [read waffles! doesn’t elaborate?], leaving the reader with the hint that perhaps there was more to this letter.” Amir D. Aczel, “Eternal Einstein,” <em>Boston Globe</em>, 15 Apr. 2007, at D5. Whatever the meaning, surely there is no suggestion here that the author evaded the truth.

**prevaricate** misused for **procrastinate**: Stage 1

**prevent**. In AmE, this verb takes from, but in BrE the preposition is frequently omitted—e.g.:

- “Fortunately for us, the earth’s atmosphere absorbs gamma rays and **prevents** them **doing** any damage to life or property here.” Clive Cookson, “Headed This Way from a Galaxy Near You,” <em>Fin. Times</em>, 17 May 1997, at 2. (AmE would insert from after them.)

**Prevent** there causes verbose, awkward constructions—e.g.:

- “Last year they went to court claiming amnesty would **prevent** there from ever being a criminal trial in his death.” “In South Africa, the Truth and Nothing But,” <em>Wash. Times</em>, 4 Feb. 1997, at A18. (A possible revision: Last year they went to court claiming that amnesty would **prevent** a criminal trial for his death.)
- “But Russell’s paradox does not **prevent** there being [read prevent or preclude] something else—a class of all sets—which is an extensional entity behaving in some respects as sets do.” Michael Potter, *Set Theory and Its Philosophy* 312 (2004).

**preventable.** So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—no longer *preventible* (the predominant spelling through about 1880). See **-able** (A).

Current ratio: 53:1

**preventive; **preventive*. The strictly correct form is **preventive** (as both noun and adjective), though the corrupt form with the extra internal syllable is unfortunately common—e.g.:

- “The scientific discoveries . . . have led biotech researchers to develop two classes of vaccines: **preventative** [read preventive], such as traditional inoculations against polio, influenza, or rubella; and therapeutic, where the immune system is primed to fend off the recurrence of certain diseases such as skin cancer.” Ronald Rosenberg.

• “As shadow health minister she has championed preventative [read preventive] health care; promoting dieting, exercise and stop-smoking programmes, for example.”


In modern print sources, preventative is about five times as common as *preventive, a needless variant.

**Preventive Grammar.** Occasionally a grammarian or editor will be asked a question such as, “Should it be It’s both of their second marriage or It’s both of their second marriages?” The expert to whom the question has been posed will demur and recommend a rewrite: It’s a second marriage for each of them, or even It’s a second marriage for them both. Or perhaps the for a.

The questioner will persist: “But which of the original wordings is correct? Assume a rewrite is impossible.”

But of course a rewrite is never impossible. Although questions of this kind might fascinate philologasters, they’re a nuisance to both the true philologist and the true stylist. The best recourse is a rewording. Why perpetrate a sentence that’s awkward but arguably defensible? A sentence that’s only defensible will raise doubts in the reasonable reader’s mind.

Often you’ll be presented with a sentence that is correct, according to strict grammatical tradition, but that sounds either stuffy or downright wrong. During the 20th century, for example, some grammarians insisted that Neither you nor I am a plumber is correct phrasing. Using are or is in place of am would be quite incorrect. These grammarians relied on the “rule of proximity”: in neither–nor constructions, the second element controls the verb for both number and person. Hence neither you nor I am. See, e.g., Roy Ivan Johnson et al., *English Patterns* 426 (1941) (“When two subjects are connected by the correlative conjunctions either . . . or or neither . . . nor, the verb agrees with the subject which stands nearer to it: . . . One thing is certain: either you or I am responsible.”). See neither . . . nor (A).

But this “correct” wording sounds awful. It sounds wrong. And now the empirical evidence shows that published authors have never used it much. In every period of Modern English, *neither you nor I are* (grammatically poor) has occurred more frequently than *neither you nor I am*. The grammarians who insisted on *am* were simply out of touch with the practice of authors who actually used the phrase—and they were insisting on a kind of linguistic unreality. Their position was unsound.

The point of this entry is that you’re better off avoiding awkward solutions entirely. If you’re a smart writer, you won’t create unnecessary frictions between you and your reader. It would be better to write or say, You’re not a plumber, and neither am I. That would be seriously inconvenient only if you were trying to use am a plumber as a rhyme in a poem. In ordinary prose, it’s typically to your advantage to write around a problem, thus eliminating doubts completely rather than creating merely defensible solutions to them.

You want to convey a message, not defend the way you expressed it.

Many of the words discussed under skunked terms fall under this principle: if some number of readers, either those in the know or the linguistic know-nothings, are going to think you’ve gotten something wrong, your best course may be to reword. Even so, you must draw the line somewhere. If you mention “preventive grammar,” and your interlocutor says it should surely be “preventative grammar,” it would be understandable for you simply to write off your interlocutor altogether.

**preview, n.** & vb., is the standard spelling. *Prevue* is a variant.

Current ratio: 729:1

*previous to* for before is highfalutin—e.g.:

- “Previous to [read Before] this award, the Police Department had received at least $11 million under the 1994 crime bill alone.” Emily Bazar & Janine DeFaoo, “City Cops Receive Big Grant,” Sacramento Bee, 16 July 1997, at A1.


Cf. prior & *subsequent to.*

**preyed mantiis.** See praying mantis.

**pricey.** This casualism, meaning “expensive,” is preferably so spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *pricy* (a variant spelling).

Current ratio: 24:1

**prideful.** See proud.

**prier (= someone who pries) is the standard spelling.** *Pryer* is a variant.

Current ratio: 27:1

**primal; primordial; primeval; *primaev*al.** All these words essentially mean “first in time; original.” But in the jargon of scientists, each is usually confined to a distinct scientific context: *primal* to psychology <primal therapy>, *primordial* to biology <primordial soup>, and *primeval* to geology or paleontology <primeval forests>. *Primaev*al is a chiefly BrE variant of *primeval.*

**primer (= an elementary or introductory textbook) is pronounced /prim-ar/ in AmE but /pri-mar/ in BrE.** Interestingly, the AmE pronunciation probably represents the older form, and BrE usage seems to have shifted during the 20th century: the original *OED* in 1909 gave precedence to the pronunciation with a short i.

**primeval.** See *primal.*
primogeniture; primogenitor. Primogeniture = (1) the fact or condition of being the firstborn child of the same parents; or (2) (at common law) the right of succession or inheritance belonging to the firstborn, often involving the exclusion of all other children.

Primogenitor = the first parent; earliest ancestor. Loosely, it’s used for progenitor (= forefather, ancestor).

primordial. See primal.

primrose path. See garden path.

principal; principle. A. The Senses. These two words, though often confused and used incorrectly and interchangeably, share no common definitions. Generally, it’s enough to remember that principal (= chief, primary, most important) is usually an adjective and that principle (= a truth, rule, doctrine, or course of action) is virtually always a noun. Although principle is not a verb, we have principled as an adjective.

But principal is sometimes a noun—an elliptical form of principal official <Morgan is principal of the elementary school> or principal investment <principal and interest>.

B. Principal misused for principle. This is a fairly common blunder—e.g.:

- “The Ways and Means bill approved today, after more than a month of deliberation and voting, preserves more than a quarter of the central principals [read principles] put forth by the President: universal coverage and the requirement that employers assume 80 percent of its cost for their workers.” Robin Toner, “Clinton Wins One, Then Loses as 2 Panels Vote on Health Bill,” N.Y. Times, 1 July 1994, at A1.

- “The three repeatedly pointed to their own steadfast adherence to principals [read principles], trying to draw contrast between themselves and Mr. Dole.” Ignoring G.O.P. Rivals, DOE Says He Can Smell Victory;” N.Y. Times, 10 Mar. 1996, at 11.

C. Principle misused for principal. This mistake is perhaps even more common—e.g.:

- “Employed with CISD for 29 years and served as CISD Principal [read Principal] for 26 years.” Advertisement for Dave Corley, running for city commission, Canyon News, 28 Apr. 1994, at 2. (This misuse—in which principal, if correctly used, would be a noun—appears less commonly than the adjectival misuse.)


- “Bowers was a principle [read principal] figure in one of college basketball’s nastiest scandals in recent years after she made allegations of NCAA violations by the Baylor men’s team in memos to university officials.” Randy Riggs, “Calm on the Court; Austin Am. Statesman, 21 Jan. 1995, at C1.

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principal misused for principle: Stage 1
Current ratio (fundamental principles vs. *fundamental principals): 305:1

C. Principle misused for principal. This mistake is perhaps even more common—e.g.:

- “Employed with CISD for 29 years and served as CISD Principal [read Principal] for 26 years.” Advertisement for Dave Corley, running for city commission, Canyon News, 28 Apr. 1994, at 2. (This misuse—in which principal, if correctly used, would be a noun—appears less commonly than the adjectival misuse.)


- “Bowers was a principle [read principal] figure in one of college basketball’s nastiest scandals in recent years after she made allegations of NCAA violations by the Baylor men’s team in memos to university officials.” Randy Riggs, “Calm on the Court; Austin Am. Statesman, 21 Jan. 1995, at C1.

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principal misused for principle: Stage 2
Current ratio (principal reasons vs. *principle reasons): 17:1

D. Principal as a Noncomparable Adjective. See adjectives (b).

prior; previous. The adjectives prior and previous for earlier are each within the stylist’s license; *prior to and *previous to in place of before are not.

In fact, *prior to—one of the most easily detectable symptoms of bureaucratese, commercialese, and legalese—is terribly overworked. As Theodore Bernstein once pointed out, one should feel free to use *prior to instead of before only if one is accustomed to using *posterior to for after. See The Careful Writer 347 (1979). Cf. *previous to & *subsequent to.

prioritize; *priorize. Writers with sound stylistic priorities avoid these words. Prioritize, dating from the mid-1960s, typifies bureaucratese bafflegab—e.g.: “The rate at which an objective is achieved should reflect the degree to which that component of the plan has been prioritized.” (Read: Do the most important things first.) Instead of prioritize, conservative writers tend to use set priorities or establish priorities. In time, of course, prioritize might lose its bureaucratic odor. But that time has not yet arrived.

Much less common than prioritize is the illogically formed *priorize, a fairly obscure Canadianism—e.g.:

- “Of course, the finance minister will, for the benefit of his colleagues, ‘priorize’ [read establish priorities for] the promises made by the new regime.” Dalton Camp, “Grits Can Be Ruthless;” Toronto Star, 7 Nov. 1993, at H3.

- “Two months later, not only must a prospective comrade share all of our ’isms; s/he must also prioritize them [read view their relative importance] exactly as we do.” “The Left’s First Deadly Sin: Ideological Elitism,” Canadian Dimension, 19 Sept. 1997, at 3. (On the use of s/he in that sentence, see sexism (b).)

- “In consequence, the triple criteria used in this work can help to prioritize [read arrange] several clusterings and to find the more reliable patterns from a set of data.” Dante Conti & Karina Gibert, “The Use of the Traffic Lights Panel as a Goodness-of-Clustering Indicator,” in Artificial Intelligence Research and Development 19, 27 (David Riaño et al. eds., 2012).

See -ize & bureaucratese.

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1. prioritize: Stage 4
2. *priorize: Stage 1

Current ratio (prioritize vs. establish priorities vs. *priorize): 1,728:69:1

*prior to. See prior.
prize. See prize.

prison. See in prison.

pristine (= [1] unspoiled and undamaged, as if new, or [2] extremely fresh or clean) is pronounced /pri-steen/ in AmE and /pris-teen/ in BrE. Two old-fashioned pronunciations, both archaic, are /pris-tin/ and /pris-tin/.

privilege is often misspelled *priviledge (a common spelling till about 1700, but now justly regarded as a mistake)—e.g.: "A season badge, which includes grounds and clubhouse privileges [read privileges] throughout the tournament, is $80." "Motorola Western Open Facts," Chicago Sun-Times, 30 June 1996, at 25. (On the poor title of that article, see noun Plague.) See spelling (A).

The word is permissibly pronounced with either three syllables (/priv-a-lij/) or two (/priv-laj/).

prize; prize. Although prize is the better spelling in the sense “to pry or force open,” prize often appears in this sense. But the differentiation is worth promoting. Prize is the spelling for all other senses.

proactive = (of a person, policy, etc.) creating or controlling a situation by taking the initiative or anticipating events; ready to take initiative, tending to make things happen (SOED). Though, as a vogue word, proactive is widely viewed with suspicion, it’s occasionally useful as an antonym of reactive. It seems to fill a gap in the language—one not adequately filled by assertive or any other common word. Cf. reactionary, n.

prize; prize. As discussed below, studies in the 1990s both continued to be married to the original sense of “poser” or “riddle,” until quite recently. Today, though, it is commonly used to describe something that creates trouble—e.g.: “P raise is the spelling for all other senses.

problematical; problematical. Both forms appear in modern writing. Though problematic is now much more usual, euphony may occasionally recommend problematical.

How problematic came to denote “troublesome” isn’t puzzling. The word problem derives from the Latin and Greek term for “something put forward, esp. for discussion and perhaps resolution.” This sense lives on, for example, in the math problems that a teacher assigns for homework. In English, this original sense of problem goes back at least to the 1300s.

It wasn’t until two centuries later that problem came to be used in the sense of “difficulty.” Even so, problematic continued to be married to the original sense of “poser” or “riddle,” until quite recently. Today, though, it is commonly used to describe something that creates trouble—e.g.: “But the jet can’t travel nonstop to Pelosi’s home district in San Francisco . . . . For security reasons, refueling stops are considered problematic.” Edward Epstein, “Pelosi Finds Unlikely Ally in Flight Fuss,” S.F. Chron., 9 Feb. 2007, at A1. Indeed, that sense has drowned out the former sense of problematic as “uncertain” or “doubtful.”

So is that trend troublesome? Not really. The word neatly fills a void in the language, and the meaning is intuitively recognizable. It ought to be considered standard.

pris-tin/ and /pris-tin/. See Pronunciation (B).

privity (= honesty; integrity) is sometimes misused for propriety—e.g.:

• “We should also openly discuss the major difference between the ethical privity [read propriety] of euthanasia, with which many concur, and its legality.” Faith Fitzgerald, “Physician Aid in Dying—Finding a Middle Ground,” 157 Western J. Medicine 193 (1992).

• “The Clintons and their political allies have built careers on criticizing the ‘get-rich-quick’ attitudes of the ‘greedy 80s;’ when all sorts of unscrupulous scoundrels were making money on deals of dubious ethical propriety [read propriety].” “Whitewater Rafting,” Orange County Register, 2 Feb. 1994, at B8. (People have or lack propriety; deals don’t.)

PRIZE
**Question**: Is often cleaner. **Complicate** is occasionally a good, uncomplicated substitute.

**proboscis** /proh-boh-siz/ (= [1] the trunk of an elephant or snout of an animal, or [2] any similar tubular organ on an insect or other life-form), a Greek loanword dating from the 17th century, traditionally formed the classical plural **probosci**es in English-language contexts. But the anglicized plural **proboscis**es became predominant in AmE in the late 1970s, and it has competed closely with the Greek plural in BrE since the mid-1980s. See **plurals** (b).

Current ratio (probosci / proboscis in World English): 1:2:1

**proceed**. See precede.

**proceed forward**, dating from the 17th century, is an age-old redundancy—e.g.:

- “And now, in the first days of this Maple Leafs training camp, it is difficult to proceed forward [read move forward] without first looking back.” Steve Simmons, “It’s Make or Break Time for Leafs’ Yushkevich,” Toronto Sun, 12 Sept. 1997, at 16.
- “When you work repeatedly with people who are familiar, then repetition will always remain the basis from which to proceed forward [read proceed],” Graham Firth & Mark Barber, Using Intensive Interaction with a Person with Social or Communicative Impairment 71 (2011).

**proceeds**, n. (= the value of land, goods, or investments when converted into money), takes a plural verb. But some writers want to write proceeds is instead of the correct form, proceeds are. This noun is pronounced /proh-seeds/, with the accent on the first syllable.

**process**, n. & vb. A **Pronunciation**. A process is a series of purposeful actions to which something is subjected or a series of things that occur naturally and result in a gradual change <fermentation is both a biological and a chemical process>. The word is pronounced /proh-ses/ in AmE and /proh-ses/ in BrE. To process something is either to deal with or handle it in some way, especially through established procedures, or to subject it to some special treatment <we haven’t yet processed the applications>. This verb is pronounced just as the noun is: /proh-ses/ in AmE and /proh-ses/ in BrE.

But process can also be another verb entirely—meaning “to move in a procession”—as a back-formation from procession. In this chiefly BrE sense, the word is pronounced /pra-ses/.

For the plural of the noun, the preferred pronunciation is /proh-ses-iz/ in AmE and /proh-ses-iz/ in BrE—not /-zeez/ in the final syllable.

**procurement** 731

**B. In the process of**. This phrase never adds anything to the sentence in which it appears. You can safely omit it and thereby tighten your sentence—e.g.:

- “I have on my desk a little manuscript from the fourteenth century written by an unknown author, which I am in the process of [delete in the process of] editing.” Donald J. Lloyd, “Our National Mania for Correctness,” in A Linguistics Reader 57, 58 (Graham Wilson ed., 1967).
- “Appropriately for a community that was in the process of [delete in the process of] acquiring the sophistication of golf and drugs, this was not a case of a mean little robbery gone wrong but a thoroughly contemporary killing.” Owen Harris, “A Long Time Between Murders,” Am. Scholar, Winter 2001, at 71, 79.

**processable**; *processable*. Although many American dictionaries continue to give priority to the archaic-looking *processable*, the spelling processable is now more than five times as common in modern print sources. It looks more natural, and it ought to be accepted as standard. See -able (a).

Current ratio: 5:1

**prochronism**. See anachronism.

**proconsulship**; *proconsulate*. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 2:1

**procreative**: *procreational*. The former is standard, *procreational* being a needless variant.

Current ratio: 15:1

**procuration**; *procurrence; procuary*. See procurement.

**procure** is a formal word for get (the ordinary word) or obtain (a semiformal word).

**procurement**; **procuration**; *procurrence; procary*. Procurement (= the act of obtaining) is the generic noun corresponding to procure—e.g.:


Procurement has another, more restricted sense in legal contexts: “the act of persuading or inviting another, esp. a woman or child, to have illicit sexual intercourse” (Black’s Law Dictionary 1401 [10th ed. 2014]). E.g.: “Police alleged that they were required to perform duties of a very personal nature for the governor on official time . . . [including] the procurement of women for sex and concealment of the governor’s

**Procuration** = (1) the act of giving someone a power of attorney; or (2) the authority given to someone with a power of attorney. Hence procurement fees are agent fees. E.g.: “There are over 40 lenders who offer advisers a ‘procurement fee.’ This is a cash payment made to advisers by lenders for bringing them the business.” James Hipwell, “Place a Mortgage and Win a Motor,” *Independent*, 24 Sept. 1995, at 13.

**Procuracy** = (1) a letter of agency; the document giving someone a power of attorney; (2) the office of a procurator, i.e., an official charged with managing the financial or legal affairs of a geographic region; or (3) the region within a procurator’s jurisdiction. Though rare, the term is still used, primarily in senses 2 and 3—e.g.:

- “After some initial progress in getting the Municipal Procuration to investigate and acknowledge that the allegations were ‘basically correct,’ the efforts of these staff members were obstructed by high officials.” Orville Schell, “China’s ‘Model’ State Orphanages Serve as Warehouses for Death,” *L.A. Times*, 7 Jan. 1996, at M2.

**prodigal.** To be prodigal is to be prone to wasteful spending, especially to frittering away one’s savings on hedonistic indulgence. In the biblical parable, the prodigal son leaves home, squanders his inheritance, almost starves to death, and is still greeted with open arms when he returns to his father.

Most people today associate prodigal with the part of the parable about wandering afar and coming home repentant, with no connotation left of squandering money—e.g.:

- “Our hero is a prodigal son (David Arquette) returned home to revive the family gold mine and rekindle an old flame with the foxy lady sheriff (Kari Wuhrer).” Brian Miller, “Scream,” *Seattle Weekly*, 18 July 2002, at 78.

The word is unrelated to prodigy and prodigious, both of which today generally carry positive connotations.

**prodigality; profligacy.** The former means “lavishness, extravagance.” The latter means primarily “given to overindulgence in vice, licentiousness,” but it also shares the sense of the former.


**pro et con.** See *pro and con.*

**profane; profanatory.** What is profane is irreverent or blasphemous (<proflane insult>; what is profanatory tends to make something profane <drink had a profanatory influence on him>.


**profession.** This word has been much debased in recent years, primarily at the hands of egalitarians who call any occupation a profession. In many American cities today, a person seeking a job as a barber, manicurist, or convenience-store manager turns in the classified ads to the section titled “Professions.” A physician looking for a change in jobs turns to “Advanced Degree Required,” a section of its own rather than a subsection of “Professions.”

Traditionally there have been but three professions: theology, law, and medicine. These were known either as the three professions or as the learned professions. The term was ultimately extended to mean “one’s principal vocation,” which embraces prostitution as well as medicine. (*The oldest profession originally had an irony much stronger than it has today.*)

The restricted sense of profession no doubt strikes many people as snobbish and anachronistic. What about university professors, atomic physicists, and engineers? Perhaps three professions are not enough, but we ought to use at least some discrimination,

**professoriate** (= collectively, the professors of an academic institution) has been the standard term since the mid-19th century. Before that, *professorate* was standard; it is now a needless variant of either *professor or professorship.* Avoid the variant spelling *professoriat.*

Current ratio (professoriate vs. *professorate vs. *professoriat): 7:2:1

**profferer.** So spelled—not *profferor.* For a curiosity, though, see **offeror.** See also -er (A).

**profligacy.** See prodigality.

**progenitor.** See primogeniture.

**progeny** (= offspring) is usually plural in sense—e.g.: “The day before is the annual Alumnae Baby Party, when mothers and grandmothers (perhaps even a great-grandmother or two) will be showing off their progeny who’ve become students at the school.” Betty Guillard, “VIPS Rounded Up for Cowboy Month,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 7 May 1997, at E3. So it takes a plural verb. It’s not a collective noun that takes a singular verb—e.g.: “Their progeny was [read progeny were] many, and all of them came back from World War II and worked in the business.” “All in the Family,” Footwear News, 16 Oct. 1995, at S26.

The word is sometimes used as a singular in place of son, daughter, or child, but only when the writer wants to be facetious—e.g.:

- “It took this nervous first-time father a minute or two to realize that my poor tiny progeny was born without the old gluteal fold, i.e., a butt.” Robert Glenn, “Dad Has Two Arguments Against Abortion Option,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 28 Sept. 1996, at A7.
- “Ashley Hamilton, who not only is the progeny of George Hamilton but was once married to the infamous Shannen Doherty of Beverly Hills 90210 for about 20 minutes, is going to get himself spliced . . . to Angie Everhart.” Roger Anderson, “Glitterati,” Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 4 Oct. 1996, at E7.

For the insensitive use of progeny as a metaphor, see **METAPHORS.**

**prognosis; prognostication; prognostic,** n. *Prognosis* is ordinarily used in medicine to mean “a forecast of the probable course and termination of an illness.” (See **diagnosis.**) **Prognostication** is more general, denoting “a prediction or prophecy” or “a conjecture of some future event formed upon some supposed sign.” E.g.: “But not quite everyone is convinced that Mr. Greenspan’s latest *prognostication*—or, for that matter, the unbroken economic expansion since 1991—proves that he has all the answers.” Peter Russell, “Erring on the Side of Fighting Inflation at the Expense of Jobs,” N.Y. Times, 10 Apr. 1997, at D2. *Prognostic* = an indication or omen.

**program; programme.** The first is the AmE spelling; the second is BrE. *Program* is used in BrE, however, in reference to computer programs.

The word is best pronounced /proh-gram/ in AmE and BrE alike—but /proh-gram/, with an anomalous schwa sound, is widespread and acceptable today.

**program(m)er; program(m)ing.** The best spellings use *-mm-*, whether in AmE or BrE. The *-mm-* in AmE appears to derive from *programme*, the BrE spelling. Although some American dictionaries have given priority to *programmer* and *programing*, these forms are rare and undesirable: they suggest a long -a- in the penultimate syllable. See **SPELLING (B).**

Current ratio (programmer vs. *programer): 843:1
Current ratio (programming vs. *programing): 357:1


**prohibit** takes the preposition from <the bylaws prohibit us from doing that>. Formerly, this verb could be construed with to <the bylaws prohibit us to do that>, but now this construction is an archa-ism. Cf. **forbid.**

**prohibitive; prohibitory.** These terms have undergone a latent differentiation that deserves encouragement. *Prohibitive* may mean generally “having the quality of prohibiting,” but more and more in modern prose it has the sense “tending to preclude consumption or purchase because of expense” <the costs are prohibitive>. *Prohibitory* has carved out a niche in the law in the sense “expressing a prohibition or restraint” <prohibitory injunction>.

**project, n. & vb.** The noun *project* (= [1] a carefully planned piece of work, [2] an ambitious undertaking, or [3] a part of a school or college course involving a formulated task, esp. one requiring research) is /prәh-jekt/ in AmE and BrE alike. Avoid /prah-jek/. The verb *project* (= [1] to plan, configure, estimate,
or extrapolate, [2] to present for consideration, [3]
to stick out beyond an edge or surface, [4] to display
outwardly, [5] to send out with great force, or [6] to
ascribe to another [one's own attitudes or feelings,
etc.]) is pronounced /prә-jekt/.

**prolificacy**; **prolificness.** The standard noun
corresponding to prolific is prolificacy, not
*prolificness—e.g.:

• “Alas, Ms. Oates—whose work I deeply admire—has paid
a price for her prolificity” Jay Parini, “On Being Prolific,”
in *Writers on Writing* 199, 204 (Robert Pack & Jay Perini

• “Allen's prolificness [read prolificacy] is legendary.” John Beifuss,
“So-So 'Love You' Says: Woody Allen Needs a Hiatus,”

• “The first problem that has to be confronted in relation to Ruiz's oeuvre is its sheer prolificacy [read prolificacy].”

Cf. *genericity.*

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*prolificacy for prolificity*; Stage 1
Current ratio (prolificacy vs. *prolificness*): 3:1

prolifically is the adverb corresponding to prolific, adj. But some writers misspell it *proficely, maybe on the
analogy of publicly—e.g.: “No wonder I wrote so easily, and prolifically [read prolifically].” Jeanne Crownover,
“She’d Be a Writer . . . Except She Has Too Much Tranquility,” *Sacramento Bee,* 1 Jan. 1995, Scene §,
at 6. See -1C.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*proficely* misspelled *proficely*; Stage 1
Current ratio: 2,100:1

**promotor.** See *promoter.*

**promulgate** (= [1] to put into effect [a new law, regu-
lation, etc.], or [2] to proclaim or make known to as
many people as possible) is pronounced /prahm-ol-
gate/ in *STANDARD ENGLISH* today—though it was
traditionally pronounced /pra-mal-gate/ before the
mid-20th century.

**prose; prosestrate; supine.** To lie *prose or prosestrate
is to lie facedown. To lie *supine* is to lie face up. But in
1997, when a mass suicide occurred in San Diego, a
local officer spread an incorrect usage to millions of
listeners: “‘They were lying prose on their backs,’ the
San Diego sheriff’s spokesman told the TV camera.”
Richard K. Shull, “Fatal Dose of Copspeak,” *Indianap-
olis News,* 1 Apr. 1997, at A11. Within seconds of that
televised statement, “an earnest broadcast reporter,
eager to set the record straight, declared, ‘They were
prostrate on their backs’” *Ibid.* The word that each
speaker wanted, of course, was *supine.*

For more on *prostrate,* see *prostrate* (b). See also
*supine.*

**PRONOUNS. A. The Basics.** The personal pronouns in
English are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nominative</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Possessive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Person</strong></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>me</td>
<td>my, mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Person</strong></td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>your, yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third Person</strong></td>
<td>he, she</td>
<td>him, her</td>
<td>his, her, hers, its</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*prolong* misspelled *prolong*; Stage 1
Current ratio: 15:1

**pronoun.** So spelled—*not* *prolog.*

**promisor; promiser.** Usage commentators have long
said that the former is the legal spelling (as it is), the
latter the everyday spelling. In fact, though, lawyers
have much more call to use the term, so *promiser is
comparatively infrequent in print sources.

Current ratio: 15:1

**promissory.** So spelled.

**promoter.** So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—*not*
*promotor.* E.g.: “Meanwhile, the city's attorneys have
been meeting with concert *promoters* [read promoters].” Ruth S. Intress, “City’s Legal Stance Still Unsure
on Concert Ban,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* 21 Apr.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*promoter misspelled *promotor*; Stage 1
Current ratio: 79:1

**promotive** (= tending to promote) tends to be used in
wordy constructions—e.g.: “Thought that is faithful
to God is promotive of [read promotes] health, while
thinking that tends away from God undermines

• “She must have watched John and I [read me] when we all met at a party one evening,” Susan Elliott, “The Day Denholm Said He Wanted an Open Marriage,” Daily Mail, 22 Aug. 1994, at 28, 29.

• “That tax of course is passed on to you and I [read me] through a franchise fee on our electric bills. Boiling it down, our city charges you and I [read me] for the electric company to use our city easements.” “WT Should Be Appreciated,” Canyon News, 20 Aug. 1995, at 4. (Consistency isn’t always a virtue.)


• “As for we [read us] poor slobs who were out of the loop—any loop—we did what Dallasites had always done: We took it on faith that the city was virtually recession-proof.” Jim Atkinson, “The Great Dallas Bust,” D Mag., Dec. 1995, at 91, 92.

• “What the public knows about Mr. Kelly’s life at home since his surrender in Switzerland is more or less what he, his parents and Mr. Puccio have chosen to disclose: scenes of Mr. Kelly passing the time with vigorous exercise and of he [read him] and his parents declaring his innocence, as seen on a recent broadcast of ABC’s “Turning Point.”” George Judson, “Ex-Fugitive from Rape Charge Seeks to Shape Image and Trial,” N.Y. Times, 2 May 1996, at A12.

• “Tokens predicting the future were buried in each dish . . . a coin for one who would become wealthy and a ring for he or she [read him or her] who would marry.” Edythe Preet, “Good Cheer,” Irish America, 31 Oct. 1996, at 66.

• “But they are not like you and I [read you and me], Po,” Peter David, Sir Apropos of Nothing 110 (2001).

• “If he had not forgiven we [read us] who lost faith at that time, he would have very few followers left.” J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince 27 (1st Am. ed. 2005).

For *between you and I, see between (c) & HYPERCORRECTION (b). For it’s me, see it is I. For pronouns after than, see than (c).

Occasionally, writers avoid the strictly correct form merely to avoid seeming pedantic. One trying for a natural tone might understandably shrink from I in this example: “There are now so many casinos in the places are like. [¶] And that somebody is. [¶]” And that somebody is me.” David Hawley, “New Guidebook Has the Scoop,” Pioneer Press (St. Paul), 22 Oct. 1994, at D1. The word I, technically, should serve as the predicate nominative after the linking verb is. That is, the pronoun in the predicate denotes the same person as the subject (somebody), so the predicate takes the nominative form because of that interchangeability. But me is much more common today in a sentence like that one.

Ernest Gowers gave sound advice here: “The prepositional use of than is now so common colloquially (He is older than me; they travelled much faster than us) that the bare subjective pronoun in such a position strikes the readers as pedantic, and it is better either to give it a more natural appearance by supplying it with a verb or to dodge the difficulty by not using an infective pronoun at all” (FMEU2 at 620).

For than whom, see than (d).

C. Underused in Specialized Writing. Some specialized writers—especially legal writers—have overlearned the lesson that pronouns sometimes have unclear referents. So they (the writers, not the referents) swear off ever using them (the pronouns, not the writers). The resulting style is quite stiff and unnatural—e.g.:

• “Frankfurter was also convinced that he could easily handle his judicial colleagues. Throughout his life Frankfurter [read he] had excelled at ‘personalia.’” ibid. at 138.

• “Throughout the spring of 1941, as Black, Douglas, and Murphy continued to agree with Frankfurter only in minor cases, Frankfurter stepped up his efforts at instruction. By the end of the term, Frankfurter [read he] was clearly exasperated with his colleagues.” ibid. at 155.

D. Indefinite Pronouns: Number. Traditionally, indefinite pronouns (anybody, anyone, everybody, everyone, nobody, no one, somebody, and someone)
have been considered invariably singular. Indeed, as the subject of a verb, each of those terms must be singular—e.g.:  

For an example of anyone . . . are, see anyone (d).

But often, as in the following sentences, the sense undoubtedly carries the idea of plurality from an antecedent pronoun to a referent one: “Since everyone there was Japanese, and none of them had ever traveled abroad, they needed a translator.” / “Everybody was crouched behind furniture to surprise me, and changing them.”

Other sentences present closer calls, but the trend is unmistakable—e.g.:  
• “We are therefore appealing to anyone working on a literary, social, or other historical text who has found a discrepancy between the material with which they are working and an entry in the OED, no matter how trivial, to send their comments to us.” Letter of John Simpson & Edmund Weiner [coeditors of the OED], “Revision of the Oxford English Dictionary,” TLS, 5 Nov. 1993, at 15.
• “Being so down-to-earth she accepts everybody for who they are, and so is unlikely to treat them any differently from the way she deals with anybody else.” Shelley von Strunkel, “What the Stars Say About Them,” Sunday Times (London), 18 June 1995, Style §, at 36.

Although everybody and everyone carry the strongest suggestions of plurality, the other indefinite pronouns are almost as natural as antecedents with they and them. That’s because they has increasingly moved toward singular senses. (See sexism (b).) Disturbing though these developments may be to purists, they’re irreversible. And nothing that a grammarian says will change them.

E. Reflexive Pronouns. The reflexive pronouns—herself, himself, itself, myself, oneself, ourselves, themselves, yourself, yourselves—have two uses. First, they may serve as the object of a reflexive verb (one that has the subject acting on itself), as either a direct object <they flatter themselves> or an indirect object <she gave herself a break>. Second, they may give their antecedent special emphasis. The antecedent may be the subject <Gayle herself would never admit it> <Gayle would never admit it herself> or an object <give it to Gayle herself>.

The key to the use of reflexive pronouns is that each one should reflect an antecedent. They are misused when they just stand in for personal pronouns—e.g.: “It is only right and just, Ms. Flamel, that the assets of the partnership should now be divided equally between yourself and me [read between you and me].” Fred Saberhagen, A Coldness in the Blood 152 (2002). See myself.

Nonstandard reflexive pronouns, such as *hisself and *theirselfs, typify dialect.  
F. Overeager Pronouns. See anticipatory reference.

G. Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Relative Pronouns. See that (A).

H. One as a Pronoun. See one.

I. Noun–Pronoun Disagreement. See concord (b).

J. Relative Pronoun–Antecedent Disagreement. See concord (d).

pronunciation is sometimes mistakenly said (and written) *pronunciation—e.g.:  
• “Gloria Estefan stopped by to discuss her new movie with Meryl Streep—Couric checked the pronunciation [read pronunciation] of her name seconds before air time.” Eric Deggans, “Dawn’s Early Fight,” St. Petersburg Times, 1 Nov. 1999, at D1.
• “Discussions will range from players who appeared on baseball cards without ever making it into a game to the pronunciation [read pronunciation] of names.” Joe Capozzi, “It’s Geek to Us,” Palm Beach Post, 21 June 2000, at C1.

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*pronunciation for pronunciation: Stage 1
Current ratio (pronunciation vs. *pronunciation): 165:1

PRONUNCIATION. A. General Principles. The best course is to follow the pronunciation current among educated speakers in one’s region. A few words have universally accepted pronunciations and rejected mispronunciations; where prescriptions on pronunciation appear in this book, the preferred pronunciation is generally preferred across geographic boundaries.

H.W. Fowler still speaks to us with clarion wisdom: “The ambition to do better than our neighbours is in many departments of life a virtue; in pronunciation it is a vice; there the only right ambition is to do as our neighbours” (FMEU1 at 466).

But when it comes to words that are seldom pronounced by English-speaking people—as with any learned word—the advice to conform with our neighbors’ pronunciation becomes problematic. For here we find diversity, not uniformity—the result of the infrequent occasions when the words are pronounced. And when opinions diverge among reasonable and educated people, there must be considerable leeway.

For a misspelling of pronunciation, see pronunciation.
B. Commonly Mispronounced Words. Many troublesome words are listed throughout this book, with the correct pronunciation noted. Here are some of the most frequently mispronounced words in AmE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Correct Pronunciation</th>
<th>Incorrect Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>affluent</td>
<td>af-lou-ant</td>
<td>a-flo-ant</td>
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<td>album</td>
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<td>concierge</td>
<td>kon-see-airzh</td>
<td>kon-see-air</td>
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<td>koo-pon</td>
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<td>zoology</td>
<td>zoh-ol-a-je</td>
<td>zoh-ol-a-je</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some contractions are also commonly mispronounced. For example, couldn't, didn't, and wouldn't are sometimes mouthed as if the -d- were part of the uncomplicated second syllable: /kuu-dant/, rather than the correct /kuu-d-ant/, etc. Sometimes, too, careless speakers syncopate contractions into such sounds as /kuun-t/ and /wuun-t/.

On pronunciations as class indicators, see CLASS DISTINCTIONS.

C. Recessive and Progressive Stresses. In English pronunciation, two forces seem to be constantly at work: pushing back the accent in certain words (recessive stress) and pushing it forward in others (progressive stress). Hence pronunciations shift very gradually. Recessive stress—usually by which the accent gets moved from the first to the second syllable—sometimes yields what have come to be seen as accepted pronunciations, but many of the recessive stresses here listed typify unrefined speech (stages 1 to 3 of the Language-Change Index). Most of the terms listed here are more fully discussed in entries at their alphabetical places in this book.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Stress</th>
<th>Recessive Stress</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>admirable (LCI Stage 1)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

With other terms, though, the force of change is in the opposite direction, from second syllable to first. Again the shift from the traditional pronunciation to the new stress sometimes typifies unrefined speech. But note that many more of the progressively stressed words have reached Stage 5 of the Language-Change Index—meaning full acceptability in STANDARD ENGLISH.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

Tradational Stress | Progressive Stress
---|---
acclimate | acclimate (LCI Stage 5)
acumen | acumen (LCI Stage 3)
cement | cement (LCI Stage 5)
confiscate | confiscate (LCI Stage 5)
contrary | contrary (LCI Stage 5)
debacle | debacle (LCI Stage 2)
descent | descent (LCI Stage 2)
Detroit | Detroit (LCI Stage 1)
ilustrative | illustrative (LCI Stage 2)
inculcate | inculcate (LCI Stage 5)
insurance | insurance (LCI Stage 2)
minuscule | minuscule (LCI Stage 5)
obfuscate | obfuscate (LCI Stage 5)
police | police (LCI Stage 1)
precedence | precedence (LCI Stage 5)
sonorous | sonorous (LCI Stage 4)
vagaries | vagaries (LCI Stage 5)

Much depends on what one linguist calls the “dynam-
icums of utterance.” Dwight L. Bolinger, “Stress and In-
in certain words are an indication of dialect and of
regional preferences. They may also be affected by the
presence or absence of stress in neighboring words.
See Arthur J. Bronstein, The Pronunciation of Ameri-
can English 256 (1960).

D. De-anglicized Pronunciations. English speak-
ers who learn another language often busy themselves
with using the “correct” pronunciation of loanwords
long since anglicized: ambience /ahm-bee-ahns/ for
/əm-be-an[t]s/ (ambience); guillotine /gee-ya-teen/ for
/gi-l-o-teen/; homage /oh-mahzh/ for /hom-iij/;
San Jacinto /san hah-seen-toh/ for /san ja-sin-toh/;
and even place names such as Torino for Turin. These
speakers display not so much their learning of another
tongue as their ignorance of English pronunciation.
Cf. Hobson-Jobsonism.

E. Lambdacism and Rhotacism. These are two of
the most common defects in pronunciation: lambdac-
cism denotes the imperfect or superfluous sounding
of -l- (as by making it sound like an -r- or -y-), and rhotac-
cism denotes the imperfect or superfluous sounding
of -r- (as by making it sound like -w- or -l-). In some children,
these mispronunciations occur at an early stage of
development and are soon outgrown; for them, Mary
had a little lamb can sound like Mawy had a yitto yam.
Sometimes, though, these defects are never outgrown;
they become minor speech impediments. Sometimes,
too, pronunciations exhibiting rhotacism character-
ize regional speech, as in President John F. Kennedy’s
pronunciation of idea /i-deer/ and Cuba /kyoo-bor/.
In the words listed in (n), one sees the intrusive -r-
(persevere) and the omitted -r- (mirror), both of which
are types of rhotacism; and the intrusive -l- (album),
which is a type of lambdacism.

F. The Mispronounced -ph-. In several words—
notably, diphtheria, diphthong, naphtha, ophthal-
mology, and pamphlet—people tend to change the
/l/ sound of the -ph- to a /p/ sound. Avoid these
mispronunciations.

For an example of a -ph- that has simply dropped
out of a word, see apothegm. Cf. jodhpur.

G. Names. See names (c).

H. Pronunciation and enunciation. Enuncia-
tion = (1) clear articulation of words, sentences, and
thoughts; or (2) a formal announcement, proclama-
tion, or statement. In sense 1, enunciation includes cor-
rect pronunciation of words, but it is a much broader
term. When enunciation is used without a modifier of
quality, the understood connotation is positive <the
speaker is known for her enunciation>; pronunciation,
on the other hand, is connotatively neutral <the presi-
dent is known for his pronunciation>.

I. Bibliography. For the best guidance on pro-
nouncing the most troublesome words, see Charles
Harrington Elster, The Big Book of Beastly Mispronunci-
cations (2d ed. 2005). For an excellent guide to proper
nouns, see John K. Bollard, Pronouncing Dictionary of
Proper Names (2d ed. 1998). For still other references,
see the Select Bibliography at the end of this book.

proof. Pl. proofs. See plurals (c).

propaganda, typically a singular mass noun, makes
the (rare) count-noun plural propagandas (which has
been around since the 18th century)—e.g.: “Colin
Jacobson has amassed a startling collection of banned
or suppressed photographs that clashed with prevail-
ing propagandas of a particular era or were seen as
ideologically dangerous.” Mona Reeder, “Images to
Savor for Months to Come,” Dallas Morning News, 20
Dec. 2002, at C4. The word propaganda is sometimes
mistaken to be a plural in the class of data and strata—
e.g.: “Ideological and political propagandas were [read
propaganda was] being used to bolster their objective,
too.” “Developing Nations Moving Towards Debt

Language-Change Index
propaganda misused as a plural: Stage 1
propagate (= to reproduce or extend) is occasion-
ally confused with promulgate (= to proclaim; put [a
policy, law, etc.] into action)—e.g.: “The EC tends
to impose its will by regulatory edict rather than by stat-
utes enacted by elected representatives. It propagates
[read promulgates] regulations daily, at an annual rate
of several thousands.” “Taking Sides: Stranglehold of

Language-Change Index
propagate misused for promulgate: Stage 1
propellant, n.; propellent, adj. As the headwords show,
the noun and the adjective aren’t spelled the same.

*propelment. See propulsion.

properly. How you place this word in relation to a
linking verb can affect meaning: be properly means
something different from properly be. The latter
phrase means that the thing in question (the subject)
is proper, or that it is proper for the thing to be done
<parents may properly be notified in these circum-
stances>, while the former means that the thing should
be done in a proper way <parents must be properly
notified—not orally, but in writing>. See be-verbs.
proper noun; common noun. These phrases are antonyms. A proper noun is the name of a specific person <Noah Webster>, place <Vancouver, British Columbia>, or thing <Gateway Arch>. A common noun is the name of a general class of people <teacher>, places <mountain>, or things <iron ore>. Some writers mistakenly believe that the antonym of proper noun is *improper noun—e.g.: "Capitalization of improper [read common] nouns and the lack thereof for proper nouns, sentence fragments and run-on sentences are unacceptable abuses of the English language." Lloyd Bockstruck, "Even Basics Are Wrong in These Basic Books," *Dallas Morning News*, 19 May 2001, at C8.

prophesy; prophecy. Prophesy (*/pro-fә-si/) is the verb meaning "to predict or foretell; prophecy" and the noun meaning "a prediction or foretelling." The two words are sometimes confounded—e.g.:
• "When he was finished he acknowledged the applause in good form before the chorus surged onto the stage to tell him of the Vestal's prophecy [read prophesy]." Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, *Communion Blood* 369 (1999).
• "Meanwhile, the gods finagle a meeting between Helen and young Paris (Matthew Marsden), a shepherd born to royalty, who was cast off as a baby because his birth was prophesied [read prophesied] to signal the destruction of Troy." Allan Johnson, "'Helen' A Soap Opera in Greek Clothing," *Chicago Trib.* 18 Apr. 2003, Tempo §, at 5.
• "Denied the constitutional option of a tie, it's a sure thing that in the day (or days? weeks? months?) ahead, millions of sore losers will be screaming bloody murder, prophecying [read prophesying] doom and acute gloom." Logan Jenkins, "A Monday in the Doldrums as Moby Dick Circles," *San Diego Union-Trib.*, 1 Nov. 2004, at B2.

To complicate matters further, the verb prophesy has sometimes been incorrectly made *prophesize*, especially since the 1950s—e.g.:
• "As Jesus rode through Jerusalem, many of the Jews waved palm branches and hailed him as the king of Israel because of clues . . . that had been prophesized [read prophesied] in Scripture." Betty Beard, "Holy Celebrations Have Similar Roots," *Ariz. Republic*, 26 Mar. 1994, at E9.
• "The Fox double triumph was perhaps prophesized [read prophesied] earlier this season." Jerry Krupnick, "The Simpsons' and 'X-Files' Win Peabodys," *Star-Ledger* (Newark), 4 Apr. 1997, at 39.
• "Mariammal's brother, too, reportedly continues to prophesize [read prophesy] and perform healings in his own small temple in the village." Tracy Pintchman, "From Local Goddess to Locale Goddess," in *Inventing and Reinventing the Goddess* 89, 94 (See Padma ed., 2014).

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. prophesy (n.) misspelled prophesey: Stage 3
2. *propheze* for prophesy: Stage 2

Current ratio (propesied vs. *propheze*): 29:1

proponent. See protagonist (b).

propose; proposition, vb. Propose (= to offer or suggest [some course of action]) has no particular connotations except when used in the sense of asking someone to marry. The word dates from the 14th century. *Proposition*, on the other hand, is an Americanism dating only from the early 20th century; it almost always carries a negative connotation. In its original uses, it usually implied that some unsavory or illegal action was suggested. It soon began to denote specifically an invitation to another person to engage in illicit sex.

propound. See expound.
proprietary; proprietorial; *proprietary. The last is an erroneous form. The adjective form corresponding to the noun 'proprietary' is either 'proprietary or propri- etorial. 'Proprietary' also means 'of, relating to, or holding as property.'

In the following sentence, 'proprietary' is almost certainly misused for 'proprietary': 'The contracts were negotiated not with the band's company, The Beatles, Ltd., which held the rights, but with NEMS, which did not possess any proprietary [read proprietary] rights whatsoever, being simply a management organization.' Albert Goldman, _The Lives of John Lennon_ 335 (1988).

Language-Change Index

*proprietary* misused for proprietary: Stage 1

Current ratio: 146,385:1

propriety. This word may mean either "fitness, right- ness" or "correctness in behavior or morals." But some writers have come to use it in the sense of 'property', perhaps as a kind of misguided back-formation from the adjective 'proprietary'—e.g.: "Between 1869 and his death in 1931, at age 84, Thomas Alva Edison was granted more than a thousand patents for inventions familiar and eccentric: from the typewriter, electric pen, electric light, phonograph, motion picture camera and alkaline storage battery—to the talking doll and a concrete house that could be built in one day from a cast-iron mold. [¶] From the start, Edison endeavored to 'keep a full record' of his progress—and the propriety of his ideas." Neil Baldwin, "Eureka: The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 5,799:1

propulsive; *propulsory. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 440:1

pro rata, adv. & adj., should be spelled as two words <their shares will be reduced pro rata> <the company will each exchange their 5.6 percent pro rata equity interest>. The phrase 'on a pro rata basis' is wordy for pro rata—e.g.: 'TP' shareholders will have the right to receive contingent shares that will permit them to receive—on a pro rata basis [read pro rata]—any cash proceeds resulting from TPI's ongoing lawsuit." Mary Hance, "Shoney's Acquiring Franchise," Nashville Banner, 5 Sept. 1995, at D1. The tendency to use the wordier expression signals the decline of the adverbial pro rata and the rise of the adjective. See basis (A).

Proportionate(ly) can often serve in place of pro rata—e.g.: "His 22-page financial disclosure to the Office of Government Ethics showed he received $1,141,578 from Kirkland & Ellis and $25,000 from NYU. He also received a pro rata [read proportionate] share of the counsel's salary," Frank J. Murray, "Starr Busy in Private Practice," Wash. Times, 13 Sept. 1995, at A4. See proportionate.

Language-Change Index

procise; prescribe. Proscribe = to prohibit. Prescribe = to impose authoritatively. But some writers apparently think that proscribe is simply a fancier form of prescribe—e.g.:

- "An amendment . . . merely authorizes the enactment of a litany of laws dictating the punishment of citizens inter- preted to have committed an act of physical desecration upon a banner proscribed [read prescribed or defined] to be a flag." Keith A. Kreul, "But There Are Better Solutions," Wis. State J., 14 June 1997, at A7.

Sometimes, but much less often, the opposite error occurs—e.g.: "Most of these rules of grammar have no real justification and there is therefore no serious reason for condemning the 'errors' they prescribe [read proscribe]." Frank Palmer, _Grammar_ 14 (1971). Given the ability and reputation of Mr. Palmer, that instance is almost certainly a printer's error.

Language-Change Index

1. proscribe misused for prescribe: Stage 1
2. prescribe misused for proscribe: Stage 1

Prose, Sound of. See sound of prose.

prosecute; persecute. Prosecute = to begin a case at law for punishment of a crime or of a legal violation. Persecute = to oppress, coerce, treat unfairly, often out of religious hatred. Occasionally the two are con- founded—e.g.: "Asked why they figure Philips has not actively persecuted [read prosecuted] violators, sources cite 'pure negligence' and a 'lack of organization' on the part of the company." Paul Verna, "Replicators

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

**prosecutorial; prosecutory; *prosecutive, *prosecutional.** Among these, the most common term in criminal-law texts is *prosecutorial*; but many dictionaries omit the term. Instead, most dictionaries define *prosecutory* and its needless variant *prosecutive*—less common words—as “of, relating to, or involving prosecution.” E.g.: “Law enforcement, shelter and support agencies, medical personnel, legal and *prosecutory* agencies, child-abuse treatment and intervention personnel all needed special interdisciplinary training and better.” Dee Aker, “The World Is Watching,” *Chicago Trib.*, 11 Aug. 1996, Womanews §, at 1.

But *prosecutorial* serves as the adjective corresponding to *prosecutor*—e.g.:

- “Not only did he lack the maturity and courage to face me, but he was irresponsible to have leaked my *prosecutorial* demise to the press the day before it occurred.” Paul Richwalsky, “Richwalsky Replies to Hawpe,” *Courier-J.* (Louisville), 19 Sept. 1997, at A15.
- “Until 2010, the notion of positive complementarity was primarily one of *prosecutorial* strategy,” Olympia Bekou, “Building National Capacity for the ICC,” in *The International Criminal Court in Search of Its Purpose and Identity* 133, 139 (Triestino Mariniello ed., 2015).

This word is hundreds of times as common in print as *prosecutor*—and has been since the 1970s.

*Prosecutional* is but a needless variant—e.g.:

- Marcia Clark, leader of that magnificent *prosecutional* [read *prosecutor* or *prosecutorial*], depending on the meaning] botch, has received a $2 million advance for her literature.” Blackie Sherrod, “Simpson Trial Has Attracted the Jackals,” *Dallas Morning News*, 5 Dec. 1996, at A37.

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**prosecutrix.** See sexism (d).

**proselytize; proselyte, v.t.** The former is preferred for three reasons: (1) despite the -ize suffix, it’s more euphonious and easier to say; (2) *proselyte* is primarily a noun, and using it as a verb causes miscues; and (3) *proselytize* is nine times as common in print. Because it is transitive, not intransitive, *proselytize* typically takes a direct object (without to or any other preposition)—e.g.: “According to the suit, Osborn had *proselytized to* [read *proselytized*] one of his players and had tried to persuade the player to attend his church.” Jack McCallum & Richard O’Brien, “Of Passes and Prayers,” *Sports Illustrated*, 22 Apr. 1996, at 20.

Current ratio (to *proselytize* vs. *to proselyte*): 9:1

**prospective; perspective.** *Prospective* (adj.) = (1) likely to become <prospective member>; or (2) expected <prospective profits>. *Perspective* (n.) = (1) the angle from which something is viewed [we gained a better perspective on the hill]; or (2) the relative proportions and positions of people and things within a scene <everything in the drawing seemed to be in perspective>. The noun *perspective* is sometimes used attributively—that is, it functions as an adjective, especially in art contexts <perspective painting>.

Misusing *perspective* for *prospective* amounts to a malapropism—e.g.:

- “Manis is expected to call 1,500 *perspective* [read *prospective*] jurors, or more than three times the usual number for a case, to look for 12 unbiased jurors.” Lee Mungin, “Al-Amin Case,” *Atlanta J.-Constr.*, 6 Jan. 2003, at D1.
- “A jury questionnaire will help prosecutors and defense lawyers determine if the *perspective* [read *prospective*] jurors have predisposed biases in the case.” Andy Nelesen, “Hill Trial in Toddler’s Death Set for Monday,” *Green Bay Press-Gaz.*, 16 Feb. 2003, at B7. (On the use of if in that sentence, see if (a).)

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**prospectus.** The correct English plural is *prospectives*—and it is the only form listed in English dictionaries. The Latin plural is *prospectus* (a fourth-declension noun), not *prospecti* (the product of ignorant hypercorrection originally in the 18th century)—e.g.:


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

**prospective** for the plural *prospectuses*: Stage 1

Current ratio (*prospecti* vs. *prospectus*): 111:1

**prostate. A. And prostatic.** Whereas most people, when referring to the disease, use *prostate cancer*, specialists often use *prostatic cancer*. That form can be found even in popular sources—e.g.:

- “This study, reported in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute, showed that 10 servings of tomatoes a week reduced the incidence of *prostatic cancer* by an amazing 45 percent.” Dr. Kenneth Walker, “Researchers Link Bad
Gums with Cardiovascular Disease,” Chicago Sun-Times, 1 Sept. 1996, at 45.


In fact, though, the phrase prostate cancer is about 100 times as common in print now as the more technical-sounding version. For example, in his 1996 book, Michael Korda used the title Man to Man: Surviving Prostate Cancer. That’s the form that reflects common usage. The other is something of an affectation at best left confined to the medical dictionaries.

B. And prostrate. These are very different words, but they are sometimes confused. In the verb sense, to prostrate oneself is to kneel down in humility or adoration. As an adjective, prostrate means either “lying facedown” or “emotionally overcome.” (See prone.) The noun prostate, by contrast, refers to the gland found in male mammals, surrounding the urethra at the base of the bladder.

The most common mistake is to write *prostate gland instead of prostate gland—e.g.:

- “Brans are popular, as are palmetto products, which are said to help prevent the prostate [read prostate] gland from becoming enlarged.” Ronda Robinson, “Be Healthy,” Knoxville News-Sentinel, 3 Dec. 1995, at E12.
- “During emission, the capsule of the prostate [read prostate] gland contracts simultaneously with the contractions of the vas deferens so that the thin, milky fluid of the prostate [read prostate] glands adds further to the bulk of the semen.” Ritu Jain, Secrets of Homoeopathy 167 (2007).

**Language-Change Index**

*prostate gland* for *prostate gland*: Stage 1
Current ratio (prostate gland vs. *prostate gland*): 97:1

**prostrate.** See prone & prostate (b).

**protagonist.** A. Generally. Literally, *protagonist* = the chief character in a drama. By extension, it means “a champion of a cause.” It should not be used loosely in reference to any character in a drama or any supporter of a cause—only to the chief one. But the slipshod extension is commonplace—e.g.:

- “In a national daily yesterday, half a dozen leading Festival protagonists [read supporters] were asked for a bet on the meeting.” Chris McGrath, “Banking on Mulligan,” Sporting Life, 11 Mar. 1997, at 2.

**Language-Change Index**

*protagonist* in the sense “any character”: Stage 2

B. And proponent. Perhaps the most objectionable watering-down of the meaning of protagonist occurs when it is used as an equivalent of proponent—e.g.:

“Rep. Henry Gonzalez, the Texas Democrat who chairs the housing subcommittee, is the protagonist [read proponent] of this legislation that also would increase the number of adjustable rate mortgages the FHA may insure.” “Senate Panel Action Gives Housing a User-Tax Victory,” San Diego Union-Trib., 27 Apr. 1986, at F23.

**Language-Change Index**

*protagonist* in the sense “proponent”: Stage 2

C. And antagonist. Some writers mistakenly use *protagonist* when the word they were looking for was *antagonist* (= opponent)—e.g.:

- “The two longtime protagonists [read antagonists], in a plot development that seems too good to be true given their relationship of late, will play together today in the final group in the final round of the Buick Invitational.” Steve Elling, “‘Woods, Mickelson Ready to Rumble,” Orlando Sentinel, 16 Feb. 2003, at C1.

**Language-Change Index**

*protagonist* misused for *antagonist*: Stage 2

D. Plural Use. If the protagonist is the main character in a play <Oedipus>, may we address more than one main character as *protagonists* <Romeo and Juliet>? H.W. Fowler decried the extensions of *protagonist* discussed in (b) and (c), but he also called the plural use “absurd.” The OED disagrees, contending that “limitation to the singular is strictly relevant only in the context of ancient Greek drama.” Today the plural is widely used and just as widely accepted—e.g.:

- “Everyone did a very good job, starting with the protagonists, Mitchell Bennett Schor as Little Joe and Eve Levin as Annette.” Anne Midgette, “Sweet Take for a Child, but a Dark Side, Too,” N.Y. Times, 18 Feb. 2003, at E3.

**protectorable; *protectible*.** The former now predominates: it’s about three times as common as its variant. See -able (a).

Current ratio: 3:1

*protected order.** See protective order.

**protective; *protectory*.** As an adjective, the latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 9,951:1

**protective order** (= a restraining order or an order preventing some type of conduct) is sometimes incorrectly rendered *protected order*—e.g. “Russell William McKay, 38, was arrested Sept. 18, for violation of protected [read protective] order.” Police Blotter, Tennessean, 3 Nov. 2002, at W14. In some states, the
variant order of protection is standard, especially in relation to domestic violence.

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*protected order for protective order: Stage 1
Current ratio (protective order vs. *protected order): 610:1

protégé (= someone whose career has been cultivated and promoted by a prominent mentor) has two acute accents. (See Diacritical Marks.) Although the term is not usually considered sex-specific, English has borrowed the feminine form as well from French: protégée. Both forms were first used in the 18th century.

protein used to be pronounced as three syllables. Today it’s almost always /proh-teen/ instead of /proh-tee-an/.

pro tem is a now-anglicized term derived from the abbreviation for pro tempore (= for the time being). No longer should this fairly common Latinism be italicized. It is used as a postpositive adjective in phrases such as mayor pro tem. Although it formerly required a period (i.e., tem.), today it is commonly and correctly used without one—e.g.:


• “Last Wednesday, police suspect a Superior Court pro tem judge got sauced, got into his Mercedes and proceeded to hit and kill an 18-year-old high school senior." Laurie Roberts, "Latest Road Outrage Doubly Outrageous," Ariz. Republic, 9 Apr. 2003, at B3.

protest, n.; protestation. The difference is that protest (/proh-test/) is the ordinary word, usually refers to a formal statement or action of dissent or disapproval, whereas protestation, a learned word, generally denotes a solemn affirmation <protestations of love>.

protest, vb., is transitive or intransitive in AmE, but solely intransitive in most BrE writing. In BrE one writes, "They protested against discrimination;" but not "They protested discrimination." Although he was writing on British usage only, Eric Partridge considered the latter, AmE usage incorrect and quoted an American writer as an offender against idiom (UÉ-A at 248). The phrase protest against is common also in AmE <they protested against the government’s decision>. In AmE, however, against is routinely omitted <they protested the government’s decision>. The verb is preferably pronounced /pra-test/ in AmE and BrE alike.

protestation. See protest, n.

protester is the standard spelling. Protester is a mere variant in all but one sense, in which the word is capitalized: “a Scottish Presbyterian who protested against the union with the Royalists in 1650.” Not common.

*prototypal. See prototypical.

prototype. See archetype.

prototypical; *prototypic; *prototypal. The first is the usual and preferred form. The others are needless variants. See archetype.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 48:4:1

protozoan (= any of various single-celled organisms) is the standard spelling. *Protozoan is a variant. Protozoan makes the plural protozoans or, especially in collective reference, protozoa. See plurals (b).

protuberate is sometimes misspelled and mispronounced as if it were *protruberate, perhaps out of confusion with protrude. The noun and adjective, likewise, are protuberance and protuberant, without the invasive -r-:

• “Sylt-Ost—or ‘eastern’ Sylt, the protruberance [read protruberance] that seems to form the handle of the ax—is a rich expanse of green meadow, not unlike the flat North German plain.” J.S. Marcus, “Germany’s Fragile North Sea Playground,” N.Y. Times, 5 June 1994, § 5, at 8.

• “Yayoi Kusama . . . became notorious in the 1960’s for covering surfaces with phalluses. In the catalogue is a photograph of a room filled with furniture bristling with such protruberances [read protuberances], which, seemingly, are cast in plaster.” Vivien Raynor, “An Exhibition Emphasizing the Feminist Role in Politics,” N.Y. Times, 7 May 1995, § 13, at 24.

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protuberate misspelled and mispronounced *protruberate: Stage 1

proud; prideful. The connotative distinction to bear in mind is that prideful suggests excessive pride, haughtiness, and disdain. Proudful is also moralistic in tone.

proved; proven. Since the 17th century, proved has been the preferred past participle of prove. It has always been the preponderant form. But proven often ill-advisedly appears—e.g.:

• “Yet it was another ‘Game of the Century,’ matching teams that had proven [read proved] thus far to be unbeatable.” Mark Blaudschun, “There’s Always Time for a Turn-around:” Boston Globe, 19 Sept. 1997, at D13.


In AmE, proven, like stricken, properly exists only as an adjective—e.g.:

• “All in all, the theory of group selection needs some beefing up before it steps onto the mat with the proven champion, individual selection, say both supporters and

• “But that strategy of occupation and settlement is a proven failure—if the object is peace.” “Stop Mideast Violence by Starting Peace Talks,” Palm Beach Post, 31 July 1997, at A12.

Proven has survived as a past participle in legal usage in two phrases: first, in the phrase innocent until proven guilty; second, in the verdict Not proven, a jury answer no longer widely used except in Scots law. As for Not proven, one writer has defined this verdict as meaning, “Not guilty, but don’t do it again.” William Roughhead, The Art of Murder 131 (1943). See irregular verbs (b).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

proven as a past participle: Stage 4

Current ratio: experience has proved vs. experience has proven: 4:1

provenance. A. And provenience. Both are formal words for origin or source. Provenance (/prə-vən-əns/) is the more usual word throughout the English-speaking world, usually in reference to art, antiques, artifacts, and other fields in which proof of authenticity is an issue. Provenience (/prə-və-nyən[t]s/) is a chiefly AmE variant.

Current ratio: 19:1

B. Misused for province. Provenance is sometimes misused for province (= domain), a malapropism—e.g.:

• “Where ‘The Full Monty’ makes something akin to a political gesture is in drawing attention to the noble male body, a subject more typically the provenance of avant-garde artists and photographers than of big Broadway musicals.” Reed Johnson, “Bare Truths of Character,” L.A. Times, 21 Apr. 2002, § 6, at 8.

• “Large, complex documents, once the provenance of professional printers, were brought in-house to word processing departments years ago.” Greta Ostrovitz, “Caddawaler Finds a Better Way to Train Staff,” N.Y.L.J., 28 May 2002, at 5.

• “If it thinks about it at all, popular opinion may hold that just intonation—the use of purely consonant tunings based on the overtone series—is the provenance of math geeks with synthesizers.” Kyle Gann, “Overtones of Eternity,” Village Voice, 4 June 2002, at 117.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

province misused for provenance: Stage 1

provided that; providing that. The phrase provided that (= on condition that; if; as long as) is a shortened form of the absolute construction it being provided that. E.g.:


• “If one parent is more affluent than the other, adequate child support from the better-off parent can permit the child to remain with the less wealthy parent, provided that the custodial parent will manage the support money to benefit the child.” Sara P. Schechter, “Tell Them to Stop Fighting,” Mothering, 22 Sept. 1997, at 70.

*Providing that is a variant form that some grammarians consider inferior because it’s not readily classifiable according to traditional grammar. (For an example of mid-20th-century disapproval of providing in this use, see Sophie C. Hadida, Your Telltale English 45 [rev. ed. 1942].) In fact, *providing that frequently causes miscues <he predicted that the church would prosper and gave some $100,000, providing that support could be found also from other donors>. As a practical matter, *providing that is especially apt to cause a miscue when that is elided—e.g.: “St. Luke’s requested the tax exemption based on parts of state law that allow tax exemptions for property, providing the company [read provided the company] doesn’t profit by it.” Ken Miller, “St. Luke’s Tax Status Hinges on Definitions,” Idaho Statesman, 20 July 1997, at A1. See given (that) & that (b).

In fact, though, nine times out of ten the word if is a better choice than either provided that or *providing that.

province. See provenance (b).

provocative; *provocatory. The latter is a needless variant.

prox. See inst.

proximate; proximal. Both mean “lying very near or close.” Yet proximal is primarily a technical, scientific term, whereas proximate is the ordinary term with the additional senses (1) “soon forthcoming; imminent”; (2) “next preceding”; and (3) “nearly accurate; approximate.” See approximate.

prudent; prudential. “To call an act prudent,” wrote H.W. Fowler, “is normally to commend it; to call it -ial is more often than not to disparage it” (FMEU1 at 473). Prudent = exhibiting prudence <the detective’s prudent withholding of judgment on the killing proved brilliant in the end>. Prudential = relating to, considered from the point of view of, or dictated by prudence <the senator opposed the policy on both moral and prudential grounds>. Writers sometimes use prudential where the shorter and simpler prudent would be a better fit—e.g.: “The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace recently released a thoughtful report arguing that the prudential [read prudent] course of action at present is to allow the inspections to continue.” Joe Roidt, “Preventive War,” Charleston Gaz., 11 Feb. 2003, at A5.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

prudent misused for prudent: Stage 1

prurience; *pruriency. The latter, standard through the 1930s, has become a needless variant.

Current ratio: 4:1

*pryer. See prior.
P.S.; postscript. The former (usually in capitals and with periods) is, of course, an abbreviation for the latter. In ordinary writing, you're better off spelling out the word—that is, “The postscript added nothing substantial to the letter” is clearer and smoother than “The P.S. added nothing substantial to the letter.”

In letter-writing, a second postscript is abbreviated P.P.S. (for post-postscript).

pseudonym; alias; pen name; nom de plume; nom de guerre. A pseudonym is a fictitious name, especially (but not necessarily) one used by a writer. It is synonymous with alias, but is free of the criminal connotations that alias often carries. (See alias.) A pen name is a writer’s pseudonym. Nom de plume is French for “pen name”—although most etymologists agree that the phrase was coined in English during the early 19th century from the French words. Nom de guerre is genuine French borrowed in the 17th century (lit., “war name”), denoting “an assumed name under which a person fights or engages in some other action or enterprise” (SOED)—e.g.: “On his first day there, he said, he met Mr. bin al-Shibh, known by his nom de guerre, Obeida.” Desmond Butler & Don Van Natta Jr., “A Qaeda Informer Helps Investigators Trace Group’s Trail,” N.Y. Times, 17 Feb. 2003, at A1.

Unless a stylistic flourish is the desired effect, the two gallicisms are to be avoided.

For a truly outré error involving pseudonym, see synonym.

psych, vb.; psyche, n. & vb. Psych /sik/ = (1) to analyze psychologically <don't try to psych my behavior>; (2) to figure out and anticipate correctly <I psyched out my professors and made all As>; (3) to use intimidating ploys against <but all his gamesmanship didn't psych her out>; or (4) to get mentally prepared for an event <she psyched herself up before the competition>. It is slang in all these senses. As a verb, psyche is a variant spelling. The predominant spelling of the phrasal verb is psych out, not *psyche out.

Psyche /st-kee/ is best confined to its noun sense: “the human mind or soul.”

Current ratio (to psych out vs. *to psyche out): 2:1

*psychal. See psychic.

psychedelic. So spelled—not *psychodelic.

psychiatry (= the branch of medicine dealing with mental illness and behavioral disorders) is preferably and predominantly pronounced /st-ka-tree/ in AmE and BrE alike—with a long -i- sound in the first syllable. The pronunciation that makes the first syllable sick is unfortunate, to say the least. The same goes for all three cognates (psychiatrist, psychiatric, psychiatrically). For the difference between psychiatry and psychology, see psychology.

psychic; psychical; *psychal; psychological. Psychic = (1) of, relating to, or involving the psyche; (2) spiritual; or (3) paranormal. Psychical (= of, relating to, or involving the mind) is contrasted with physical.

*Psychal is a needless variant. Psychological = (1) of, relating to, or of the nature of psychology; dealing with psychology; or (2) of, relating to, or involving the objects of psychological study; of, relating to, or involving the mind; mental (OED). The OED states that sense 2 of psychological is a loose usage, but it is now firmly established.

psycho. See psychopath.

*psychedelic. See psychedelic.

psychological. See psychic.

psychological moment entered the English language as the result of a misinterpretation. The phrase das psychologische Moment has been traced back to the 1870 German siege of Paris. A German magazine urged that the bombardment of the city be delayed until it would have the greatest psychological momentum (das psychologische Moment) to build on famine, disorder, and other effects of the siege and act as the final blow to crush French morale. A French translator misinterpreted das Moment (“momentum”) as der Moment (“the moment”). The phrase was fashionably ridiculed in France, where it was rendered moment psychologique (= the moment in which the mind anticipates something that will happen).

The phrase was quickly picked up by English newspapers in a still more mistaken sense of “the psychologically appropriate moment.” By 1926 it was overused to the point of becoming “hackneyed,” according to H.W. Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage. Today it is often used in reference to a psychological effect—e.g.: “Resources were measured, conserved and released at just the right psychological moments. Beethoven knew, and Delfs knows, that convincing emotional outburst paradoxically requires patience. Thus the extraordinary amount of ‘waiting music’ in this symphony, long moments where the composer marks time between themes or between spike events in the score. The patient calm enlarged the fury of the storm.” Tom Strini, “Concerto’s Elements a Perfect Fit,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 16 June 2001, B6.

But the phrase is often used loosely to mean “the critical moment” or even “the nick of time,” with reference to neither psychology nor the mind—e.g.: “Gately loves the complexity of the opera. ‘It’s an opera director’s delight. You can really direct it like a play. . . . The action never stops, or when it does, it’s a deep psychological moment [read critical moment] that doesn’t feel like the action has stopped.’” Catherine Reese

*psychedelic
Sociopath Next Door (2005), reports that 4% of the population is afflicted with antisocial personality disorder—more men than women.

Although psychopath and sociopath are generally thought to be interchangeable with antisocial, some writers suggest a distinction: “[O]ne often used distinction between psychopath and sociopath is the user’s belief in the origins of the disorder. Psychopaths are believed to possess some constitutional disposition to the syndrome. In contrast, sociopaths are biologically normal, but develop antisocial characteristics through incompetent or hostile socialization, mainly defective parenting.” Ibid. at 153.

**pudendum** forms the plural *pudenda* (= the external genitals, esp. those of the female). The plural form, pronounced /pyoo-デン-da/, is much more common—even when the reference is to one person. (See **plurals** (8.).) In the following sentence, it’s not clear which one of two noted writers might have misused the plural as a singular (perhaps it was both): “Erica Jong raised her hand to say, ‘I think we should talk about how men hate women writers. Paul Theroux once called me a giant pudenda.’” Leah Garchik, “War Between the Literary Sexes,” S.F. Chron., 2 Apr. 1997, at E8. The usage point—that it should have been a giant pudendum—gets lost in the far-fetched metaphor.

**puerile** (= childishly silly; ridiculously juvenile) is pronounced /pyoo-ә-l/ in AmE and /pyoo-әl/ in BrE. Puerility, however, is the same in both: /pyuu-әl-i-teel/.

**puissant** (= strong, powerful), a gallicism borrowed into English in the 15th century and frequently used by Shakespeare, is preferably pronounced /pwiә-stәnt/ or /pweә-stәnt/ in AmE and BrE alike. Avoid such doubly anglicized and decoupled diphthongs as /pyoo-i-sәnt/ and /pyoo-i-stәnt/.

**Pulitzer.** The name is preferably pronounced /puul-at-sәr/; not /pyoo-lit-sәr/.

**pummel.** See pommel.

**pumpkin** is often misspelled *pumkin*—e.g.: “It will begin with ravioli stuffed with pureed *pumkin* [read pumpkin] in a nutmeg cream.” Chris Sherman, “Gala Night to Have Grand Menu Series,” St. Petersburg Times, 5 Nov. 1996, at B2. The word is pronounced /pәmkin/, not /pәŋkәn/—unless, as Elster says, “you’re joking or using it as a term of endearment for a child” (BBBM at 399).

**Punctuation** is the cueing system by which writers signal their readers to slow down, pause, speed up, supply tonal inflections, and otherwise move more smoothly through sentences. Punctuation is an aspect...
of rhetoric: a way of giving emphasis and rhythm and achieving clarity. Meanwhile, punctuation problems are often a prime indicator of poor writing: “Most errors of punctuation arise from ill-designed, badly shaped sentences, and from the attempt to make them work by means of violent tricks with commas and colons.” Hugh Sykes Davies, Grammar Without Tears 167 (1951).

The basic marks—and their uses—are well known. Yet each one sometimes presents difficulties. Even the best writers should pay close attention to these matters because the more sophisticated the writing is, the subtler and more varied the punctuation becomes. And punctuating well is essential to writing solid sentences.

A. Apostrophe [‘]. This punctuation mark does three things. First, it often indicates the possessive case <Charles Alan Wright's treatise> <Jane Ortiz's appointment>. See possessives. Second, it frequently marks the omission of one or more elements and the contracting of the remaining elements into a word (or figure)—e.g.: never into never; will not into won’t; 1997 into ’97. See contractions. Third, it is sometimes used to mark the plural of an acronym, initialism, number, or letter—e.g.: CPA’s (now more usually CPAs), 1990’s (now more usually 1990s), and p’s and q’s (still with apostrophes because of the single letters). See dates (d) & numerals (d).

Two contradictory trends—both bad—are at work with apostrophes. First, careless writers want to form plurals with wayward apostrophes—e.g.: “The bishop’s [read bishops] of the United Methodist Church have issued an urgent appeal for funds to assist the victims of flooding in the Midwest.” Monte Marshall, “Special Offering for Flood Relief,” United Methodist Rep., 3 Sept. 1993. The same problem occurs in third-person-singular verbs: In the early 1990s, a sign at an Austin service station read, “Joe says: It’s time to winterize your car.” And a distressing number of signs on mailboxes and entryways are printed, e.g., The Smith’s [read The Smiths].

The second unfortunate trend is to drop necessary apostrophes: there is a tendency to write the hotels many shops or Martins Pub. The only possible cure is increased literacy.

Finally, U.S. place names drop possessive and associative apostrophes by government policy, so what was once Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, became Harpers Ferry. President Theodore Roosevelt charged the U.S. Board on Geographic Names in 1906 with standardizing place names. One resulting policy is that each name become a “fixed label” so that, under this questionable rationale, “[t]he need to imply possession or association no longer exists.” (’Principles, Policies, and Procedures,” geonames.usgs.gov/docs/pro_pol_pro.pdf, at 42.) Contracting apostrophes <Lake O’ the Pines> and surname apostrophes <O’Bannon Mill> remain.

B. Bullet [•]. This mark draws the eye immediately to one of several enumerated items. When you don’t mean to imply that one thing in a list is any more important than another—that is, when you’re not signaling a rank order—and when there is little likelihood that the list will need to be cited, you might use bullet dots. They enhance readability by emphasizing salient points. Examples appear throughout this book (see, for example, the bullets under (c)).

There is a notable difference, however, between how the bullets appear in this book and how they ought to appear in most documents. Although here the bullets fall at the left margin, they should generally be indented at least as far as a paragraph indent or perhaps a little more. They are not indented here because the double-column format would make indentation look strange.

Here are seven more tips on using bullets well:

1. end your introduction with a colon, which serves as an anchor; (2) keep the items grammatically parallel (see parallelism); (3) if you begin each item with a lowercase letter, put a semicolon at the end of each item, use and after the next-to-last item, and put a period after the last item; (4) if you begin each item with a capital—by convention, “fragments” are acceptable units here—end each with a period; (5) use hanging indents, which are extremely important in giving each bullet its full weight (see document design (h)); (6) ensure that the bullets are well proportioned both in their size and in their distance from the text they introduce, preferably with no more than one blank character-space between the bullet and the first word; and (7) resist the temptation to play with hollow characters, smiley faces, check marks, and the like—unless you’re trying for an offbeat appearance, use real bullet dots.

C. Colon [:]. This mark, which promises the completion of something just begun, has five uses.

First, it may link two separate clauses or phrases by indicating a step forward from the first to the second: the step may be from an introduction to a main theme, from a cause to an effect, from a general statement to a particular instance, or from a premise to a conclusion. E.g.:

• “Economists point to day care’s problems as a classic case of ’market failure’: Large numbers of parents need the service so they can work, but they are not willing to pay the fees that would be necessary for the well-trained, highly motivated workers they would like their children to have.” Victoria Pope, “Day-Care Dangers,” U.S. News & World Rep., 4 Aug. 1997, at 31, 34.
• “My assignment: Identify and contact the CIOs for 100 companies that were selected on the basis of their

- “Nor did the evidence submitted resolve the real question: whether Jackson is in fact Cosby’s daughter,” Matt Bai & Allison Samuels, “No Laughing Matter,” Newsweek, 4 Aug. 1997, at 33.

As in the examples just quoted, what follows the colon may be either a full clause or just a phrase.

Authorities agree that when a phrase follows a colon, the first word should not be capitalized (unless, of course, it’s a proper noun). But when a complete clause follows the colon, authorities are divided on whether the first word should be capitalized. The first three bulleted examples in the preceding paragraph follow the prevalent journalistic practice: the first word is capitalized. But the other view—urging for a lowercase word following the colon—is probably sounder: the lowercase (as in this very sentence) more closely ties the two clauses together. That’s the style used throughout this book. It’s also the house style for The New Yorker—e.g.:

- “Though active, El Misti isn’t doing anything at the moment, but Arequipa is: it has spread up the volcano’s flanks along the gullies where lava and ash will someday begin to flow.” Tad Friend, “Disaster!” New Yorker, 16 Dec. 2002, at 36, 38.

- “Party lines are not to be confused with chat lines, party planners, or escort services: they are a prehistoric phone technology of copper-loop circuits.” Susan Orlean, “Party Line,” New Yorker, 16 Dec. 2002, at 52.

Although the uppercase convention is a signpost to the reader that a complete sentence is ahead, that signpost generally isn’t needed.

Those who follow the lowercase convention typically recognize an exception and capitalize what follows the colon when the colon introduces a series of sentences: “He made three points: He wanted some water. He needed to sleep. And he wanted to go home.”

Second, the colon can introduce a list of items, often after expressions such as the following and as follows—e.g.: “The meetings are as follows: Central, Dec. 11 at the Municipal Auditorium, 5:30 p.m.–7:30 p.m.; South, Dec. 15 at the Mexican Cultural Institute, 5:30 p.m.–7:30 p.m.” Megan Kamerick, “Main Plaza Considered as Site of Museum on Mexico’s History,” San Antonio Bus. J., 12 Dec. 1997, at 6.

Third, the colon formally introduces a wholly self-contained quotation, whether short or long. If the quotation is in block form, the colon is mandatory, but if it’s run in with the text, a comma is also permissible. E.g.: “By 1776 it seemed clear to numerous inhabitants of the western areas of the Connecticut River valley that the fight against tyranny had assumed a two-fold character: ‘We are contending against the same enemy within, that is also without.’” Gordon S. Wood, Creation of the American Republic 186 (1972).

Fourth, the colon often appears after the salutation in formal correspondence <Dear Ms. Johnsonius:>

Finally, the colon separates elements such as a book’s title and subtitle <Will Rogers: A Biography>, chapter and verse in a biblical citation <John 3:16>, hour and minute in time <9:05 p.m.>, and similar uses.

Avoid four common misuses of the colon. (1) Don’t put one between a verb and its object or complement <she enjoys watching plays, films, and TV shows> (no colon after watching). (2) Don’t put a colon between a preposition and its object <they are enamored of rare books, bone china, and etched glass> (no colon after of). (3) Don’t put a colon after the conjunction that <she declared that all the plants on board must be quarantined>. (4) Don’t put a colon after an introductory word or phrase such as for example, including, such as, or that is <several dignitaries were present, including Vice President Joseph Biden, Senator John Cornyn, and Justice Antonin Scalia> (no colon after including).

Even so, as noted above, a colon is often appropriate after a phrase that more formally announces a list (e.g., as follows, the following, including these).

D. Comma [ , ]. This punctuation mark, the least emphatic of them all, is the one used in the greatest variety of circumstances. Two styles result in different treatments. The “close” style of punctuation results in fairly heavy uses of commas; the “open” style results in fairly light uses of commas. In the 20th century, the movement was very much toward the open style. The byword was, “When in doubt, leave it out.” Indeed, some writers and editors went too far in omitting commas that would aid clarity. What follows is an explanation tending slightly toward the open style, but with a steady view toward enhancing clarity.

Essentially, the comma has nine uses.

First, the comma separates items (including the last from the next-to-last) in a list of more than two—e.g.: “The Joneses, the Smiths, and the Nelsons.” In this position, it’s called, variously, the serial comma, the Oxford comma, or the Harvard comma. Whether to include the serial comma has sparked many arguments. But it’s easily answered in favor of inclusion because omitting the final comma may cause ambiguities, whereas including it never will—e.g.: “A and B, C and D, E and F, G and H.” When the members are compound, calling for and within themselves, clarity demands the final comma. (See enumerations (b).) Although newspaper journalists typically omit the serial comma as a “space-saving” device, virtually all writing authorities outside that field recommend keeping it—e.g.:

When you write a series of nouns with and or or before the last one, insert a comma before the and or or. “The location study covered labor, tax, freight, and communications costs, all in terms of 1972 prices.” While this rule is not observed by all publishers, it is valid and helpful. Professional magazines follow it frequently, and such authorities as David Lambuth support it. The reason is that the comma before the and helps the reader to see instantly that the last two adjectives are not joined. In the example cited, suppose the last comma in the series is omitted; freight and communications costs could then be read as one category, though it is not meant to be.

Examples abound. In the following sentence, for example, is Toby the terrier a gift, or is Toby the terrier getting a little plastic surgery? “Federal officials said that the Delle Donnas received $26,700 in cash and gifts from Ms. Medrano, including gift cards for Macy’s, plastic surgery for Mrs. Delle Donna and a Yorkshire terrier named Toby valued at $2,300.” Jonathan Miller, “Mayor Is Convicted in Extortion Case,” N.Y. Times, 30 Apr. 2008, at B3. The serial comma would prevent the miscue.

Second, the comma separates coordinated main clauses—e.g.: “Cars will turn here[,] and coaches will go straight.” There are two exceptions: (1) when the main clauses are closely linked <Do as I tell you [no comma] and you won’t regret it>; and (2) when the subject of the second independent clause, being the same as in the first, is not repeated <Policies that help prevent crime are often better for the public [no comma] and are closer to the ideal of effective public administration>. (Another way of referring to the construction in that sentence is that it contains a “compound predicate.”) Omitting the comma before the and in a compound sentence often causes an ambiguity of miscue:

- “I would love to see her and the baby and I will be here all day.” (Insert a comma after baby; otherwise, it might appear that the baby and the writer will be there all day.)
- “No one claimed responsibility for the attack nor for once were Chechen guerrillas seen as the prime suspects.” Sander Thoennes, “Russia Rivals Trade Insults over Moscow Bombing.” Fin. Times, 13 June 1996, at 2. (Insert a comma after attack; otherwise, it looks as if for once is parallel to for the attack.)

Third, the comma separates most introductory matter from the main clause, often to prevent misunderstanding. The introductory matter may be a word <Moreover,>, a phrase <In the meantime,>, or a subordinated clause <If everything goes as planned,>. Matter that is very short may not need this comma <On Friday we leave for Florida>, but phrases of three or more words usually do—and even the shortest of subordinated clauses always do <That said,>. On the other hand, a comma may prove helpful for clarity even with shorter phrases <For now, we must assume the worst>. It may even be imperative <Outside, the world goes on>.

Fourth, the comma marks the beginning and end of a parenthetical word or phrase, an appositive, or a nonrestrictive clause—e.g.: “I am sure[,] however[,] that it will not happen.” “Fred[,] who is bald[,] complained of the cold.” Some writers mistakenly omit the second comma—e.g.: “After graduating from Rosemary Hall, an exclusive Greenwich girls’ school in 1965, Ms. Close began touring with Up With People, the squeaky-clean pop group.” Betsy Sharkey, “Glenn Close: So Visible a Star, So Distant.” N.Y. Times, 27 Mar. 1994, at 2-1, 2-30. (Insert a comma after school or, better, put in 1965 after graduating.) Still others omit both commas, often creating a miscue: “Our customers must be at a minimum priority concerns of everyone.” (Insert a comma after be and after minimum; otherwise, one might read at a minimum priority as a single phrase.)

Fifth, the comma separates adjectives that each qualify a noun in the same way <a cautious[,] reserved person>. If you could use and between the adjectives, you’ll need a comma—e.g.: “Is there to be one standard for the old, repulsive laws that preferred whites over blacks, and a different, more forgiving standard for new laws that give blacks special benefits in the name of historical redress?” Linda Greenhouse, “Signal on Job Rights,” N.Y. Times, 25 Jan. 1989, at 1. But when adjectives qualify the noun in different ways, or when one adjective qualifies a noun phrase containing another adjective, no comma is used. In these situations, it would sound wrong to use—and—e.g.: “a distinguished [no comma] foreign journalist”; “a bright [no comma] red tie.” Writers often include the comma when it isn’t necessary—e.g.: “The centerpiece of the Senate GOP package, which could be presented to the Senate Finance Committee for a vote as early as next week, is a permanent, $500-per-child [read permanent $500-per-child] tax credit for families. . . . Effective in 1996, families would be granted a new, $500 [read new $500] tax credit for each child.” Jonathan Peterson, “Key GOP Senators OK $245 Billion in Tax Cuts,” L.A. Times, 15 Oct. 1995, at A1. See ADJECTIVES (c).

Sixth, the comma separates a direct quotation from its attribution <“Honey, I’m home,” Desi said>, but it is not used to separate quoted speech that is woven into the syntax of the sentence <TV loves catchphrases such as “Honey, I’m home”>. Sixth, the comma separates a participial phrase, a verbless phrase, or a vocative—e.g.: “Having had breakfast[,] I went for a walk.” “The sermon over [or being over], the congregation filed out.” “Fellow priests[,] the clergy must unite in reforming the system of electing bishops.” Note, however, that no comma is needed within an absolute construction—e.g.: “The sermon [no comma] being over, we all left.” (See ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS.) Nor is a comma needed with restrictive expressions such as “my friend Professor Wright” or “my son John” (assuming that the writer has at least one other son—see APPositives).

Eighth, in informal letters the comma marks the end of the salutation <Dear Mr. Crosthwaite,> <Dear Rebecca,> and the complimentary close <Very truly yours,> <Yours sincerely,>. In formal letters, the salutation is separated from the body by a colon <Dear Sir:>, <Dear Madam:>. Finally, the comma separates parts of an address <8 Country Club Dr., Amherst, Massachusetts> or a date <March 2, 1998>. Note that in these examples,
the state in the address and the year in the date are
parenthetical, so each would ordinarily take a comma
or some other punctuation after it (unless the place
name or date were used as an adjective—see adjecti-
tives (d) & dates (c)). Note also that no comma is
needed between the month and year in dates written
"December 1984" or "18 December 1984"; a comma
is required only when the date is written "December
18, 1984." See dates (b).

Writers cause needless confusion or distraction for
their readers when they insert commas erroneously.
This typically occurs in one of four ways.

(1) Some writers insert a comma before the verb—
something that was once standard. But the practice
has been out of fashion since the early 20th century,
and today it’s considered incorrect—e.g.: "Whether
or not the shoes were bought at our store, [omit the
comma] is not something we have yet been able to
ascertain."/"Only if this were true, [omit the comma]
could it be said that John F. Kennedy was a great
president." Even those who understand this prin-
ciple are sometimes tempted to place a comma after
a compound element that doesn’t require one. Avoid
the temptation—e.g.: "Teachers who do not have a
Ph.D., a D.M.A., or an M.A., [omit the comma] do
not qualify for the pay raise."

(2) Commas frequently set off an adverb that
doesn’t need setting off. The result is a misplaced
emphasis—e.g.: "We, therefore, [read therefore without
the embracing commas] conclude that the mummy
could not be authentic." Note that if the emphasis
in that sentence is intended for some reason to fall
on We—as clearly separated from some other group
and its thinking—the commas should stand; but if
the emphasis is to fall on therefore as a simple conse-
quence of reasoning from the evidence, then the com-
mas should be omitted. See therefore (A).

(3) In compound sentences, an unnecessary comma
is sometimes inserted before a second independent
clause when the subject is the same as in the first clause.
(As some grammarians put it, a comma shouldn’t
appear before the second part of a "compound predi-
cate.") As explained above in the second rationale for
using this mark, no comma appears before the con-
junction when the second clause has an understood
subject—e.g.: "They did their spring cleaning, and then
had a picnic." (Delete the comma.) Sometimes, though,
a comma is needed for clarity—e.g.: "We like to have
wine and ham it up on weekends." (Insert a comma
after wine.)

(4) Some writers (even some otherwise excel-
tent ones) mistakenly use a comma as if it were a
stronger mark—a semicolon or a period. The result
is a comma splice—e.g.: "He said he didn’t want to
look, he wanted to remember her as she was in life."
(Replace the comma with a semicolon; see run-on
sentences.) This also occurs in series of phrases or
clauses that themselves contain commas. Semicolons
rather than commas are often needed to separate the
elements in complex series—e.g.: "We celebrate the
Fourth by flying the red, white, and blue; honoring
baseball, Mom, and apple pie; and shouting hip, hip,
hooray as the fireworks burst."

E. Dash. There are two kinds of dashes, which
printers are able to distinguish by their length: the
em-dash and the en-dash. See (g), (h).

F. Ellipsis Dots [. . . ]. Ellipsis points—also called
"period-dots"—come in threes. Each one is typo-
graphically identical to the period, but together they
perform a special function: they signal that the writer
has omitted something, usually from quoted mat-
ter. Consider the following sentence: "Shakespeare’s
speech—as exhibited in his works, at least—seems to
have represented rather well the cultivated usage of
Elizabethan England, particularly in the area around
London; and what is more, it was sensitive to social
levels." Carroll E. Reed, Dialects of American English
10 (1967). If you quoted that sentence but omitted
some words from the middle and at the end, it would
look like this: "Shakespeare’s speech . . . seems to
have represented rather well the cultivated usage of
Elizabethan England, particularly in the area around
London . . . ." The final period-dot in that quotation,
which is spaced evenly with the other three, is simply
the period for the sentence; it’s not technically part of
the ellipsis.

For a more detailed explanation of ellipses, see
quotations (ε).

G. Em-Dash [—]. The em-dash, which is as wide as
the capital M, is used to mark an interruption in the
structure of a sentence. In typewriting, it is commonly
represented by two hyphens, often with a space at each
end of the pair ( --- ). Word-processing programs can
place a true em-dash, but the procedure varies among
programs. A pair of em-dashes can be used to enclose
a parenthetical remark or to mark the ending and
the resumption of a statement by an interlocutor.
E.g.: "The last time I saw him I asked him if he still
believed—as he once had written—that we are at this
moment participating in one of the very greatest leaps
of the human spirit to a knowledge not only of outside
human nature but also of our own deep inward mys-
tery." Bill Moyers, Introduction to Joseph Campbell,

The em-dash can also be used to replace the
colon—e.g.:

- "On July 22, the company was awarded the largest priva-
tization contract ever for a prison—a 2,048-bed mini-
mum-security facility in Taft, Calif.; ”Wackenhut Wins
- "She returned to singing in 1956—after a stroke and
complications from diabetes forced her to have both legs
amputated.” Suzanne Braun Levine, “My Secret Predawn

The em-dash is perhaps the most underused punc-
tuation mark in American writing. Whatever the type
of writing, dashes can often clarify a sentence that
is clogged up with commas—or even one that’s oth-
erwise lusterless. Imagine the following sentences if
commas replaced the well-chosen em-dashes:
• “It is noteworthy that the most successful revolutions—that of England in 1688 and that of America in 1776—were carried out by men who were deeply imbued with a respect for law,” Bertrand Russell, “Individual and Social Ethics” (1949), in The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell 357, 358 (1961).

• “Unfortunately, moral beauty in art—like physical beauty in a person—is extremely perishable.” Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation 55 (1966).

• “When David Nemer sat down with his 12-year-old daughter one night recently to watch a television sitcom—a treat for finishing her homework early—he was shocked by the behavior he saw in his living room.” Daniel Howard Cerone, “Adult Programming Invades Family Hour,” L.A. Times, 15 Oct. 1995, at A1.

• “I heard this anecdote from Mikhail Gorbachev—who had heard it from Gromyko himself—when I paid him a visit, earlier this year, to talk about the vodka anniversary.” Victor Erofeyev, “The Russian God,” New Yorker, 16 Dec. 2002, at S6.

• “She tried not to think that all his verses about her—the sonnets, the villanelles, the haiku—were merely ploys to prepare her for this ridiculous rubber balloon.” Arthur Miller, “The Bare Manuscript,” New Yorker, 16 Dec. 2002, at 82, 86.

Sometimes, perhaps as a result of an ill-founded prejudice against dashes, writers try to make commas function in their place. Often this doesn’t work. In fact, the commas can result in a comma splice (one of two types of run-on sentence)—e.g.: “Don’t worry about making it pretty, they will do that, just make sure the mathematics is right.” “Get Out Your Pencils,” Newsweek, 4 Apr. 1994, at 8. (A possible revision: Don’t worry about making it pretty; they will do that. Just make sure the mathematics is right.)

When using dashes, be sure to place them logically so that the parallelism of the sentence remains intact. Sometimes writers put them in odd places—e.g.: “Criminologist Marvin Wolfgang compiled arrest records for every male born—and raised in Philadelphia—in 1945 and 1958.” James Wootton, “Lessons of Pop Jordan’s Death,” Newsweek, 13 Sept. 1993, at 12. (A possible revision: Marvin Wolfgang, a criminologist, compiled arrest records for every male who was both born in Philadelphia in either of two years—1945 and 1958—and raised there. On the reason for changing the position of criminologist in that sentence, see TITULAR TOMPFOLEY.)

• “There were other cellars beyond an arch, containing nothing more than rats and rubbish but—and that was—important, they couldn’t be seen from the cages.” Terry Pratchett, Night Watch 167 (2002). (Perhaps the writer meant to put important before the second dash. Even if that were true, though, the sentence would have a problem with anticipatory reference—since the word that refers to something that hasn’t yet been mentioned.)

Generally, two em-dashes are all a sentence can handle. With three, the reader loses track of what material is part of the main sentence and what is parenthetical. A long sentence might contain distinct pairs of em-dashes far apart without creating problems, but it’s better to observe the two-em-dash limit.

Consider putting a letter space before and after an em-dash. Although most book publishers omit the spaces, outside fine typography the spaces help prevent awkward line breaks.

H. En-Dash [-]. The en-dash, which is half as wide as the em-dash, is distinct (in print) from the hyphen. It joins pairs or groups of words to show a range, and also indicates movement or tension (rather than cooperation or unity). It is often equivalent to to or versus <the 1914–1918 war> <the nature–nurture debate> <the Dallas–Toronto–Quebec route> <the Fischer–Spassky match> <the Marxist–Trotskyite split>. The en-dash is also used, however, for joint authors <the Prosser–Keeton text>. But it’s not used for one person with a double-barreled name—e.g.: “Lord Baden-Powell’s organization” (that’s a hyphen, not an en-dash).

Some editors use the en-dash for a phrasal adjective in which the individual elements contain spaces or internal hyphens <a Pulitzer Prize–winning author> <a Christopher Ricks–type literary critic> <the secretary–treasurer–elect> <pre–Civil War society>.

In typewriting and in newspaper journalism, the en-dash is commonly represented by a single hyphen. Word-processing programs can insert a true en-dash, but the procedure varies among programs.

In circumstances involving a disjunction, the en-dash is usually preferable to the virgule—e.g.: “If we manage to get that far, the absurdity of attempting to preserve the 19th-century possessive–genitive dichotomy [not possessive/genitive dichotomy] will have become apparent.” See (q).

I. Exclamation Point (!). This mark is used after an exclamatory word, phrase, or sentence. It usually counts as the concluding full stop—e.g.: “I can almost hear the producer saying, ‘Cut! Too much talk!’” Phillip Lopate, “The Last Taboo,” in Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip Mining of American Culture 164, 173 (1996). If used within square brackets in or after a quotation, it expresses the quoter’s amusement, dissent, or surprise.

J. Hyphen [-]. This mark has been called “the pest of the punctuation family” (Sophie C. Hadida, Your Telltale English 133 [rev. ed. 1942]). Generally, AmE is much less hospitable to hyphens than BrE. Words with prefixes are generally made solid: displeasure (not dis-pleasure), preshrunk (not pre-shrunk), postdebate (not post-debate), preordain (not pre-ordain). This no-hyphen style seems aesthetically superior, but reasonable people will differ on such a question. They can agree, however, that the hyphen must appear when an ambiguity or miscue is possible without it—e.g., pre-judicial (career), re-sign (the letter). See co- & re- pairs.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i–ii.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
But in one context, AmE is quite hospitable to the hyphen. That's in the realm of phrasal adjectives. Here's the rule: if two or more consecutive words make sense only when understood together as an adjective modifying a noun that follows, those words (excluding the noun) should be hyphenated. So you hyphenate special-interest money, but only because money is part of the phrase; if you were referring to this or that special interest, a hyphen would be wrong. Thus:

- credit card
- electoral college
- forest products
- high frequency
- natural gas
- small business
- used record

| but | credit-card application | electoral-college procedures | forest-products stocks | high-frequency sounds | natural-gas pipeline | small-business perspectives | used-record store |

Wilson Follett had it right when he said, in reference to this phrasal-adjective hyphen: "Nothing gives away the incompetent amateur more quickly than the typescript that neglects this mark of punctuation or that employs it where it is not wanted" (MAU at 428).

**K. Parentheses [( )].** These marks enclose words, phrases, and even whole sentences (but usually no more than a whole paragraph). If what is enclosed is a full sentence, the closing parenthesis follows the end punctuation; if not, the end punctuation is placed outside, as in the previous sentence here. More specifically, parentheticals are used in four ways. First, they indicate interpolations and remarks by the writer of the text <Mrs. X (as I shall call her) now spoke>. Second, they specify, in one's own running text, an authority, definition, explanation, reference, or translation <according to Fowler (FMEU1 at 64), it is correct to ...>. Third, in reporting a speech, they sometimes indicate interruptions by the audience <"Finally—(laughter)—no, I'm really coming to an end now—(laughter)—let me say ...">. Fourth, parentheses separate reference letters or figures that do not need a full stop, e.g., (1)(a).

The first of those uses comes into play most frequently. The main test for whether a parenthetical construction works is whether the rest of the sentence makes sense without it. That's because words contained within parentheses do not affect the syntax of the rest of the sentence. E.g.: "We must determine whether each (or both) children are entitled to tickets." The writer of that sentence could have avoided this error (each children are) by reading the sentence without the parenthetical phrase.

Virtually any punctuation mark is subject to an annoying overuse, but this is especially true of parentheses, which to be effective must be used sparingly. When they appear at all frequently, they tire the reader's eye, add to the burden of decoding, and deaden the reader's interest. Sentences can sag with all this parenthetical baggage, which to be effective must be used sparingly. When they appear at all frequently, they tire the reader's eye, add to the burden of decoding, and deaden the reader's interest. Sentences can sag with all the qualifying parentheticals.

On the use of parentheses with appositives, see appositives.

**L. Period [ ].** This mark is used for two purposes. First, it ends all sentences that are not questions or exclamations. The next word normally begins with a capital letter. Second, it has traditionally indicated abbreviations, but this use is on the decline. See abbreviations (a).

If a point marking an abbreviation comes at the end of a sentence, it also serves as the closing full stop. E.g.: "She also kept dogs, cats, birds, etc." But where a closing parenthesis or bracket intervenes, a period is required: "She also kept pets (dogs, cats, birds, etc.)." When a sentence concludes with a quotation that ends with a period, question mark, or exclamation mark, no further period is needed. E.g.: "He cried, 'Be off!' [no period] But the child would not move."

**M. Question Mark [ ?].** A question mark follows every question for which an answer is expected. Typically, the next word begins with a capital letter. "He asked me, 'Why are you here?' A foolish question." But it's also possible to have a mid-sentence question mark—e.g.: "Why should what is supposed to be a sacrament be performed with everyone looking on?—with that most desolating of all assemblages, a family reunion." Edmund Wilson, "Things I Consider Overrated" (1920), in From the Uncollected Edmund Wilson 127 (1995). Most authorities recommend not placing a comma after the question mark in such a sentence; yet, though it seems a little old-fashioned, Wilson's em-dash after the question mark is quite acceptable.

A question mark is not used after indirect questions <He asked me why I was there>. See questions, direct and indirect.

A question mark may be placed in brackets after a word, phrase, or date whose accuracy is doubted <Cardinal Wolsey (1475?–1530)>.

**N. Quotation Marks [“ ”].** Reserve quotation marks for five situations: (1) when you're quoting someone; (2) when you're referring to a word as a word <the word "that">, unless you're using italics for that purpose; (3) when you mean so-called—but-not-really <if he's a 'champion,' he certainly doesn't act like one>; (4) when you're creating a new word for something—and then only on its first appearance <I'd call him a "mirb," by which I mean ...>; and (5) when you're marking titles of TV and radio programs, magazine articles, book chapters, poems, short stories, and songs <having been put on the spot, she sang "Auld Lang Syne" as best she could>.

In marking quotations, writers and editors of AmE and BrE have developed different conventions for quotation marks (or "inverted commas," as the British call them). In AmE, double quotation marks are used for a first quotation; single marks for a quotation within a quotation; double again for a further quotation inside that; etc. In BrE, the practice is exactly the reverse at each step.

With a closing quotation mark, practices vary. In AmE, it is usual to place a period or comma within the closing quotation mark, whether or not the punctuation so placed is actually a part of the quoted matter. In BrE, by contrast, the closing quotation mark comes before any punctuation marks, unless these marks
form a part of the quotation itself (or what is quoted is less than a full sentence in its own right). Thus:

AmE: (1) "Joan pointedly said, 'We won't sing "God Save the Queen."'"
(2) "She looked back on her school years as being 'unmitigated misery.'"
BrE: (1) "Joan pointedly said, 'We won't sing 'God Save the Queen.'"
(1) 'She looked back on her school years as being "unmitigated misery."'

In both sets of examples, the outermost quotation marks indicate that a printed source is being quoted directly.

With respect to question marks and exclamation marks, AmE and BrE practice is the same. They're either inside or outside the ending quotation mark depending on whether they're part of what's being quoted—e.g.: (AmE) "Did Nelson really say 'Kiss me, Hardy'? / (BrE) 'Did Nelson really say "Kiss me, Hardy"?'
And: (AmE) "Banging her fist on the table, she exclaimed, 'And that's that!' / (BrE) 'Banging her fist on the table, she exclaimed, "And that's that!"'
(Note that when the end of an interrogatory or an exclamationary sentence coincides with the end of another sentence that embraces it, the stronger mark of punctuation is sufficient to end both sentences. A period need not also be included.)

Colons and semicolons are placed outside quotation marks—e.g.: "John didn't shout 'Fire'!; he did, however, say that he smelled smoke."

As to quotations that are interrupted to indicate a speaker, AmE and BrE again show different preferences. In AmE, the first comma is placed within the quotation mark <"Sally," he said, "is looking radiant today">; in BrE, the first comma (usually) remains outside the inverted comma, just as though the attribution could be lifted neatly out of the speaker's actual words <"Sally", he said, 'is looking radiant today'>. See QUOTATIONS (n).

Finally, be cautious about using gratuitous quotation marks. The emphatic use is a sign of amateurish writing (and advertising). Don't use them for PHRASAL ADJECTIVES, don't use them to be cute, and don't use them to suggest that the marked word or phrase is somehow informal or slangy—it usually isn't. If you mean what you say, say it without hesitation. If you don't, then use other words. The following examples could be improved by removing the quotation marks and tweaking the sentences:

- "Features are the characteristics of a product or service that are 'built-in' when you buy it—in other words, 'the things it already comes with.'" Erica Levy Klein, *Write Great Ads* 33 (1990).
- "The individual, however, who truly 'made it happen' is our senior vice president, Jim Savage. . . . Since he and I are virtually always on the 'same page' in our philosophy and thoughts, I had a double advantage of having a dedicated, experienced, bright collaborator who made a magnificent contribution." Zig Ziglar, *Ziglar on Selling* (1991).

O. Semicolon [;]. This mark—a kind of “super-comma”—separates sentence parts that need a more distinct break than a comma can signal, but that are too closely connected to be made into separate sentences. Typically these will be clauses of similar importance and grammatical construction.

Four uses are common. First, the semicolon is sometimes used to unite closely connected sentences; typically, as in this very sentence, there is no conjunction between clauses. E.g.:

"But Shakespeare's language appears entirely familiar to us, although it is almost 400 years old; the spelling, the vocabulary, the shapes of the words and phrases seem to have changed but little in that time." W.F. Bolton, *A Short History of Literary English* 15 (1972).

Often, such a semicolon signals an antithesis—e.g.:

- "Malamud promises an oeuvre; Bellow, at fifty-one, has already achieved one." Anthony Burgess, "'The Jew as American,' in *Urgent Copy* 131, 132 (1968).

Some editors would argue that in the first two examples, the clauses are so short and interconnected that a comma could have been used instead of a semicolon, especially since there is no other internal punctuation. But the better practice is to use a semicolon rather than a comma. See the final paragraph of (n).

Second, the semicolon sometimes separates coordinate clauses in long, complex sentences. This use was much more common in the 19th century than it is today—e.g.:

- "But Elizabeth was not formed for ill-humour: and though every prospect of her own was destroyed for the evening, it could not dwell long on her spirits; and having told all her griefs to Charlotte Lucas, whom she had not seen for a week, she was soon able to make a voluntary transition to the oddities of her cousin, and to point him out to her in particular notice." Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 80 (1813; repr. 1990).
- "The system which had addressed him in exactly the same manner as it had addressed hundreds of other boys, all varying in character and capacity, had enabled him to dash through his tasks, always with fair credit, and often with distinction; but in a fitful, dazzling way that had confirmed his reliance on those very qualities in himself, which it had been most desirable to direct and train." Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* 211 (1853; repr. 1895).
- "If the memory which we have uncovered does not answer our expectations, it may be that we ought to pursue the same path a little further; perhaps behind the first traumatic scene there may be concealed the memory of a
But in some fields, such as law, it’s not only acceptable but customary to use parentheses within parentheses—e.g.:

- “Greek developments include pimpleni and pletho, ‘to fill; pleres, pleos, ‘full; poly-‘, ‘much,’ with comparative pleos and superlative pleistos; polemos, ‘war; and polys, ‘city.’” Mario Pei, The Families of Words 229 (1962).

- “I wish to acknowledge the valuable help of a number of superior editors in the composition of this book: Neal Kozodoy of Commentary; Erich Eichmann, and Hilton Kramer of The New Criterion; John Gross, formerly of the Times Literary Supplement; and Carol Houck Smith, of W.W. Norton.” Joseph Epstein, Plausible Prejudices: Essays on American Writing 9 (1985).


Fourth, the semicolon sometimes appears simply to give a weightier pause than a comma would. This use is discretionary. A comma would do, but the writer wants a stronger stop—e.g.: “There is never anything sexy about Lautrec’s art; but there also is never anything about 1894–1895 that is discretionary. A comma would do, but the writer wants a stronger stop—e.g.: “There is never anything

The most common misuse of the semicolon is to place it where a colon belongs. So it’s not uncommon to see, in a business letter, a semicolon after the salutation: “Dear Sarah; . . . .” But the semicolon stops the forward movement of a statement, whereas a colon marks a forward movement. In any given published example, the error might simply be a typographical error. But it happens too commonly to be routinely a typo—e.g.: “In addition to those whose names appear as contributors, I am especially grateful to the following for their valuable assistance in the preparation of the Second Edition: Luciano Berio, Juilliard School of Music; David Burrows, New York University; . . . .” Willi Apel, Harvard Dictionary of Music v–vi (2d ed. 1972). In that sentence, the first semicolon should be a colon; the others are correct.

P. Square Brackets ([]). These enclose comments, corrections, explanations, interpolations, notes, or translations that were not in the original text but have been added by subsequent authors, editors, or others. E.g.: “My right honorable friend [John Smith] is mistaken.” “They [Whig members of Congress] couldn’t thwart President Jackson’s legislative agenda.” Unfortunately, many journalists use parentheses for this purpose—a slipshod practice.

Also, brackets often show parentheses within parentheses—Smith and her commander (Robert Parnell, also a [helicopter] pilot) both survived the crash. But in some fields, such as law, it’s not only acceptable but customary to use parentheses within parentheses—e.g.:

Q. Virgule (/). Known popularly as the “slash,” arcanely as the “solidus,” and somewhere in between as the “diagonal,” the virgule is a mark that doesn’t appear much in first-rate writing. Some writers use it to mean “per” <50 words/minute. Others use it to mean “or” <and/or> or “and” <every employee/indepenent contractor must complete form XJ42A>. Still others use it to indicate a vague disjunction, in which it’s not quite an or <the novel/novella distinction>. In this last use, the en-dash is usually a better choice. (See (h).) In all these uses, there’s almost always a better choice than the virgule. Use it as a last resort.

But the virgule has legitimate uses as well: (1) to separate run-in lines of poetry <To be, or not to be: that is the question: / Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer // The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune>; (2) to show pronunciations (as they’re shown throughout this book) <ribald is pronounced /rib ald/>; (3) to separate the numerator and the denominator in a fraction <19/20>; (4) in Internet addresses <http://www.oed.com>; and (5) in informal jottings, to separate the elements in a date <11/17/98>.

R. Bibliography. For books on punctuation, see the Select Bibliography at the end of this book (p. 1049).

pundit (= [1] a wise, learned teacher, or [2] an acknowledged expert who is paid to opine about matters of public interest, esp. through the mass media) is pronounced /pan dit/. Of Hindi and ultimately Sanskrit origin, the word was introduced into English in the late 1600s and first became widely popular about 1800. The derivative punditry (= the quality or state of being a pundit) arose in the 1920s, and punditocracy (= government by pundits) in the 1980s. By the latter date, pundit had come to be tinged with negative connotations—the sense often being that the person is not so much an acknowledged expert as a putative one.

Today there is a widespread mispronunciation of the word involving an epenthetic -n- in the second
syllable: /pәn-dint/. It arose in the late 20th century and has been spreading ever since. You can avoid it by dint of good memory and care in enunciation.

**punitive; *punitory.** The latter is a NEEDLESS VARIANT. See penal.

**PUNs**. After centuries of disrepute, puns (= humorous verbal ambiguities) now appear in straight-faced writing more than ever. It’s easy to see why they’re sometimes considered lame—e.g.: “Hip hotelier Ian Schrager has brought a Starck change to San Francisco’s historic Cliff Hotel. He and celebrated designer Philippe Starck have teamed up to reopen the stately hotel.” “Nifty New Clift,” *Am. Way*, 15 Nov. 2001, at 18. On the other hand, it’s easy to admire a seafood restaurateur who’s willing to put money at risk with the name “Just for the Halibut.”


**pupillage** (= the state or period of being a pupil) is the predominant AmE spelling. *Pupillage* is the predominant BrE spelling—but that has been so only since the 1970s.

**purchase.** See buy (b).

**purl** is a knitting term denoting a type of stitch. *Pearl* is a variant form to be avoided—e.g.: • “Key trends . . . include: cotton cable knee socks and cotton *pearl* [read *purl*] stitch knee socks, $12.” Sylvi Capelaci, “Legs Long on Style,” *Toronto Sun*, 23 Aug. 1994, imagination §, at 38.

• “With four hours of free time, a basic knowledge of the knit-and-*pearl* [read -*purl*] stitch and a creative mind, critter mittens were formed.” Faith Mayer, “Critter Mittens Win Magazine Prize,” *Telegram & Gaz.* (Worcester), 28 Feb. 1997, at B4.


**pursue** vs. *pursue*. See for pursuit.

**purposeful.** See purposive.

**purposely; purposefully.** *Purposefully* = on purpose; intentionally. *Purposefully* = with a specific purpose in mind; with the idea of accomplishing a certain result. Some writers fall into INELEGANT VARIATION with these words—e.g.: “For someone to be guilty of witness tampering, they must have acted purposely. Accidentally interfering with a witness, for example, does not qualify. Because the indictments did not specify Montgomery acted *purposefully* [read *purposely*], Mohl ‘quashed,’ or voided, the indictments.” “Man, 22, Gets 5–12 Years for Rape,” *Union Leader* (Manchester, N.H.), 23 Nov. 1996, at A7. Cf. right, adj.

**purposive; purposeful.** H.W. Fowler and the OED editors objected to *purposive* as an ill-formed hybrid. Today, however, it is usefully distinguished in one sense from *purposive* (= [1] having a purpose; or [2] full of determination). *W¹¹* records under *purposive* the sense “serving or effecting a useful function though not as a result of planning or design.”

But in other senses it is a NEEDLESS VARIANT of *purposeful*—e.g.: “The raw materials for John Wayne the persona were Wayne’s imposing physique and an economical, *purposive* [read *purposeful*] body language, which combined with the famous Wayne voice . . . to convey an air of inevitability and control.” Michiko Kakutani, “The Making of a Myth Who Rode into the Sunset,” *N.Y. Times*, 25 Feb. 1997, at C14.

**purport** vs. *purport*. See for purport.

**purposely** (= in accordance with; under; in carrying out) is rarely—if ever—useful. Lawyers are the main users of the phrase, and they often use it imprecisely. Following are some well-taken edits that show how multithued the phrase has become:

• “Actually, the college has some male students, but pursuant to its incorporation [read in accordance with its articles of incorporation], men are not accepted into the college’s liberal arts school.” Donna Greene, “New Chief Helps Define Women’s College,” N.Y. Times, 7 Dec. 1997, Westchester §, at 3. (Pursuant to its incorporation is briefer, to be sure, but it doesn’t make much sense.)

Eric Partridge was wrong to call this phrase “officialese for after” (U-EA at 257). It may be officialese, but it does not, ordinarily, mean “after.”

pushback. See airlinesese.

put paid to = (1) to put a stop to (something) as an object of interest; or (2) to deal effectively with (a person). The phrase seems to derive from the practice of stamping invoices as “paid,” at which time they stop being of any interest to the creditor. Sense 1 is far more common—e.g.:

- “But if Perlman’s audience thought it was going to be able to bask in gorgeous, mellow romanticism, the concert’s all-Bartok second half put paid to that idea.” Judy Gruber, “Itzhak Perlman,” Wash. Post, 14 Nov. 1994, at D6.
- “This, however, was not to be: the attack on the USSR meant that the war changed its focus and put paid to any hopes of Spain playing a role.” Joan Maria Thomàs, “This, however, was not to be: the attack on the USSR meant that the war changed its focus and put paid to any hopes of Spain playing a role.” Joan Maria Thomàs, “CenterSpan owes Sony Music Entertainment a $500,000 content fee and $750,000 in quarterly payments pursuant to [read under] a deal it struck to put the major’s content on its peer-to-peer network.” Matthew Benz, “CenterSpan May Cease Operations,” Billboard, 12 Apr. 2003, at 34.

put up with. See phrasal verbs.

pygmy, n., has been the standard spelling since about 1935. *Pigmy is a variant form. The adjective form is the same: pygmy. So *pygmaean and *pygmean are NEEDLESS VARIANTS.

Current ratio (pygmy vs. *pigmy): 2:1

pyjamas. See pajamas.

pyorrhea (= periodontitis) is so spelled in AmE, pyorrhoea in BrE. But the word is periodontologically old-fashioned: since the early 1950s in AmE and the late 1950s in BrE, periodontitis has become the usual term.

Qatar (the Middle Eastern country) is preferably pronounced /kәtәr/ throughout the English-speaking world—not /kәh-тәhr/, /kә-тәhr/, /kәy-тәhr/, /kәy-tәhr/, /gәh-әr/, or /gәt-әr/. Although older dictionaries list those variants, as the nation has risen in prominence internationally more and more speakers of English have realized that it’s easy to pronounce a homophone of cutter.

qua, conj. & adv. (= in the capacity of; as; in the role of), is often misused and is little needed in English. “The real occasion for the use of qua,” wrote H.W. Fowler, “occurs when a person or thing spoken of can be regarded from more than one point of view or as the holder of various coexistent functions, and a statement about him (or it) is to be limited to him in one of these aspects” (FMEU1 at 477). Here is Fowler’s example of a justifiable use: “Qua lover he must be condemned for doing what qua citizen he would be condemned for not doing.” But as would surely work better in that sentence; and in any event, this use of qua is especially rare in AmE.

One is hard-pressed to divine any purpose but rhetorical ostentation or idiosyncrasy in the following examples:

- “Such developments . . . do not explain why students qua students have played such an important role in stimulating protest.” Seymour Martin Lipset, “Why Youth Revolt,” N.Y. Times, 24 May 1989, at A31.
- “The proposal that a physician qua physician (or a medical ethic as such) is the necessary or best authority for the existential decision of rational suicide misrepresents medical knowledge and skills.” Steven H. Miles, “Physician-Assisted Suicide and the Profession’s Gyrocompass,” Hastings Ctr. Rep., May 1995, at 17.
- “The second [aspect of Plato’s account] concerns his views about the content of the knowledge of the choric poet, i.e. what kind of knowledge the choric poet possesses qua choric poet.” Antony Hatzistavrou, “’Correctness’ and Poetic Knowledge: Choric Poetry in the Laws,” in Plato and the Poets 361, 361 (Pierre Destrée & Fritz-Gregor Herrmann eds., 2011).

Similarly, as is better in unemphatic uses, in which Fowler rightly objected to qua—e.g.:

“Psychiatrists qua [read as] physicians should never deprive individuals of their lives, liberties, and properties, even if the security of society requires that they engage in such acts.” Thomas Szasz, “Mental Illness Is Still a Myth,” Society, May 1994, at 34.

“A state (here South Korea) has the right to protect itself—qua government—even if its population were not threatened by nuclear death and would, perhaps, in the face of a conventional attack, rather be Red than dead.” Jeremy I. Stone, “Less than Meets the Eye,” Bull. of Atomic Scientists, Sept. 1996, at 43. (Here the writer seems to mean through government; he would have been better off deleting the dashes and the phrase within them.)

The term is pronounced /kwah/—preferably not /kway/, even though the latter is the first pronunciation listed in many dictionaries.

**QUADRA-. See QUADRI-.**

**quadrennial; *quadriennial.** Quadrennial (= occurring every four years; lasting four years) is now standard: the etymologically proper -i- was dropped from the word in the 18th century. Today *quadriennial is merely a variant spelling to be avoided. See quadri-. Current ratio: 42:1

**QUADRI-; QUADRUS; QUADRA-.** In Latinate words denoting four of something, quadri- is the usual form, as in quadripartite (= having four parts), quadrillion (= 10^15 [consisting of four groups of three zeros after 1,000]), and quadrivium (= the four subjects of study in the higher division of the medieval curriculum, consisting of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music).

Quadru- is the usual form for words in which the second element begins with a -p-, as in quadruped (= a four-legged animal), quadruple (= to multiply by four), and quadruplet (= one of four children born at one birth). The two words in which quadru- precedes a word without a -p- are rare: quadrumanous (= four-handed) and quadrumvirate (= a group of four men united in some way).

Although Eric Partridge said that quadra- is “always wrong” (U&E at 257), it appears unexceptionably in many terms deriving from Late Latin, such as quadragesimal (= of, relating to, or involving Lent) and quadrangle (= a four-sided figure). And 20th-century word coiners have devised words such as quadruphonic (= of, relating to, or involving a sound system with four loudspeakers) and quadrathlon (= an athletic contest involving four events).

But in one word especially—quadriplegia—the medial -i- is sometimes wrongly made -a-. About 10% of the time in print, the misspelling *quadraplegia appears—e.g.: “The sudden bending of the neck . . . can lead to spinal cord injury and permanent paralysis of both arms and legs (known as *quadriplegia* [read quadriplegial]).” G. Timothy Johnson, “So Long, Readers—The Doctor Is Out,” Chicago Trib., 22 Aug. 1986, at C2.

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*quadriplegia* misspelled *quadraplegia*: Stage 1

**quadriplegias.** While the correct term for these thigh muscles is *quadriplegias in both singular and plural forms, it is common when writing of a single muscle to drop the -s—e.g.: “Brown had no update on the condition of kick returner Josh Davis, who suffered a *quadriceps* injury against Missouri.” Eric Olson, “NU’s Ball-Control Keyed Win,” Omaha World-Herald, 14 Oct. 2002, at C1. It’s better to stick with the singular form *quadriplegias, by far the more commonly used form. But given the acceptance of *biceps* as a singular, *quadriplegias probably can’t be far behind. Cf. bicep, pecs & triceps. Current ratio (left *quadriplegias vs. *left *quadriplegias): 7:1

*quadriennial. See quadrennial.

**quadruple.** So spelled. See quadri-.

**QUADRU-; See quadri-.

**quagmire (= [1] a bog, or [2] an especially difficult or complicated situation) is pronounced /kwag-mir/ in AmE and either that way or /kwahg-mir/ in BrE.**

*quai. See quay.

**qualifiedly (= with qualifications or reservations) is an adverb usually signaling that the sentence ought to be rewritten—e.g.: “The sage of Israel defense analysts, Zeev Schiff, believes that a compromise with Syria is, as he wrote in Haaretz on Dec. 8, *qualifiedly optimistic* [read, perhaps, has . . . a qualified optimism or is . . . fairly optimistic].” Amos Perlmutter, “Syria’s Mideast Peace Gambit,” Wash. Times, 26 Dec. 1995, at A14.

“Burundi’s prime minister, Antoine Nduwayo, a Tutsi, has also backed a security force, though with qualifications or has also backed a security force, but not without qualifications.” “Burundi at the Edge,” N.Y. Times, 25 July 1996, at A22.

Since the 19th century, the word has appeared more frequently in AmE than in BrE. See -EDLY.

**qualitative; *qualitative.** The first is standard in AmE and BrE alike. The second is a needless variant—e.g.: “That result, though, suggests a *qualitative [read qualitative]* difference between the approach of period
wind instrumentals to their craft and that of their keyboard or string counterparts.” Andrew Clements, “Tan and Hoeprich,” Fin. Times, 27 Sept. 1988, at 127. Qualitative corresponds to quality in the sense of character or nature, not in the sense of merit or excellence. Cf. quantitative.

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quality. When used as an adjective meaning “of high quality,” this is a vogue word and a casualism. A quality bottling company, quality time. Use good or fine or some other adjective of better standing. For a misuse of quality, n., for quantity, see unknown quantity.

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quality as an adjective meaning “of high quality”: Stage 4

quantum leap; quantum jump. These terms, once technical but now part of the popular idiom, date from the early 20th century. They denote “a sudden, extensive change (usu. an improvement) in the rate of progress.” Although purists insist that, in physics, the change is merely abrupt but not necessarily large or dramatic, anyone using the term in that sense is sure to be misunderstood in most contexts—even technical ones. The popular sense, involving a massive change, seems genuinely useful. Its only disadvantage is that it’s now a vogue word and a cliché.

The phrase quantum leap is 20 times as common in print today as quantum jump. But this disparity represents a reversal: from 1920 to 1980 jump was more frequent in print sources. The alternative term leapt ahead in 1980.

quantum (≈ amount; measure) forms the plural quanta, an exception to the maxim to avoid foreign plurals. (See plurals (b).) Actually, though, for the most part the word itself is easily simplified and should be avoided—e.g.: “If necessary, he will enter into arrangements with financial institutions and stockbrokers to place out an appropriate quantum [read number] of PWE shares to ensure its continued listing.” Jennifer Jacobs, “Ting Makes Offer for 6.56m PWE Shares at RM7.75 Each,” Bus. Times, 14 May 1996, at 6.

quarrel, v.i., makes quarreled and quarrelling in AmE, quarrelled and quarrelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

quarter is best pronounced /kwәr-tәr/—not /kor-tәr/.

*quarternary. See quaternary.

quartet; *quartette. The former is standard in AmE and BrE alike. The latter is an infrequent variant. Cf. quintet.

quarto (= a type of page size or book) forms the plural quartos. See plurals (d).

quash. See squash.

quasi—pronounced /kway-ziz/ or /kwәh-zee/—means “as if; seeming or seemingly; in the nature of; nearly.” In legal writing, quasi may stand alone as a word, but as a prefix it’s generally hyphenated. The term has been prefixed to any number of adjectives and nouns, e.g., quasi-compulsory, quasi-domicile, quasi-judicial, and quasi-monopoly.

quaternary, adj. & n., is often misspelled *quarte-

ny, *quartenary, or *quatenary. The adjective means “consisting of four parts,” the noun “a set of four things.” The word is pronounced either /kwәh-tәr-nәr-ee/ or /kwә-tәr-nәr-ee/.
quay is the standard spelling. *Quai is a variant. The word is pronounced /ˈkweɪ/ or /ˈkweɪ-/—preferably not /ˈkwɛɪ/.

queasy is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Queasy is a variant.

Quebec (the French Canadian province) was long ago anglicized in pronunciation: /kwɑːˈbek/. To say /ˈkay-ˈbek/ in an English-speaking context is to engage in affectation.

queenly. See kingly.

*quelch is an unconsciously made PORTMANTEAU word formed from quell (= [1] to overwhelm, or [2] to pacify) or quash (= to suppress) and squelch (= to crush or silence), perhaps through a false association with quench. Although few dictionaries record this nonword, it’s hardly uncommon. Either squelch or quelch, both standard words that dictionaries have long recognized, will serve better. Sometimes quelch seems like the right choice—e.g.:

- “He aggravated scholars even further by quelching [read squelching] hopes that he might release reams of hitherto unread Joyceana sealed in a suitcase in the Irish national library,” John Engstrom, “Actor Goes Galactic,” Boston Globe, 9 July 1990, at 33. (On the use of aggravate for irritate in that sentence, see aggravate.)


- “Already this year, Haug had to quelch [read squelch] rumors that it was appropriate for teachers to use ‘hand signals’ to cue students during testing.” Nancy Mitchell, “Jeffco School Under Review over CSAP,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 21 Mar. 2002, at A32.

At other times, quell seems to fill in better—e.g.:


What’s the principle for deciding between squelch and quell? Squelch is better for the idea of stifling talk, emotions, thoughts, and the like. Quell is better for the idea of stifling a violent uprising or competitive bid.

querulous (= habitually fretful, whiny, and complaining) is pronounced /ˈkwɛr-ə-ləs/—not /ˈkwɛr-ələs/.

query (= a question designed to elicit particular information or to check the accuracy of something) is pronounced /ˈkwɛr-ee/-—not /ˈkwɛr-ələr ee/. For the difference between query and inquiry, see inquiry (c).

*questionary. See questionnaire.

*question as to whether. See question whether.

question-begging. See beg the question.

questioner; querist. The first is now the ordinary, more natural term. But from 1700 to about 1840, querist (now old-fashioned) was predominant. Today it would doubtless be misunderstood in speech.

Current ratio: 39:1

**Question Marks.** See punctuation (m).


*Questionary is a needless variant. (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
question whether

Writers sometimes err by putting a question mark after an indirect question, especially one beginning with I wonder—e.g.:


• “I wonder whether the NAACP would have considered it proper if the Ku Klux Klan had similarly paid off the plaintiffs in Brown v. Board of Education?” “Lost Opportunity,” Fresno Bee, 27 Nov. 1997, at B14.

In both those examples, the question mark should be a period.

question whether; *question of whether; *question as to whether. The first has a long literary lineage: it properly uses the noun clause beginning with whether in apposition to question. The other two are minor prolixities—e.g.: “There is also the question of whether [read question whether] talk of values—in the context of adultery and the like—will resonate in 2004 as it once did.” Jeffrey Toobin, “Candide,” New Yorker, 16 Dec. 2002, at 42, 48. See whether (B).

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 6:6:1

*quethen. See quoth.

quetzal (/ket-sahl/) = [1] a colorful, long-tailed bird common to Mexico and Central America; or [2] the basic monetary unit of Guatemala. *Quezal is a variant spelling.

Current ratio: 300:1

queue (/kyoo/), vb., makes queued and queuing (not queueing). For the sense of the noun as well as the verb, see cue.

*quezal. See quetzal.

quick. A. And quickly. Although quick, as an adverb, dates back to Middle English, quickly has long been considered preferable in serious writing. To say she learns quick is so casual as to be slangy. But some exceptions occur in set phrases such as Come quick! (sometimes also Come quickly!) and get-rich-quick schemes. Some instances are close calls—e.g.: “Police said they believe that the explosives were stolen and dumped in the A.B. Jewell water reservoir by someone who wanted to get rid of them quick.” “Police Remove Explosives from Oklahoma Reservoir,” Dallas Morning News, 30 July 1997, at D12. Cf. slow.

B. Meaning “alive.” Quick originally meant “alive” and continued to do so up to the 19th century, as in the Apostles’ Creed: “From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” Except in allusion to that well-known sentence, this usage is now archaic. See archaisms.

The illogical phrase quick with child—referring to a pregnant woman—began in the 15th century as a METATHESIS of the strictly logical with quick child. The OED labels the phrase “rare or obsolete,” but writers continue to use it: “Under the common law, abortion was allowed with the consent of the woman and before she was ‘quick with child’ (i.e., the time when the first movements of the child were felt by the woman, around the end of the first trimester).” Maggie Jones Patterson et al., “Abortion in America,” J. Consumer Research, 1 Mar. 1995, at 677.

quick claim. See quitclaim.

quid pro quo (= this for that; tit for tat) is a useful LATINISM since the only English equivalent is tit for tat, which seems too colloquial in many contexts. E.g.: “Here, then, is a lobbying group pointedly offering something of value to a public official as a quid pro quo for a political favor.” Jim Brunelle, “Paper’s Series Shows How Irredeemably Corrupt System Is,” Portland Press Herald, 19 Sept. 1997, at A11. And the word exchange often doesn’t quite capture the right sense—e.g.: “Congress will evade its intent with subversive language or will collude with the executive, engaging in quid pro quo at the pork barrel.” Letter of Bill Weiss, “Line-Item Veto Law Can Prod Press to Find, Feds to Cut Pork,” Columbus Dispatch, 6 Sept. 1997, at A9.

The best plural is quid pro quos. Quids pro quos is a pedantic alternative. *Quids pro quo is simply incorrect; it’s a good example of Hypercorrection. See plurals (B).

quiescence; *quiescency. Quiescence (/kwee-es-onts/ or /kw-m/-) is standard, *quiescency being a needless variant. *Quiescence is a fairly common misspelling—e.g.: “The apparent quiescence [read quiescence] and resignation of the Iowa electorate is a source of deep frustration for Iowa Democrats.” James R. Dickinson, “Hip-Deep in Farm Crisis, Iowa Favors Republican,” Wash. Post, 10 Oct. 1986, at A16.

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1. quiescence misspelled *quiescence: Stage 1
   Current ratio: 469:1

2. *quiescency for quiescence: Stage 1
   Current ratio (quiescence vs. *quiescency): 1,204:1

quiescent (= [1] characterized by inactivity or tranquillity, or [2] causing no trouble or symptoms for the time being) is pronounced either /kwee-ee-onts/ or (less commonly) /kw-ee-es-onts/. See spelling (A).

quiet, n.; quietness; quietude. Quiet = silence; stillness; peace <the quiet of Wolfson College when the students had departed>. Quietness = the condition of being silent or still <they had mistakenly attributed her quietness to shyness>. Quietude = a state or period of repose; tranquility <after a three-month quietude, he resumed work>.

quiet, v.t.; quieten. The preferred verb form is quiet. Chiefly a Briticism, quieten was considered a superfluous word by H.W. Fowler (FMEU1 at 479). Avoid it.

Current ratio (quieted vs. quietened): 11:1

quietness; quietude. See quiet, n.

quietus (= [1] the end of something, or [2] someone’s death) is pronounced /kwv-e-tas/—preferably not
Quite good

quite moderately. Sense 3 occurs in BrE only, in which quite
is sometimes used in the sense of just a little, a bit, esp. of
any claim to ownership) often appears in the past
tense as quit[ed]. The word is occasionally mangled into *quick
claim—e.g.: • “By page 290 Robin has long quitted the
suburbs, met a nice girl at Oxford, done his war service, [etc.]” David
Hughes, “You Can’t Do Both,” Mail on Sunday, 11 Sept.
1994, at 36. • “As he quitted the palace, the whole Court crowded about
him to pay their compliments.” “The Jacobite File,” Scots-
man, 30 Sept. 1996, at 12. • "It was heard from Indian River in a few days more that
Blueskin had quitted the inlet and had sailed away to the
southeast; and it was reported, by those who seemed to
know, that he had finally quitted those parts.” Howard
Pyle, “Blueskin the Pirate,” in Ghost Pirates of the Caribbean,
[read as kwi-ik/—not /kee-hoh-tik/]. True, the adjective derives
from the name of Cervantes’s character Don Quixote,
but the adjectival form of the name is /dahn kee-
Los Angeles Times, 30 Oct. 1998, at C1. • “It may take quite a long time before your loved one takes
any action of any kind.” Meg Nugent, “Straight from the
For the advantage of quite over very with a past-
participial adjective, see very (b).

quitter; quittor. For “someone who quits,” quitter is
preferred. Quittor = an inflammation of the feet, usu.
in horses.

quixotic (= impractically based on wholly unrealistic
dreams of improving the world) is pronounced /kwik-
sot-ik/—not /kee-hoh-tik/. True, the adjective derives
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For the advantage of quite over very with a past-
participial adjective, see very (b).
The word is sometimes misspelled *quandam, and misused also—e.g.: “This would have been the perfect time to meet . . . what used to be called The Wife, the quandam [read quandam?] little woman who, theory has it, might be able to influence what is written.” Richard Cohen, “Press Party Symbolizes Carter Administration,” Wash. Post, 26 Jan. 1978, at B1. Is the writer suggesting that she is no longer little? At best the sentence involves a miscue.

The word has several synonyms: erstwhile, sometime, and whilom. See erstwhile.

quorum. Pl. quorums—not *quora. See plurals (b).
Current ratio: 34:1

**Quotation Marks.** See punctuation (n).

**Quotations. A. Use of Quoted Material.** The deft and incidental use of quotations is a rare art. Poor writers are apt to overuse block quotations (see (b)). Those who do this abrogate their duty, namely, to write. Readers tend to skip over single-spaced mountains of prose, knowing how unlikely it is that so much of a previous writer’s material pertains directly to the matter at hand.

Especially to be avoided is quoting another writer at the end of a paragraph or section, a habit infused with laziness. Skillful quoters subordinate the quoted material to their own prose and use only the most clearly relevant parts of the previous writing. And even then, they weave it into their own narrative or analysis, not allowing the quoted to overpower the quoter.

B. Handling Block Quotations. The best way to handle them, of course, is not to handle them at all: quote smaller chunks. Assuming, though, that this goal is unattainable—as many writers seem to think it is—then the biggest challenge is handling a quotation so that it will actually get read. The secret is in the lead-in.

Before discussing how a good lead-in reads, let us look at the way many of them read. They’re dead:

- According to one authority: . . .
- The author went on to state: . . .
- The article concludes as follows: . . .
- As stated by one critic: . . .

Anyone who wants to become a stylist must vow to try never to introduce a quotation in this way. Readers are sure to skip the quotation.

With a long quotation, the better practice is to evoke the gist of the quotation in the lead-in. Hence the lead-in becomes an assertion, and the quotation becomes the support. Feeling as if the writer has asserted something concrete, the reader will often, out of curiosity, want to verify that assertion.

Consider, for example, how nicely three literary critics introduce quotations. First is Randall Jarrell, in his Third Book of Criticism (1965):

- “His poetic rhetoric is embarrassingly threadbare and commonplace, as when he writes about his own lost belief . . . .”

- “What he says about his childhood is true of his maturity . . . .”
- “His obsessions, at their worst, are a moral and intellectual disaster and make us ashamed for him: . . . .”


- “The first reply of Lamb (3 October) begins with the words, ‘Your letter was an inestimable treasure to me,’ but the next one grieves that Coleridge is not settling down to a serious course of life, and the third (24 October) questions the doctrines that Coleridge has preached: . . . .”
- “Mr. Piper sometimes admits that a use of words by a Romantic is bad, but even so he considers it bad in a different way from what we think: . . . .”
- “He quotes from ‘A General Introduction for My Work’ (1937) about the undirected hatred that sprouts in the modern world: . . . .”


- “Adrienne Rich, in an essay called ‘Power and Danger,’ gives a feminist history of the word as used against women: . . . .”
- “Any rewriting of women’s history, as in this neutrally uninformative passage, has to center on the word: . . . .”
- “Toril Moi (arguing with Irigaray over the word power) writes these heartening words: . . . .”

How does such a lead-in work in the fuller context? Here’s an example from the masterly Christopher Ricks:

William Blake knew, whether or not torment may hereafter prove eternal, that eternity may itself be a torment to contemplate:

> Time is the mercy of Eternity; without Time’s swiftness Which is the swiftest of all things: all were eternal torment.

Christopher Ricks, Beckett’s Dying Words 24 (1993).

When the writer gives the upshot in the introductory words, readers aren’t left hunting for the quotation’s central idea.

This method has the benefit not only of ensuring that the quotation is read, but also of enhancing the writer’s credibility. For if the lead-in is pointed as well as accurate, the reader will agree that the quotation supports the writer’s assertion.

C. Punctuating the Lead-In. Writers usually have four choices: a colon, a comma, a period (i.e., no lead-in, really—only an independent sentence before the quotation), or no punctuation. A long quotation ordinarily requires a colon—e.g.:

> My concern today is with what might be called the Higher Bibliography (bibliology would be a better word), and in particular with the superior historical certainty increasingly claimed for such investigations. Here, as a sample, is a characteristic pronouncement:

When bibliography and textual criticism join [sc. in the editing of a definitive text], it is impossible to imagine one without the other. Bibliography may be said to attack textual problems from the mechanical point of view, using evidence which must deliberately avoid being colored by literary considerations.
Nonbibliographical textual criticism works with meanings and literary values. If these last are divorced from all connection with the evidence of the mechanical process that imprinted meaningful symbols on a sheet of paper, no check-rein of fact or probability can restrain the farthest reaches of idle speculation. [Fredson Bowers, On Editing Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Dramatists 34–35 (1955).]

On the contrary, I shall argue, the only check-rein on idle critical speculation is critical speculation that is not idle.


Some writers, though, let the lead-in and the quotation stand as separate sentences; that is, Bateson might have used a period instead of the colon when leading in to the Bowers quotation. But the colon helps tie the quotation to the text and is therefore generally superior, especially when the quotation is introduced by a sentence using here or consider or a similar word. A period would leave the quotation in a sort of syntactic limbo.

A comma typically introduces a short quotation that isn’t set off from the rest of the text—e.g.:

True, I can’t quite match [Barzun’s] example of the novelist who submitted a manuscript in which one of his characters spoke about seeing a play starring the Lunts; it came back to him from his publisher with the marginal suggestion, “Wouldn’t the Hunts be better?”


A colon would be permissible in place of that comma, but it would introduce the quotation more formally and give a stronger pause. With the comma, the reader glides more easily into the silly suggestion that Gross quotes.

When is it best to use no punctuation at all? Only when the introductory language moves seamlessly into the quoted material. E.g.:

Thus, Wilson is able to say of the Dickens family penury and of Charles’s childhood humiliations that they are biographical data worth knowing and bearing in mind, because they help us to understand what Dickens was trying to say. He was less given to false moral attitudes or to fear of respectable opinion than most of the great Victorians; but . . . the meaning of Dickens’s work has been obscured by that element of the conventional which Dickens himself never quite outgrew.


The mere fact that what is being introduced is a block quotation does not mean that some additional punctuation is necessary.

D. American and British Systems. In AmE, quotations that are short enough to be run in to the text (usually fewer than 50 words) are set off by pairs of double quotation marks (" . . "). In BrE, quoted text that is not long enough to be a block quotation is set off by single quotation marks (’ . . ’). See Punctuation (n).

E. Ellipses. A good way to trim down a bloated quotation—and to increase the odds of having it read—is to cut irrelevant parts. When you omit one or more words, you show the omission by using ellipsis points (a series of three period-dots) with one space before, after, and between them:

In several scenes . . . the players bear down and the camera bores in with an intensity that suggests the sense of liberty, even in matters irrelevant to censorship, that freedom from the Hays code can bring.

Use a fourth period-dot when the omission falls between sentences in the quoted material or when your ellipsis ends a sentence.

The spacing between the last quoted word and the first ellipsis point depends on whether the word before the ellipsis ends a sentence. In the following example, charming is the last word of the first sentence, and it therefore ends with a period followed by three ellipsis points:

Both he and the children are very charming. . . . But I would like still better to see any sufficiently intelligent attack on the new kinds of soul-destroyer—those heirs of the healers of the recent past who have learned the words ever so earnestly but, lacking the remotest ear for the tune, do their work by the book.

But if charming were not the last word of the first sentence, then the three ellipsis points would come first, and the (typographically identical) period after. The only difference would be the space between charming and the first dot:

Both he and the children are very charming. . . . But I would like still better to see any sufficiently intelligent attack on the new kinds of soul-destroyer—those heirs of the healers of the recent past who have learned the words ever so earnestly but, lacking the remotest ear for the tune, do their work by the book.

This distinction—a hairsplitting distinction, in the minds of some—is one that careful writers should adhere to. Otherwise, careful readers will justifiably wonder whether the end of the sentence has been lopped off.

Finally, when you omit one or more paragraphs in a block quotation, use a whole line for the three ellipsis points (centered), which should have five to seven spaces between them—e.g.:

It seems to me that the title Something to Declare encapsulates the tragedy of foreign films in America. Though many foreign films don’t make it over here, those that do are not necessarily the best. Popular success, sensationalism, or the mere fact of coming from some major film industry—French, German, Italian—may be more important than quality. But if a good foreign film does make it to America—if distributors and exhibitors do not deem it uncommercial—all kinds of duties are levied on it because it has “something to declare.”
The problem with the better foreign films is that—unlike the majority of American movies, even the superior ones—they have . . . something to say. They are not just devices for killing a couple of hours, not just moviemovies. They do not merely entertain but also, by provoking thought, sustain. And for this, they incur the heavy duty of disregard. A public afraid to confront a little reality, to feel more strenuously committed—to think—simply stays away. Such films have something to declare, but virtually no one to declare it to.


For more on ellipses, see *Punctuation* (f).

### quote

*quote* (properly a verb) for *quotation* is a casualism that has been very much on the rise since the 1950s. E.g.:

- “Most of his really good *quotes*, which have an off-the-cuff originality when heard at a campaign rally, are rehashes from the book.” William Murphy, “Pols & Politics,” *Newsday* (N.Y.), 19 Sept. 1997, at A30.
- “A *quote* has an even more powerful effect if we presume not just a particular author behind it, but God, nature, the unconscious, labor, or difference.” Boris Groys, *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of the Media* 90 (Carsten Strathausen trans., 2012).

The problem with *quotation* is that, to the writer who hopes to deliver goods quickly, the three syllables sound and read as if they are slowing the sentence down. The single syllable of *quote*, meanwhile, sounds apt to such a writer. And it sounds more and more natural all the time, as it seems to predominate in spoken English. So although it remains informal for now, it’s gaining ground in formal prose.

The negative form, too, is a casualism—e.g.: “I need to correct several *misquotes* printed in the article by Kristi O’Brien, ‘Crosses Set in Protest of Abortions.’” Letter of Vicki Rice, “Claims Misquoting in Article About Abortions,” *State J.-Register* (Springfield, Ill.), 23 May 1997, at 8. See *cite*, v.t.

### LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*quote* for *quotation*: Stage 4

#### quoth

*quoth*, an archaisms, appears chiefly in historical contexts or jaunty prose. The word is always part of an inverted phrase. That is, *quoth* precedes its subject—e.g.: “*Quoth* the Ravens, ‘Charge ever more.’ The average ticket price for the new [Baltimore] Ravens is $40.05, compared to $32.61 last year when the team was the Cleveland Browns.” Jerry Stack, “Morning Briefing: Eye Openers,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 12 Aug. 1996, at C2. (That sentence is, of course, a play on Edgar Allan Poe’s famous line, “*Quoth* the Raven, ‘Nevermore.’”) See *inversion*.

The word should be used only in the past tense (for “said”). The present-tense verb *quethen* is obsolete.

### Quran. See Koran.

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**rabbet; rebate.** In carpentry, a *rabbet* is a kind of groove cut into the edge of a board. *Rebate* (in this sense) is a variant form.

**rabbis; raebins.** *Rabbi*, the standard term, forms the plural *rabbis*—not *rabbies*. *Raebin*, an archaic form, is a needless variant—except that it gives us the adjective *rabinic*. We also have the cognate noun *rabinate* (= [1] the position, tenure, or office of a rabbi; or [2] collectively, a body of rabbis).

**rabbit.** See Welsh *rabbit*.

**rabid (= [1] [of an animal] afflicted with rabies, or [2] having extreme and unreasonable opinions) is pronounced /rab-id/—not /ray-bid/.

**raccoon; racon.** The animal is North American, and the AmE spelling is *raccoon*. The traditional BrE spelling—a variant form in AmE—is *racon*. But since 1950 the AmE spelling has become predominant also in BrE. *Raccoon* should be considered standard in all varieties of English.

Current ratio (World English): 13:1

**rational discrimination; race discrimination.** The first phrase predominates in print sources and is slightly better because, other things being equal, an adjective is preferable if it has the form as well as the function of an adjective (hence *rational*). But predictably, idiomatic English is not consistent: we speak of *racial equality* but *race relations*, and of *racial tension* but *race riots*. Cf. *sex*, adj.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 9:1

**racism; *racialism*.** Both terms date from the early 20th century—*racialism* (1907) is more than two decades older than *racism* (1933)—yet both terms remained relatively obscure until the late 1950s. *Racialism* stayed obscure, but *racism* shot to ever greater levels of prominence beginning in the 1960s—first in AmE and later in BrE. *Racism* = (1) unfair treatment of people on grounds of their ethnicity or race, or (2) the belief that some races of people are inherently superior to others.

**rack; wrack.** The word *rack* is a complicated one with many senses. The important thing to know about the two spellings is that *wreck* is predominant in only one specialized sense: “seaweed” or “kelp.” In all other senses and idioms, *rack* is the word. In the sense “to torture,” *rack* has been vastly predominant since the
racket; racquet. For the implement used in net games, racket is standard in AmE and BrE alike. The variant form racquet appears in some proper names (e.g., the Palm Springs Racquet Club) seemingly because the “fancy” spelling looks more high-toned. Perhaps that also explains why, in the sport of squash, racquet has somehow become the predominant spelling. The same is true of racquetball, the related sport using short-handled rackets.

racketeer, n. & vi. The noun racketeering refers to the business of racketeers—a system of organized crime traditionally involving the extortion of money from business firms by intimidation, violence, or other illegal methods. Oddly, this noun (as well as the verb racketeer) is characterized by the OED as an Americanism, whereas the adjective racketeering is exemplified in that dictionary only by British quotations. If the verb and its derivative forms began as Americanisms, they will inevitably spread to BrE, given the inroads already made.

In 1970, Congress passed the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), which led to a resurgence of the word in AmE. Today racketeering often has the broad sense “the practice of engaging in a fraudulent scheme or enterprise.”

*roocon. See raccoon.

racquet. See racket.

radiance (= [1] a soft, gentle light, or [2] a beaming happiness that emanates from someone) has always been the standard term in all varieties of English. *Radiancy is a Needless Variant.

Current ratio: 103:1

radical, adj., = [1] of, relating to, or involving a root or foundation <the radical selfishness of human nature>; or [2] far-reaching, extreme, sweeping <a radical proposal>. It’s sometimes misspelled radicle—e.g.: “This radicle [read radical] approach to bifurcation would make any class certification a foregone conclusion.” “Ninth Circuit Denies Red Cross Mandamus Request in AZ Blood Class Action,” Pharmaceutical Litig. Rptr., July 1996, at 11,449. Actually, radicle is a noun meaning “a small root”—e.g.:


radiocast > radiocast > radiocast. So inflected. The solecism *radiocasted almost never appears despite the problems that arise with analogous verbs such as broadcast. See -CAST & IRREGULAR VERBS.

radius. The Latin plural radii, traditionally the preferred form, greatly outnumbered radiuses in modern print sources from all varieties of English. E.g.: “During a turn, the two skis cut different radii—the outside ski carving a wider turn than the inside ski.” Greg Johnston, “All Aboard!” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 23 Oct. 1997, at 8.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

radiuses for radii: Stage 2 Current ratio (radii vs. radiuses): 76:1

radix (= [1] a plant root, or [2] the base of a system of numbers or algorithms) has always predominantly formed the plural radices—not *radixes.

Current ratio: 14:1

railroad; railway. As nouns these words are virtually equivalent. W2 makes the following distinction: “Railroad . . . is usually limited to roads [with lines or rails fixed to ties] for heavy steam transportation and also to steam roads partially or wholly electrified or roads for heavy traffic designed originally for electric traction. The lighter electric street-car lines and the like are usually termed railways.” But that distinction has largely faded, as railway appears comparatively seldom in AmE. In BrE, the term railway is more common. Streetcar lines in England are commonly called tramlines and the vehicles tramcars or trammy cars.

Railroad is used universally as a verb <passenger railroaded>, figuratively as well as literally—e.g.: “But we’re Brooklynites, so watch out; we will not be railroaded.” Dick D. Zigun, “Can Coney Come Back?” N.Y. Times, 9 Aug. 1997, § 1, at 23. This sense is now used in BrE as well as AmE.

raise. A. And rear. The old rule, still sometimes observed, is that crops and livestock are raised and children are reared. But today the phrase born and raised is about nine times as common in print as born and reared. And raise is now standard as a synonym for rear—e.g.:
Indeed, born and reared is now likely to sound affected in AmE—even though it was predominant over born and raised till about 1950.

As a matter of word frequency, raising children (as opposed to rearing children) became the predominant usage in AmE in 1968 and in BrE by 1974.

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**B. And rise.** The straightforward distinction is that raise (raise > raised > raised) is transitive, while rise (rise > rose > risen) is intransitive. Here the rule is followed: “For 40 years the farmer has risen at 4:00 in the morning to tend to his crops and raise his chickens.”

But the following example incorrectly uses raise as an intransitive verb: “Then it [an alligator] raised up [read rose] on all four legs and charged.”

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**Raising.** See can’t seem & don’t think.

**rallentando.** See ritardando.

**rumbunctious.** See rambunctious—e.g.:

- “I try to keep a semblance of order here;” she says, in between a couple of well-placed reminders to the occasional student getting too rambunctious [read rambunctious]." Tom Snyder, "Grinding Out the Meals," Orange County Register, 8 Aug. 1996, at A1.

- “From the grungy thub-thumping, through the soul and reggae covers and the rave-up Winning Ugly, Dirty Work’s all over the shop, loud and rumbunctious [read rambunctious] and in your face.” Christopher Sandford, Keith Richards: Satisfaction 280 (2004).

**Cf. bumptious & rumbustious.**

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**rampant** means “widespread, unrestrained,” usually in a pejorative sense <a rampant epidemic>. Hence bad things become rampant in places; places don’t become *rampant with* bad things. Yet some writers get this backwards—e.g.: “Officials and residents in the area want to revive and showcase the glory that was Bronzeville before it becomes rampant [read rife] with large tracks [read tracts] of vacant land and dilapidated buildings.” “Revival of ‘Black Metropolis’ Blossoms,” Telegraph Herald (Dubuque), 24 Sept. 1996, at A7. (For the second error in that sentence, see track.)

**Language-Change Index**

| rampant with for rife with | Stage 1 |

**ransack.** See ransack.

**rancor** (= a feeling of anger and hatred toward someone) is so spelled in AmE—and has been since about 1850. Rancour has always been the BrE spelling. See -OR; -OUR.

**rankle** (= to irritate or embitter) is traditionally a transitive verb, not an intransitive one. Something rankles someone—it doesn’t *rankle with* someone. Most writers get this right in the overwhelming majority of instances. Yet in both AmE and BrE, the superfluous with has begun insinuating itself alongside rankle—e.g.:


> “It must rankle with [read rankle] Rawley indeed that this bastard brother was seated at the same table. And rankle with [read rankle] his father as well.” Diane Gaston, “A Reputable Rake,” in Rapturous Rakes Bundle 7, 230 (2007).

> “I am slightly nervous that the memory of the photographs of our wild dance at Atlantic on the cover of the Star and the Enquirer might still rankle with [read rankle] her estranged husband, Bruce Willis, who will be attending the premiere that night.” Christopher Ciccone, Life with My Sister Madonna 257 (2009).

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**ransack** (= to search thoroughly, esp. for loot; pillage) is occasionally misspelled *ransack—e.g.: “After Kentland was ransacked [read ransacked] by Union troops during the Civil War, Kent rebuilt Kentland.” Robert Freis, “Grand Land with a History as Rich as Its Soil,” Roanoke Times, 10 Oct. 1995, at 8.

**Language-Change Index**

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**rap** (= a negative allegation or reputation) typically appears in the phrase bad rap or bum rap. It’s occasionally confused with the word wrap (= a material for covering something)—e.g.:


> “Even though Edgar Allan Poe gets a bum wrap [read rap] for ‘just dying here,’ his genealogy is deeply rooted in this
rapture is susceptible to a blunder analogous to the one that occurs with rapt. That is, some writers make it *wrapture. Sometimes, of course, it’s simply a face-
ious formation—e.g.: “Whatever you do, don’t for-
get the glue gun, the real key to true wrapture,” Kathy
Legg, “Inspirations for Wrapping It All Up,” Wash-
Post, 7 Dec. 1995, at T12. But uses of that kind—and
the fact that some women’s apparel stores call them-
sew Wrapture—are likely to cause some popular
confusion in years ahead.

rara avis (/rərə-aɪvɪs/; lit., “rare bird”) is, as H.W.
Fowler once noted, “seldom an improvement on rarity”
(FMEU1 at 483). The plural is rara avises or (more com-
monly, believe it or not) rarae aves. See plurals (b).

rare; scarce. In the best usage, rare refers to a con-
sistent infrequency, usually of things of superior qual-
ity <diamonds having more than three carats remain
quite rare>. Scarce refers to anything that is not plen-
tiful, even ordinary things that are temporarily hard to
find <job opportunities are scarce this year>. Writers
sometimes misuse rare for scarce—e.g.: “Flowers are
frequent, usually in the warmer months, but fruit is
rare [read scarce] in the Tampa Bay area.” Bette Smith,

rarebit. See Welsh rabbit.

rarefaction /rərə-ʃək-shən/ = (1) the act or process
of making less dense; the state of being less dense; or
(2) the act or process of purifying; the state of being
purified. The forms *rarefaction, *rarification, and
*rarefaction are erroneous—e.g.: “Occasionally, signs of fibrous pericarditis and a
rarefaction [read rarefac-
tion] of intramyocardial ves-
sels suspicious for chronic vasculitis can be found.
Angiographically, this type of rarefaction [read rarefac-
tion] of intramyocardial vessels is seen as a ‘burned tree’
angiogram.” Textbook of Angiology 290 (John B. Chang

“‘The Presocratics are believed to have suggested a sun-
dry of underlying stuff’ such as air or water; proposed
processes of alteration involving, for example, rarification
[read rarefaction] and condensation; and, of course, they
offered opinions about opposites.” Edward Schiappa,
Protagoras and Logos 95 (2d ed. 2013).

“‘The solution consists of the high pressure gas expanding
into the low pressure gas, sending a shock wave ahead and a
rarification [read rarefaction] wave in the other direction.’

rarefy (/rərə-ʃə-fi/) = (1) to make or become less
dense or solid; or (2) to purify. Although the standard
spelling has been fixed since about 1740, the variant
spelling *rarely ever has persisted since that time. Today the latter is generally regarded as a misspelling—e.g.:

- “Too often, when we wonder why government and its institutions cost so much, we gaze down for solutions, look to the bottom of the pond where real life goes on instead of peering into that murky but rarefied [read rarefied] algae bloom.” Royal Ford, “It’s Time to Challenge the Chancellor,” Boston Globe, 23 Feb. 1997, at 2.

See FY. See also spelling (A). Cf. liquefy & stupify.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

rarely misspelled *rarely: Stage 4
Current ratio: 5:1

*rarely ever. A. Self-Contradictory Idiom. Though old, the phrase *rarely ever is literally nonsensical—as many idioms are, of course. But this one is easily corrected to rarely, rarely if ever, or rarely or never—e.g.:


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*rarely ever for rarely or rarely if ever: Stage 1
Current ratio (rarely if ever vs. *rarely ever): 2:1

B. And *rarely or ever. The phrasing *rarely or ever has no justification at all. It’s erroneous in place of rarely or never or rarely if ever—e.g.:

- “Because thousands of fully certified teachers rarely or ever [read rarely if ever or rarely or never] come near a classroom, it’s likely that one out of five . . . of those who actually stand in front of kids each morning are uncertified.” Carl Campanile & Stefan Friedman, “They Flunk and Stay in School,” N.Y. Post, 4 Mar. 2002, at 26.
- “Scientists rarely or ever [read rarely if ever] explain their methods sufficiently to allow replication, and anyway few scientists ever bother to replicate work done elsewhere.” William Gaver, “Science and Design,” in Ways of Knowing in HCI 143, 149 (Judith S. Olson & Wendy A. Kellogg eds., 2014).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*rarely or ever for rarely or never: Stage 1
Current ratio (rarely or never vs. *rarely or ever): 34:1

*rarefy. See rarely.

*rase. See raze.

ratable; rateable. The spelling rateable is standard in AmE, rateable in BrE. See MUTE E.

ratatouille (= a spiced vegetable stew made of tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, squash, onions, peppers, etc.) is pronounced /raht-ә-too-ә/-el. If there was any serious contention by the variant pronunciation /raht-tә-too-ә/-el, it was ended in 2007 by the popular animated film Ratatouille, in which Remy the rat (/(rat/) cooked up a critically acclaimed dish of ratatouille. In the popular mind, there is no rival pronunciation.

ratchet, n. & vb. So spelled—not *rachet. E.g.: “Kallstrom said security was being *racheted [read ratcheted] up’ not only in New York but in other cities.” “2 Held in N.Y. Bomb Plot Allegedly Tied to Hamas,” Houston Chron., 2 Aug. 1997, at 1.

The verb is inflected as ratcheted and ratcheting—not *racheted and *ratcheting (formerly preferred in BrE).

rateable. See ratable.

rate of speed is a REDUNDANCY that became especially common after 1850. Speed alone normally suffices.

rather. A. Rather than. This phrase can function either as a conjunction or as a preposition. As a conjunction (the more common use), rather than demands that the constructions on each side of it be parallel: “If we can, we will solve this problem diplomatically rather than forcibly.” But as a preposition, rather than can connect nonparallel constructions: “Rather than staying home on a Saturday night, we went out to six different bars.”

When rather than separates two verbs, it’s often less awkward to convert the verbs into gerunds: “I’ve always liked going out rather than staying in.” But sometimes rather than appears between simple verbs—e.g.: “With due respect to Shakespeare and others, we want our girls to communicate freely with the live world around them rather than plunge into musty old books.” Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita 179 (1955; repr. 1982). Many modern writers would make that rather than plunging.

B. *Rather. . . instead of. This phrasing, an example of SWAPPING HORSES, sometimes displaces what should be a straightforward rather . . . than—e.g.: “The tragedy of Ms. Charen’s column is that it reveals a writer who would rather be glib and sarcastic instead of [read than] measured and sincere.” William Roberts, “Column on Princess Was Callous,” Syracuse Herald-J., 12 Sept. 1997, at A8.

C. *More . . . rather than. It’s poor syntax to write more . . . rather than—e.g.: “His ideological convictions . . . were defined more by present-day concerns rather [delete rather] than by thirteenth-century conditions.” Robert E. Norton, Secret Germany 667 (2002).

rather unique. See ADJECTIVES (B).

rathskeller (= a basement, pub, or tavern), a GERMANISM dating from the mid-18th century, is pronounced either /raht-skә尔-әr/ or /rath-skә尔-әr/.
ratiocination; rationalization. Ratiocination /'rash-ee-os-ə-nay-shan/ = the process or an act of reasoning. Rationalization = (1) an act or instance of explaining (away) by bringing into conformity with reason; or (2) (colloq.) the finding of "reasons" for irrational or unworthy behavior. Sense 2 is responsible for the negative connotations of the word.

rational. See reasonable.

rationale (= a reasoned exposition of principles; an explanation or statement of reasons) is not to be confused with rationalization. (See ratiocination.) Rationale routinely has three syllables (/rash-ə-nal/), despite H.W. Fowler's belief that it should be four syllables based on its Latin etymology (-ale being two syllables). Today, his pronunciation (/rash-ə-nay-lee/) would sound terribly pedantic in most company. The final syllable is now pronounced like that in morale or chorale.

Occasionally the noun rationale is confused with the adjective rational: "The rational [read rationale] that they used in that defies [read escapes] me." Bill Martin, "All Dressed Up . . . ," Austin Am.-Statesman, 24 May 1994, at C8 (quoting Wayne Graham, the Rice baseball coach). Although the second error in that sentence is surely the speaker's, the rationale–rationale mistake is probably the journalist's.

Language-Change Index
rationale misused for rationale: Stage 1

rationalization. See ratiocination.

ravage; ravish. Ravage (/rash-vəd, -vij/) = destruction or devastation, usu. through repeated acts over a sustained period) is sometimes confused with ravish (= [1] to abduct and rape, or [2] to enrapture)—e.g.:

- "People fleeing the ravishes [read ravages] of Eastern Europe, Africa and elsewhere are confined for months at a time while their paperwork is 'processed.'" Eric Harrison, "Last Resort' Builds on a Dream," Houston Chron., 30 Mar. 2001, at 5.
- "Marcus was about to ask how the mechanism had withstood the ravishes [read ravages] of time, but David merely said he had no idea." Johan Minto, The Heliopolis Scrolls 216 (2009).

As in those examples, the word ravage typically occurs in a plural construction (the ravages of time). Ravage is also occasionally used as a verb meaning "to ruin, destroy" <tornadoes ravaged the area>.

The opposite error (ravage for ravish) is rare, but it does occur—e.g.: "If necessary, I would claim that I went to visit my friend Mariana and that he attempted to ravage [read ravish] me, but I doubt it would come to that." Peter Robinson, "The Duke's Wife," in Much Ado About Murder 284, 292 (2002).

The word ravish, now literary or archaic, should be avoided in nonfigurative contexts. The primary problem with ravish is that it has romantic connotations: it means not only "to rape" but also "to fill with ecstasy or delight." The latter sense renders the word unfit for acting as a technical or legal equivalent of rape. The term describing the act should evoke outrage; it should not be a romantic abstraction, as ravish is.

Still, the word ravishing (= captivating, enchanting) is generally considered a perfectly good and complimentary adjective.

Language-Change Index
ravish misused for ravage: Stage 1
Current ratio (the ravages of vs. *the ravishes of): 438:1

ravel. For the use of this verb in opposite senses, see contronyms.

raven; ravin. For the verb meaning "to plunder, devour greedily," raven is the standard spelling <they ravened their meal>. Ravin is a variant spelling.

But for the related noun meaning either (1) "a violent plundering" <the utter ravin of the town>, or (2) "something preyed upon" <the town was their ravin>, ravin is standard and raven the variant. Perfectly logical and intuitive, no?

ravish. See ravage.

raze (= to tear down) is the standard spelling. *Rase, a variant, is chiefly BrE.

For the misuse of raze for raise, see hair-raising.

RBI (= run batted in) makes the plural RBIs, not RBI. See plurals (i).

Current ratio (three RBIs vs. *three RBI): 2:1

re. See in re.

RE- PAIRS. Many English words beginning with the prefix re- take on different meanings depending on whether the word is hyphenated or closed. Some of these words, whose two different senses with and without the hyphen should be self-explanatory, are:

- re(-)bound re(-)mark
- re(-)call re(-)move
- re(-)claim re(-)place
- re(-)collect re(-)present
- re(-)count re(-)prove
- re(-)cover re(-)search
- re(-)create re(-)sent
- re(-)dress re(-)serve
- re(-)form re(-)sign
- re(-)fund re(-)sound
- re(-)join re(-)store
- re(-)lay re(-)treat
- re(-)lease

Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l-li.)
reactionary, n.; *reactionist; *reactionarist; reactive. Reactive = (1) of, relating to, or characterized by reactions <Jones's reflexes made him an extraordinarily reactive athlete>; or (2) occurring in response to a stimulus <reactive depression>. Occasionally reactionary is misused for reactive—e.g.:

- “A strong chairman should give Mr. Barley the push he needs to make the MPO a pro-active—rather than reactionary [read reactive]—player on transportation matters.” “Get Moving in 1997,” Orlando Sentinel, 5 Jan. 1997, at G2.

Cf. proactive.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index
reactionary misused for reactive: Stage 1

reader-friendly. See -FRIENDLY.

ready, willing, and able. In law, this set phrase traditionally refers to a prospective buyer of property who can legally and financially consummate the deal. A less common variant is ready, able, and willing.

real, adj. Since the early 18th century, real has been considered dialectal when used for very—e.g.:

- “This was a real [read very] big deal and even I got into the countdown business.” J.V. Trot, The Cleavers Didn’t Live on Our Street 95 (2009).

The phrasing *real good likewise is dialectal, really good or quite good (adverb + adjective) being standard—e.g.:

- “I think the two BU teams were really talented and were real [read really or quite] good on special teams.” John Connolly, “Champions Return to BU,” Boston Herald, 4 Dec. 2000, at 86 (quoting Peter Y etten).
- “A real [read really] good mortgage lender can tell within five minutes if he can give you a loan from looking at your report.” Carl Agard, Getting the Real Out of Real Estate 65–66 (2007).

See dialect.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index
real for really <*he's feeling really bad>: Stage 3
Current ratio: 3:1
Current ratio (feeling really bad vs. *feeling really bad): 5:1

real-estate agent. See realtor.

real facts. See fact (c), (e).

realtor; real-estate agent; estate agent. Realtor (= a real-estate agent or broker) has two syllables, not three: /reel-tәr/, not /reel-a-tәr/. (See PRONUNCIATION (b).) This Americanism is a MORPHOLOGICAL DEFORMITY, since the -or suffix in Latin is appended only to verb elements, and realt- is not a verb element. But the term is too well established in AmE to quibble with its makeup. Its shortness commends it.

Some authorities suggest that it should be capitalized and used only in its proprietary trademark sense, that is, “a member of the National Association of Realtors”; that organization invented and registered the trademark in 1916. Few people seem to know about the trademark, and consequently in AmE the term is used indiscriminately of real-estate agents generally. In BrE, real-estate agents are known as estate agents, realtor is virtually unknown, and the phrase real estate is only a little better known.

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realtor mispronounced with three syllables: Stage 1

reality (= a property in the form of land and buildings or other fixtures attached to the land) is pronounced in two syllables: /reel-tee/—not /reel-a-tee/.

rear. See raise (A).

rearward(s). See DIRECTIONAL WORDS (A).

reasonable; rational. Generally, reasonable means “according to reason; sensible.” Rational means “having reason.” Yet reasonable is often used in reference to people in the sense “having the faculty of reason” <reasonable person>. When applied to things, the two words are perhaps more clearly differentiated: “In application to things reasonable and rational both signify according to reason; but the former is used in reference to the business of life, as a reasonable proposal, wish, etc.; rational to abstract matters, as rational motives, grounds, questions, etc.” George Crabb, Crabbe’s English Synonymes 589 (John H. Finley ed., 2d ed. 1917).

*reasonable-minded is a REDUNDANCY that sprang up in the late 19th century, first in BrE in the late 1860s and then in AmE in the late 1870s. It persists—e.g.:


reasonableness; *reasonability. The former has been standard since the 17th century. The latter has been a NEEDLESS VARIANT ever since.

*reason is because. This construction is loose because reason implies because and vice versa. Robert
W. Burchfield, the distinguished OED lexicographer, put it well: “Though often defended by modern grammarians, the type ‘the reason . . . is because’ (instead of ‘the reason . . . is that’) aches with redundancy, and is still as inadmissible in Standard English as it was when H.W. Fowler objected to it in 1926.” Points of View 116 (1992).

After reason is, you’ll need a noun phrase, a predicate adjective, or a clause introduced by that. The best cure for *reason is because* is to replace it with that—e.g.:

- “Marcello (Jean Reno) has one frantic mission in life: to keep anyone from dying in the small Italian village where he lives. The reason is because [read reason is that] there are only three plots left in the local cemetery and his terminally ill wife, Roseanna (Mercedes Ruehl), wishes only that she be buried next to their daughter.” “Ticket,” Star-Ledger (Newark), 27 June 1997, at 14.
- “The second reason is because of [read reason relates to] the different research perspectives taken in regard to the causes of dyslexia.” Denis Lawrence, Understanding Dyslexia 29 (2009).
- “There are varying opinions about how a financial model should look. One reason is because [read reason is that] modeling is a relatively recent practice.” Jack Avon, The Handbook of Financial Modeling xiii (2013).

As an empirical matter, Standard English has embraced *reason is that* over *reason is because* since the late 18th century. The predominance of the former has been most stark since 1900. Variations such as *reason is due to* are no better—e.g.: “It’s a challenge for any athlete to come back after four years of inactivity. The challenge is even greater when the reason is due to injury [read the layoff is due to injury or injury is the cause].” Barry Lewis, “Long Wait Is Over; Kojima’s on Mound,” Tulsa Trib. & Tulsa World, 4 May 1997, at B1. Cf. reason why.

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1. *reason . . . is because*: Stage 4
   - Current ratio (*reason is that* vs. *reason is because*): 22:1
2. *reason . . . is due to*: Stage 4

*reasons account for.* This odd, illogical construction appears to result from writers seeking to avoid both the noun things (and therefore resort to reasons) and the construction there are (see there is). But either of those choices is preferable to the idea that a reason can account for something. There can be several reasons for a phenomenon; or several things can account for it. But idiometrically speaking, the reasons don’t account—e.g.:

- “Several reasons account for the trend, specialists say, but most point to one reason: experience.” Raphael Lewis, “Teen Drivers Said to Pose Increased Risk,” Boston Globe, 16 Mar. 2000, at B4. [A suggested revision: Several things account for the trend, specialists say, but most point to one: experience. Or: There are several reasons for the trend.]

- Michael Wilson, professor of geosciences at Fredonia State College, said a number of reasons account [read that there are a number of reasons] for the lake’s good condition.” Terry Frank, “Report Calls for Improving Lake Condition,” Buffalo News, 12 Dec. 2000, at C2.
- “The first is that an agent necessarily knows what his or her reasons are (reasons account for intentional behavior, while causes might account for accidents or unintentional behaviors).” Kelly Shaver, *The Attribution of Blame* 127 (2012). (A possible revision: . . . what his or her motivations are (motivations account for intentional behavior . . . ).)

reason why; reason that. Both forms are correct. It’s an unfortunate superstition that reason why is an objectionable redundancy. True, it is mildly redundant (as are time when and place where), but it has long been idiomatic. The OED, under why (5a), has examples from 1225 to 1908. The collocation reason why has consistently occurred more frequently than reason that in print sources since the early 17th century—with a steady variance since about 1680. Good writers routinely use reason why—e.g.:

- “The reason why I object to Dr. Johnson’s style is that there is not discrimination, no variety in it.” William Hazlitt, “On Familiar Style” (1822), in Perspectives on Style 112, 113 (Frederick Candelaria ed., 1968).
- “The reason why these things are as they are is that the people who use the language have agreed that they should be so, and not otherwise.” Brainerd Kellogg, *A Text-Book on Rhetoric* 16 (1881).
- “Indeed, one of the reasons why we have syntactical doubts and questions is that idiom influences and sometimes defies pure ‘grammar.’” G.H. Vallins, Good English: How to Write It 9 (1951).
- “The sentence also tells us the reasons why this is so.” Lester S. King, *Why Not Say It Clearly* 39 (1978).
- “No, immortality was not the reason why my wife and I produced these beloved sources of dirty laundry and ceaseless noise.” Bill Cosby, *Fatherhood* 15–16 (1986).
- “The reason why this unimportant wedding had been chosen was precisely that it was redundant.” Frank Kermode, *Not Entitled* 244 (1995).
- “Yet, as one former regulator points out, there are sound reasons why the prudential ratios applied to banks are stricter than those applied to non-banks, such as insurance companies.” Peter Martin, “Birth of Brown’s Brainchild,” *Fin. Times*, 23 May 1997, at 21.
- “Prime-time programming may drain your brain, but there’s no reason why your TV set should.” Anita Hamilton, “Cool Stuff,” *Time*, 1 June 1997, at 16.

It is true, however, that why might have been omitted in all but the King and Martin examples. The phrasing reason that is often a poor substitute for reason why—as in any of the examples just quoted—just as time that and place that are poor substitutes when adverbials of time and place are called for. Cf. the indefensible redundancy *reason is because*.

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reason why: Stage 5

Current ratio (*reason why* vs. *reason that*): 1.5:1
rebate. See rabbet.

rebound; re-bound. See re-pairs. For an error involving rebound, see redound.

rebus (= [1] a representation of a word or phrase by pictures or symbols, such as a drawing of an eye for I; or [2] a riddle using these pictures or symbols) forms the plural rebuses, not *rebi. E.g.: "His iconoclastic experimentation with clay included asymmetry, rebuses, animals, flowers and explicit sexual images expressed in fantastic forms." J.J. McCoy, "Watch This Space," Wash. Post, 29 May 1997, at T4.

rebout; refute. Rebut means "to attempt to refute." Refute means "to defeat (an opponent's arguments)." Hence someone who rebouts certainly hopes to refute; it is immodest to assume, however, that one has refuted another's arguments. Rebut is sometimes wrongly written *rebutt. See refute.

recall; re-call. See re-pairs.

recant; recount. Recant = to publicly repudiate a previous statement, belief, or accusation. Recount = to narrate a past event, esp. from personal experience. Recant sometimes erroneously displaces the similar-sounding recount—e.g.:

- "Keep a 'holiday memories' book and ask each guest to write a small passage describing a special moment of the evening or past year. This will provide a great opportunity for guests to recant [read recounts] past holiday stories and memories year after year." "A Time for Traditions," Topeka Capital-J., 8 Dec. 2001, at A2.


The OED does give "recount" as one sense of recant but labels it obsolete and rare. The most recent example is from 1611.

Recant is best reserved for use with personal statements and public positions (think cant = "sing"). Other words are better suited when the thing taken back is something other than words—e.g.:

- "The state's consumer counsel has asked state regulators to recant [read reverse] a recent decision under which she said Yankee Gas ratepayers would bear all of the costs of the company's proposed multimillion-dollar system expansion." "Gas Rate Decision 'Fatally Flawed,'" Hartford Courant, 14 Feb. 2002, at E6.

- "Why do I feel like I'm listening to a deathbed confession by someone who's been a bastard all his life and suddenly, at the 11th hour, is terrified and wants to recant [read make up for or renounce?] his evil ways?" Fred Pfisterer, "Helm's Apologies Somewhat Unmoving," Daily News Leader (Staunton, Va.), 5 Mar. 2002, at A9.


Recant may be transitive (as in the first use in the following example) or intransitive (as in the second): "Police have a follow-up interview scheduled with Olowokandi's former girlfriend, Suzanne Ketcham, who says she plans to recant her original statements to them and a representative of the district attorney's special victims unit. [¶] 'It's not unusual for victims of domestic abuse to recant,' Nilsson said." Elliott Teaford, "Olowokandi Case Will Go to D.A.," L.A. Times, 7 Dec. 2001, Sports §, at 5.

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1. recant misused for recount: Stage 1 2. recant misused for reverse, renounce, or resign: Stage 1

receipt, v.t., began as an Americanism in the 18th century and soon spread to BrE, reaching the pinnacle of its popularity about 1920. It is commercial—, but there is no grammatical problem in writing the bill must be receipted or the sale was receipted. The verb appears most often in the passive voice—e.g.:

- "Items are supposed to be receipted, stored and disposed of properly." Kevin Murphy, "Liquor Control Supervisor Fired," Kansas City Star, 9 May 1997, at C3.

- "Hence on noticing a receipted invoice, the auditor should verify that neither the original nor the duplicate thereof has already been entered in the Purchase Day Book." Arun Kumar & Rachana Sharma, Auditing 207 (2001).

- "Many auditors now practicing will recall that invoices were mailed with checks—to be receipted and returned to the payers." Harvey Cardwell, Principles of Audit Surveillance 276 (2005).

receipt of, in. See *in receipt of.

receivables (= debts owed to a business and regarded as assets) began in the mid-19th century as an Americanism but is now current in BrE as well. It is the antonym of payables. See adjectives (c) & functional shift (c).

receive. See spelling (a).

recense. See revise.

recension (= the revision of a text) is not to be confused with rescision. See recission.

recess, n. & vb. The noun recess is preferably pronounced /ri-ses/ in reference either to an alcove or niche in the wall of a room or to a secluded place where things are hidden. It is preferably pronounced /ree-ses/ for a brief period of rest, play, or inactivity between sessions, lessons, etc. The verb recess (= [1] to place within an indentation, [2] to make an indentation in, or [3] to take a break) is pronounced /ri-ses/ in standard English.

recidivist, n. & adj.; *recidivistic; *recidvious. Recidivist can be both a noun (meaning "a habitual criminal") and an adjective (meaning "habitually
The adjectives *recidivist and *recidivous are now needless variants.

Current ratio (recidivist offenders vs. recidivistic offenders): 6:1

reciprocity; reciprocation. Reciprocity = (1) the state of being reciprocal <over the years they achieved a satisfactory reciprocity>; or (2) the mutual concession of advantages or privileges for purposes of commercial or diplomatic relations <their reciprocity in according favors worked to each one’s advantage>. Reciprocation = the action of doing something in return <a concession made without hope of reciprocation>.

Coupling either word with mutual creates a redundancy—e.g.: “We also witness a touching emotional resolution of the situation and learn of the long-standing mutual reciprocation [read reciprocity] between the two.” Joan Hinkemeyer, “Ferroll Sams Authors 3 Hopeful Looks at the Human Condition,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 28 May 1995, at A80. See mutual.

*recision; *recission. See rescission (A).

recital; recitation. These words overlap, but are distinguishable. Aside from a (usually) solo musical or dance performance, recital may mean “a rehearsal, account, or description of some thing, fact, or incident” <a recital of all the incidents would be tedious>. Recitation usually connotes an oral delivery before an audience, whether in the classroom or on stage. Yet it is more often the general noun meaning “the act of reciting”—e.g.: “This continuing tension is realized in a series of formal tropes: angry monologues, recitations of dreams, discussions of cartographic representation of Greenland and what they call their ‘truth game.’” Ben Brantley, “Whimsy as a Tool to Deal with AIDS,” N.Y. Times, 29 June 1995, at C11.


reckless. So spelled. In a fairly gross error, the word is frequently misspelled *wreckless, which appears to denote precisely the opposite of what it’s supposed to mean. As literacy in the higher sense has become ever shakier, this error has become disturbingly common—e.g.: “It begins with the cast making mindless revelry; the quality of movement is disturbingly loose and wreckless [read reckless].” Nancy Goldner, “Speaking in Tongues’ World Premiere at the Annenberg,” Phil. Inquirer, 11 Nov. 1988, at 15.

• “Racette was charged with wreckless [read reckless] operation of a motor vehicle, speeding and failure to keep right, police said.” “10 Injured in Fiery Dracut Accident,” Boston Globe, 4 Feb. 1990, at 66.


• “But while Clinton in Portland this week, the hope here is that he’ll reconsider his administration’s wreckless [read reckless] course.” “To: The President, II,” Oregonian (Portland), 26 June 1995, at B6.


The second and fifth examples are particularly ironic misspellings, given the contexts. For the sense of the word reckless, see wanton.

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reclaim; re-claim. See re- pairs.

recognizance; reconnaissance; *reconnoissance. Recognizance = a bond or obligation, made in court, by which a person (called the recognizor) promises to perform some act or observe some condition (as to appear when called on, to pay a debt, or to keep the peace). E.g.: “The suspect was released on his own recognizance.”

In BrE, the -g- in recognizance (as it is spelled in BrE) is silent. But in AmE, the -g- is regularly sounded. Reconnaissance = a preliminary survey; a military or intelligence-gathering examination of a region. *Reconnaissance is an archaic French spelling of reconnaissnace; it is also a needless variant of recognition and of recognition. The verb corresponding to reconnaissnace is reconnoiter. See reconnoiter.

recognize /rek-ә-niz/ is often mispronounced /rek-ә-niz/, without the -g- sounded.

recollect. A. And remember. The distinction is a subtle one worth observing. To remember is to retrieve what is ready at hand in one’s memory. To recollect is to find something stored further back in the mind. As the OED puts it, “Recollect, when distinguished from remember, implies a conscious or express effort of memory to recall something [that] does not spontaneously rise in the mind.”

B. And re-collect. As with other re- pairs, the hyphen is crucial: recollect means “to remember, recall”; re-collect means (1) “to collect (something) again,” or (2) “to gather or compose (oneself).”

recompense—both a noun (“payment in return for something”) and a transitive verb (“to repay, compensate”)—is a formal word equivalent to but more
learned than compensation or compensate. In BrE, the noun is sometimes spelled recompense. Recompense is more frequently a noun than a verb—e.g.:

- “...recompense for his acceptance of NATO expansion, Yeltsin gave the privileges appropriate to a leader of one of the world’s eight most advanced economies.” “A Summit of Symbols,” Boston Globe, 24 June 1997, at A14.
- “...the blogger then published her own version of events, saying she deserved suitable recompense for writing a post she claimed would take eight hours.” Emma Lunn, “When Bloggers Are Expecting a Meal Ticket, Why Should We Trust Their Reviews?” Independent, 22 Aug. 2015, at 52.

See compensate (b).

recondite (adj) difficult to understand. It is pronounced /ri-kәndit/ for words such as recondite, but /rek-әn-dit/ is now usual.

recount; recountal. The verb form corresponding to the noun recondite is recondite predominantly spelled -er in AmE, -er in BrE. See -er (b) & recognizance. It is pronounced /ree-ka-noy-tәr/ or /rek-ә-noy-tәr/.

recount. On the difference between recount and re-count, see re- pairs. For the misuse of recount for recount, see recant.

recountal (n) a narration or recital is the noun corresponding to the verb recount (as opposed to the verb re-count [= to count again]). It dates from the early 19th century. *Recountment is an obsolete variant used by Shakespeare.

Current ratio: 21:1

recount; recrueperate. Recount, dating from the 15th century as an English word, is a transitive verb with two senses: (1) “to get back (lost money, etc.)”; and (2) “to pay back (money owed, etc.)”. Although sense 2 is older, sense 1 is now predominant. Recuperate, dating from the mid-16th century, is now almost always intransitive with the sense “to get well; to regain one’s strength after a medical procedure or an illness.” Linda Perlstein, “Illness Brings Rise in School Absenteeism,” Wash. Post, 1 Feb. 2001, at T3.

A related mistake is the misspelling *recouperate—e.g.: “Lance Diamond, the godfather of Buffalo soul, is in Mercy Hospital recouperating [read recuperating] from a flu-like illness.” Anthony Violante, “Diamond in the Rough,” Buffalo News, 30 Nov. 2000, at C2.

The OED records two examples of “recuperating” losses—from 1891 and 1924—noting that they are rare. They are actually misuses of recuperate for recoup, an occasional error even today—e.g.:


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1. recoup misused for recuperate: Stage 3
2. recuperate misused for recoup: Stage 2

Current ratio (recoup the loss vs. recuperate the loss): 7:1

rein; resource. These words are unrelated. To have recourse to something is to turn to it for aid or protection <recourse to the law>; to be without recourse is to have no remedy <she thought about suing but found she had no recourse>. A resource is something that is available for use, such as wealth or books or other assets.

Sometimes one word gets swapped for the other—e.g.: “William Blake and Walt Whitman, whose main source for their renovation of poetry into free verse was the Bible, saw, without resource [read recourse] to the more extensive verse typography found in the revised versions, that the Bible was an endless fountain of poetry.” Willis Barnstone, “Three Invisible Poets,” Southwest Rev., 22 Mar. 2001, at 412. See word-swapping.

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rein misused for recourse: Stage 1
Current ratio (without recourse vs. without resource): 19:1

recover; re-cover. See re- pairs.

recreate; re-create. A distinction is fading. Recreate (v) (1) to amuse oneself by indulging in recreation; or (2) of (a pastime) to agreeably occupy. Re-create = to create anew. Classically, the hyphen makes a great difference—e.g.:

- “Her days are divided between frolicking in the sand and recreating in a resort hotel.” A. Scott Walton, “Peach Buzz,” Atlanta J.-Const., 19 Mar. 1995, at E2.
• “The dining rooms feature big, open rooms and vintage
signs designed to re-create the airy, energetic atmosphere
of 1940s Gulf seafood houses.” Barbara Chavez, “City
Reeling in Landry’s Seafood Chain,” Albuquerque J., 21

But recreate is so much more common than
re-create—and the tendency to delete the hyphen after
a prefix is so strong in AmE—that recreate is losing the
senses listed above and is taking over the meaning of
re-create. The process is now almost complete. Still,
some careful editors continue to make the distinction.
See re- pairs.

recreational; recreative. Recreational is the standard
jective corresponding to the noun recreation; it’s
about a thousand times as common as its synonym
recreative, a NEEDLESS VARIANT. But recreative is genu-
inely useful in the sense “tending to re-create”—e.g.:
“The paradoxically destructive and recreative force of
the mythical flood seemed as real to Friday’s perform-
ers as it must have to the composer.” Timothy Pfaff,
“Innocence of Children Survives ‘Noah’s Flood,’” S.F.

recriminatory; *recriminative. The former has been
standard since the late 18th century. The latter has
always been a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 9:1

recruitment; *recruital. Since about 1950, recruit-
ment has been the predominant noun in AmE and
BrE alike. Though standard from the 1840s to about
1950, *recruital has now become a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 30,378:1

recuperate. See recoup.

recur; reoccur. The first means “to happen repeat-
edly, often at more or less regular intervals.” The sec-
ond (less common) means merely “to happen again.”
See relapse.

recurrence; *recurrency; recurrencce. Recurrence
refers to a repeated occurrence, especially at fairly
regular intervals. *Recurrency is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.
Reocurrence refers to another occurrence of some-
thing, with no suggestion that the thing happens
repeatedly or at more or less regular intervals.

reusal; *recusation; *recusement; recusancy;
*recusance. The preferred noun corresponding to the verb recuse (= to remove [oneself] as a judge con-
sidering a case) is recusal, though its earliest known use
is only as recent as 1950: “On the 13th of April,
Judge Longshore filed an order of recusals accompa-
nied by an order vacating his former order.” Methvin
reigned supreme as STANDARD ENGLISH from the 18th
century to the early 1970s, but mysteriously it is now
almost unknown; it has become a NEEDLESS VARIANT.
*Recusement (not listed in the OED), though once
common, is also now a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Recusancy is a different word, meaning “obstinate refusal to comply.” *Recusance is a NEEDLESS VARIANT
of recusancy.

Current ratio (reusal vs. *recusation): 19:1

redact. See revise.

redeemable; *redemptible. The first is standard.
Avoid the second, which is pedantic, unnecessary, and
irredeemable—in short, a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

redemptive; *redemptory; redemplional. Redem-
ptive = tendency to redeem, redeeming. *Redemptory is
a NEEDLESS VARIANT. Redemplional = of, relating to,
or involving redemption.

or suggestive) is pronounced /red-әnt/ —not
/ri-dohl-әnt/. When a preposition follows the word,
idiom requires of <a potpourri redolent of lilacs> <an
experience redolent of my boyhood>.

redoubtable (= [1] venerable; or [2] fearsome) is a
14th-century loanword from the Old French redout-
able (= dreaded). Both senses are common:

• Sense 1: “Chipperfield and a number of ‘britisher Archi-
tekten,’ as Architectural Review notes in its April 2006
issue, have been leaving a redoubtable imprimatur on
Germany’s landscape.” Suzanne Stephens, “David Chip-
perfield Architects Combines Modernism and Classicism
with a Reductive Clarity in the New Modern Literature
Museum in Marbach, Germany,” Architectural Record, 1
Feb. 2007, at 102.

• Sense 2: “The Irish were redoubtable duellists, but so lack-
ing in decorum when potting each other that, in 1777,
delegates from five counties assembled to hammer out the
Irish Code Duello.” Arthur Krystal, “En Garde! The His-
(On the spelling of dueling vs. duelling—and likewise
duelist vs. duellist—see duel.)

The writer’s meaning isn’t always clear, though—e.g.: “As the new year approached, the man set to become
the new Senate majority leader was the redoubtable
Harry Reid, possibly the most interesting boring guy
in Washington.” Todd S. Purdum, “The Majordomo:
Senator Harry Reid,” Vanity Fair, Feb. 2007, at 130.
(Is the “boring” senator being labeled fearsome? emi-
nent? merely powerful?)

rebound, now used most commonly in the verbose
expressions to rebound to the benefit of (= to benefit)
and to rebound to one’s credit, may also be used in
negative senses <to rebound against or to the shame of>.
E.g.: “If I leave before the new villa is complete, I
will have more questions to answer than I would care
to deal with, and I would leave behind speculation that

Unfortunately, some writers confuse this word with rebound—e.g.:  

- “If these remarks may be understood only as opinion, the words of Eros further emphasize Shakespeare's intention, *Eros* [read *Eros’s*] statement being especially important because it deviates from the source where the indicated events rebound [read redound] largely to Anthony's discredit.” J. Leeds Barroll, “Shakespeare and the Art of Character: A Study of Anthony,” *5 Shakespeare Studies* 159, 171 (1969).

- “Weavers are favored by karmic forces, and such endeavors as the saving of a weaver's life can rebound [read redound] to one's benefit at the most unexpected times.” Peter David, *Sir Apropos of Nothing* 110 (2001).

The etymology of redound lies in the Latin *und* “wave,” and the word implies an advancing and receding move.

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redound misused for redound: Stage 1

Current ratio (redound to the benefit vs. *rebound to the benefit*): 14:1

redress, n. & vb. The noun redress (= [1] the means of correcting a wrong, or [2] the act of correcting something wrong or unfair) is pronounced /ree-dres/ in AmE but /ri-dres/ in BrE. The verb redress (= [1] to set right, rectify, or remedy, or [2] to compensate or make up for) is uniformly pronounced /ri-dres/ in standard English. On redress vs. re-dress, see re- pairs.

redressable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—preferably not *redressable.* But this represents a change in spelling from the 18th-century standard (-ible), which persisted into the 20th century. Redressable became the predominant form in AmE in the 1940s and in BrE as recently as the 1980s. See -able (A).

red tape. Lawyers and government officials formerly used red ribbons (called “tapes”) to tie their papers together. Gradually during the 19th century, these red ribbons came to symbolize rigid adherence to time-consuming rules and regulations. Writers such as Scott, Longfellow, and Dickens used the term red tape, and now it has become universal. But its origins are widely forgotten.

reducible. So spelled—not *reducible.* See -able (A).

Current ratio: 364:1

**REDUNDANCY.** Washington Irving wrote that “redundancy of language is never found with deep reflection. Verbiage may indicate observation, but not thinking. He who thinks much says but little in proportion to his thoughts.” Those words are worth reflecting on.

This linguistic pitfall is best exemplified rather than dismissed on:

- “Ms. Kwok believed the cause of the heavy rainfall was due to two major factors [read that two things caused the heavy rainfall].” Andrew Laxon & Edward Laxon, “Sun to Take a Rain-Check as Expert Forecasts Gloom,” *South China Morning Post*, 21 Aug. 1994, at 4. See cause . . . is due to.


- “A woman with a permanent disability who claims she received a low test score for the law school entrance exam test because the test-givers wouldn't accommodate her has sued them for emotional distress.” Lauren Blau, “LSAT Target of Woman's Suit,” *L.A. Daily J.* 15 Nov. 1995, at 3. (Test appears twice, once in the phrase exam test, tripling the redundancy.)

- “Bush also went high profile, choosing as one of his picks baseball legend Nolan Ryan for a six-year term.” “Bush’s Appointees Settle in Quickly,” *Austin Am.-Statesman*, 24 Dec. 1995, at D11. (Choosing as one of his picks is tautological. If it read, less colloquially, choosing as one of his choices it would have been more obvious both to the writer and to the editors that the phrasing was redundant.)

- “Curtis and Company was a prosperous chemist's shop on Crawford Street, the nearest such to Baker Street; Holmes and I both frequented the establishment on a regular basis.” Barbara Paul, “ ‘The Sleuth of Christmas Past,’” in *Holmes for the Holidays* 18, 19 (Martin H. Greenberg et al. eds., 1996). (“To frequent” means to “to visit (a place) often or habitually.”)

- “That each creature from microbe to man is unique in all the world is amazing when you consider that every life form is assembled from the same identical [read the same or identical] building blocks.” George Johnson, “ ‘Soul Searching,’” *N.Y. Times*, 2 Mar. 1997, § 4, at 1. See identical.

- “ ‘Building on those beginnings and armed with new innovations [read innovations], the industry today is staking its future on new territory.’ ‘Offshore Oil’s Half-Century Mark,’ *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 16 Nov. 1997, at B6.

- “As local Chinese opera was performed on a stage on the balcony, a distinguished audience watched from the courtyard that was gardened with tall trees and elegant dwarf bonsais.” Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* 375 (2002). (The author tried to create a distinction by using tall and dwarf, but bonsais are dwarfs by definition.)


Samuel Johnson once advised writers to “avoid ponderous ponderosity.” His repetition of word roots, of course, was purposeful. But many writers engage in such repetitions with no sense of irony, as in the phrases build a building, refer to a reference, point out points, an individualistic individual. In the sentences that follow, the repetitions are thoughtless errors:


Though many of those mistakes look like unique ones—the result of semiconscious writing—some
redundancies are so commonplace that they’ve been all but enshrined in the language. Adept editors must be alert to such phrases as these:

- absolute necessity
- actual fact (see fact)
- advance planning
- basic fundamentals
- brief respite
- closely scrutinize
- collaborate together (see together)
- combine together
- completely full
- connect together
- consensus of opinion (see consensus)
- entirely eliminate
- fellow colleagues
- few in number (see *few in number)
- free gift (see *free gift)
- future forecast
- future plans
- general consensus of opinion (see consensus)
- interact with each other (see each other)
- many...abound
- merge together
- mingle together
- mix together
- mutual advantage of both (see mutual)
- new innovation
- new recruit
- pair of twins
- pause for a moment
- plead a plea
- pooled together
- reason is because (see *reason is because)
- reelected for another term
- refer back
- regress back
- serious crisis
- still continues to
- surrounded on all sides
- temporary reprieve
- throughout the entire
- unfilled vacancy
- visible to the eye

For examples of redundant acronyms, see abbreviations (b).

Is a one-word redundancy possible? Certainly, with the help of suffixes and prefixes—e.g.:


- “When the first blasts echoed at 11:15 p.m., a young woman, elfinlike [read elfin or elflike] and angst-ridden, dashed from her home just off Regent’s Park, looking for sanctuary.” Colin Edwards, The Father of Forensics 74 (2006).

redundancy. See tautology.

reek; wreak. These homophones are occasionally confused. *Reek*, vb., = to give off an odor or vapor

<the house reeked of gas>. Reek, n., = an odorous vapor <the reek of garlic spoiled our conversation>. *Wreak = to inflict, bring about <to wreak havoc*. The misspelling *reek havoc* has been a frequent blunder since the 1980s, but only in AmE—e.g.:


Also, *wreak* for *reek* is a surprisingly common slip-up—e.g.:


- “Though such a statement wreaks [read reeks] of hyperbole, Alexakis truly seemed more comfortable with the intimate give-and-take at this sold-out Middle East date on his solo tour.” Tristram Lozaw, “Music: Alexakis Finds Comfort Zone,” Boston Herald, 10 Apr. 1997, at 53.

- “Nate Newton has leaked a little information in response to reports that the Cowboys’ dorm rooms at St. Edward’s University wreaked [read reeked] of urine and were otherwise in a mess upon the team’s checkout from training camp last week.” Tim Price, “Newton Says Dorm Free of Any Pee,” San Antonio Express-News, 21 Aug. 1997, at C1.

See *wreak* (c).

*Reak* is a common misspelling of *reek*—e.g.:

- “The oil company subsequently hired a firm to clean the oil, but after six weeks of work and a declaration the house was inhabitable, the house still ‘reeked’ [read ‘reeked’] of oil,” Hansen said. MaryAnn Spoto, “Suit Seeks Damages for Oiled Homes,” USA Today, 7 May 1996, USA: News from Every State, at A8.

And a double bobble results when the misspelling *reek Havoc* displaces the correct form, *wreak havoc*—e.g. “January arrived on the UW-Platteville campus and reaked [read wreaked] of the oil, but after six weeks of work and a declaration the house was inhabitable, the house still ‘reeked’ [read ‘reeked’] of oil,” Hansen said. MaryAnn Spoto, “Suit Seeks Damages for Oiled Homes,” USA Today, 7 May 1996, USA: News from Every State, at A8.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)**

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reenactment. No hyphen.

reenforce. See reinforce.

reenter; reentry. These terms are now solid.

reestablish, formerly hyphenated, no longer is.

refer. See allude (A).

referable; *referrible; *referrable. The vastly predominant form is referable (= capable of being referred to)—which, like preferable, is accented on the first syllable; otherwise, the final -r- would be doubled. (See spelling (b); cf. conferrable.) This spelling has held sway since the 16th century. *Referrable and *referrible are variant spellings that have never been serious rivals.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 59:2:1

refer back is a common redundancy, refer alone nearly always being sufficient—e.g.: "Irons said he believes the judge's latest ruling refers back [read refers] to an original order in 1991 that did order the removal of the cross." Valerie Alvord & Gerry Braun, "San Diego Files Notice to Appeal Soledad Cross Ruling," San Diego Union-Trib., 8 Oct. 1997, at B3.

Dating from the 18th century, the phrase refer back is justified when it means (as it occasionally does) "to send back to someone who or that has previously been involved"—e.g.: "The full council wouldn't pass the plan and referred it back to the committee." Cindy Eberting, "Gaming Ads Could Stay at KCI," Kansas City Star, 5 June 1997, at C4. See revert. Cf. relate back.

reference, n. See referral.

reference, as a verb meaning "to provide with references," is defensible. E.g.: "The cross-referenced chapter contains two subsections." The evidence of this verb dates back to the 17th century, after which it lay quiescent till about 1950. Then it surged to an unprecedented popularity (as compared to its former self).

Since the latter half of the 20th century, the term has become a vogue word, however, as a synonym for refer to—e.g.:

- "You can add notes (10K) to your items, import, or simply reference [read refer to or cite] external files." Bill Howard, "Agenda: Lotus' Answer to Information Management," PC Mag., July 1988, at 34.
- "At one point, Kristof specifically referenced [read referred to] the impact that stricter gun laws can have on gun suicides." Louis Jacobson, "Columnist Correct on Calculation of Deaths," Atlanta J.-Const., 4 Sept. 2015, at B1.

See functional shift (d) & computerese.

Language-Change Index

reference in the sense "to refer to": Stage 4
Current ratio (refer to the fact vs. *reference the fact): 55:1

referendum. Pl. referendums or referenda. In modern AmE journalistic sources, referendums is four times as common, but in AmE books, referenda predominates. In BrE books and journalism, the homegrown referendums has been dominant since about 2000. See plurals (b).

*referable. See referable.

referal; reference. Both mean "the act of referring." Reference is the broader term. Referral, which began as an Americanism in the early 20th century but now is commonly used in BrE as well, means specifically "the referring to a third party of personal information concerning another" or "the referring of a person to an expert or specialist for advice."

*referible. See referable.

referring to your letter of. See replying to your letter of.

reflection; *reflexion. The first spelling has been predominant in all varieties of English since the early 17th century. *Reflexion is an archaic variant that enjoyed a brief floruit in mid-18th-century AmE. *Reflexion was formerly common in British writing.

Current ratio: 101:1

REFLEXIVE PRONOUNS. See pronouns (e).

reform; re-form. See re-pairs.

refractive; refractory. These terms have undergone differentiation. Refractive = that refracts light <refractive lenses>. Refractory = stubborn, unmanageable, rebellious <refractory teenagers>.

refrain. See restrain.

refugee; evacuee. Refugee (= someone who flees home to seek safety) originally denoted French Huguenots who fled to England in the late 1680s to escape religious persecution. The word has another (rare) sense, denoting a fugitive on the run. Refugee had lost most of its connotations of foreignness or truancy when Hurricane Katrina forced thousands of New Orleans residents out of the city in August 2005. But many of those who fled objected to being referred to as refugees in news accounts and political discourse. Almost overnight the word was displaced by evacuee (= someone who withdraws from a place, esp. under an order from some authority). See -ee.

The words are pronounced /ref-yoo-jee/ or /ref-yoo-je/ and /ee-vak-yoo-ee/.

refund, n. & vb. The noun refund (= an amount of money given back) is pronounced /ree-fond/. The verb refund (= to return [money] by way of repayment or restitution) is pronounced /ri-fond/. On the question of refund vs. re-fund, see re-pairs.

refutable (= conclusively disprovable) is correctly pronounced either /ri-fiyoot-a-bal/ or /ref-yoo-tay-bal/. Its antonym, irrefutable, is likewise either /ir-i-fiyoot-tay-bal/ or /i-ref-yoo-tay-bal/.
refutation; *refutal. The first is standard. The second is an unnecessary and ill-formed variant—e.g.: “In a point-by-point refutal [read refutation] of the 42-page civil action, Columbia/HCA . . . say in court documents that they were exercising ‘independent business judgment.’” Roz Hutchinson, “Wesley Responds to Wichita Clinic Lawsuit,” Wichita Bus. J. (Kan.), 22 Nov. 1996, at 5. Sometimes the word is misused for denial—e.g.: “Michael Shermer . . . has written a valuable primer debunking many of the crackpot obsessions of our time—alien abductions, creationist science, Holocaust refutal [read denial], the statistics-bespeckled racism of the bell curve and pseudoscientific theology among them.” Todd Gitlin, “Millennial Mumbo Jumbo,” L.A. Times, 27 Apr. 1997, Book Rev. §, at 8.

Refutary phrases. Refutary has predominated in BrE since the 1820s and in AmE since the 1930s. *Refutary is a needlessly variant.

Current ratio: 2:1

refute is not synonymous with rebut or deny. That is, it doesn’t mean merely “to counter an argument” but “to disprove beyond doubt; to prove a statement false.” Yet the word is commonly misused for rebut—e.g.: “Ontario Hydro strongly refuted [read denied or rebutted] the charges, saying none of its actions violate the Power Corporations Act.” Tom Blackwell, “Local Utilities Sue Ontario Hydro over Pricing,” Ottawa Citizen, 25 Apr. 1997, at D16. See rebut.

Sometimes the word is misused for reject—e.g.: “Two-thirds of people rejected [read rejected] [Nicholas Ridley’s] belief that European Monetary Union is a ‘German racket to take over the whole of Europe.’” Toby Helm, “Majority Back Euro Ideals,” Sunday Telegraph, 15 July 1990, at 1.

Confute is essentially synonymous with refute in the sense “to prove to be false or wrong.” It’s probably the stronger term, but it’s much rarer.

Current ratio: 645:1

Language-Change Index
*refutal for refutation or denial: Stage 1 Current ratio (refutation vs. *refutal): 645:1

refutative, *refutatory. Refutative has predominated in BrE since the 1820s and in AmE since the 1930s. *Refutatory is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 2:1

regal. See kingly.

regard. A. As a Noun in with regard to and in regard to. In these phrases, the singular noun is standard. The plural form (as in *with regards to or *in regards to) is, to put it charitably, poor usage—e.g.: • “In the case of Angel, it is [set] to a simple piano accompaniment, and with regards to [read but with regard to or, better, but with] Mimi and Roger, there is a musical gap when the line is spoken.” Robert Sprayberry, “‘Prescription’ Results from an Under-Dose of ‘Rent,’” L.A. Times, 20 Oct. 1997, at F3.


• “I’ve come to learn some complexities of our system, especially in regards to [read with regard to] its unique freedom of movement.” David Staples, “School Success Depends on Parents,” Edmonton J., 4 Sept. 2015, at A4.

The acceptable forms are best used as introductory phrases. But even these may be advantageously replaced by a single word such as concerning, regarding, or considering, or even in, about, or for.

The plural regards is acceptable in this sense only in the phrase as regards. But some writers mistakenly use *with regards to—e.g.: “He became furious at the mere mention of George F. Will, the columnist who accused him recently of ‘judicial exhibitionism’ with regards to [read with regard to] his trade-agreement ruling.” Ruth M. Bond, “At the Center of Trade-Accord Storm, Judge Bristles but Watches Image,” N.Y. Times, 17 Sept. 1993, at B11. See as regards. Cf. respect.

Language-Change Index
1. *in regards to for in regard to: Stage 3 Current ratio (in regard to vs. *in regards to): 13:1

2. *with regards to for with regard to: Stage 2 Current ratio (with regard to vs. *with regards to): 23:1

B. As a Verb in highly regarded and widely regarded. The verb regard commonly appears in these two combinations. The one phrase, highly regarded, is a vague expression of praise; the other, widely regarded as, usually leads to words of praise—though it would certainly be possible to say that someone is widely regarded as beneath contempt. It’s a mistake, however, to truncate the latter phrase—to say widely regarded in place of highly regarded: “Crotty has published four novels since leaving the newspaper, and he’s widely regarded [read highly regarded] by both fiction writers and journalists.” Worse still is the error based on a mishearing of the already-erroneous phrase as *wildly regarded.

Language-Change Index
widely regarded for highly regarded: Stage 1

widely regarded for highly regarded: Stage 1

regarding is sometimes ambiguous. It can function as a preposition, meaning “with respect to; concerning; about” <I have no comment regarding the jury’s verdict>. Or it can function as a gerund, meaning “consideration; taking into account” <regarding modern life in a contemplative way is understandably depressing>.

For regarding as an acceptable dangling modifier, see danglers (E).
regardless (≡ without regard to) should not be used for despite (≡ in spite of). E.g.:


Though longer, regardless of would also be acceptable in those sentences. See *irregardless.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

regardless (without of) misused for despite: Stage 2

regardless of whether. This is the idiomatic phrasing, not *regardless whether—e.g.:

- “When he wanted to send troops to help end the civil war a year ago, President Clinton told a skeptical public and Congress that they would be withdrawn in December 1996 regardless whether [read regardless of whether] peace had been achieved.” “Bosnia Mission Is Not Justified,” Fla. Times-Union, 21 Nov. 1996, at A10.
- “One proposal . . . would require the companies to pay $6 billion a year, indefinitely, to compensate tobacco farmers—regardless whether or not [read regardless of whether] their crop is needed.” “The Farmers’ Cut,” Courier-J. (Louisville), 22 June 1997, at D2.

See whether (c).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*regardless whether for regardless of whether: Stage 2
Current ratio (regardless of whether vs. *regardless whether): 44:1

regards. See regard (A) & as regards.

regime (= [1] a particular government, esp. one whose legitimacy is questioned, [2] a specific system for doing something under a given plan or management, or [3] a special plan of exercise and diet intended to improve one’s health; a regimen) predominates in AmE, *regimen (= a systematic routine designed to improve a person’s health and fitness) predominates in AmE, regime in sense 3 in BrE—e.g.:

- “Many people, fat or fit, can’t keep up a strenuous 30-minute exercise regimen, day in and day out.” Aaron E. Carroll, “Diet, Not Exercise, Is Crucial to Weight Loss,” N.Y. Times, 18 June 2015, at A3.
- “She does not bore on about her dietary or health regime, or engage in competitively self-deprecating ‘fat talk.’” Hannah Betts, “Flirtatious, but Never Rapacious,” Daily Telegraph, 24 Apr. 2014, Features §, at 27.

regiment (= a military unit made up of several battalions) is coming to be misused for regimen (= a systematic plan designed to improve health, skills, etc.)—e.g.:

- “Wealthy people plagued with weak nerves and ‘auto-intoxication’ flocked to the San, as it was known, from all over the world to undergo a strict regimen [read regimen] of sinusoidal baths, Vibrotherapy, laughing exercises and five enemas a day.” Laurie Muchnick, “In Battle Creek, Not All Flakes Were Made of Corn,” Miami Herald, 6 June 1993, at I3.
- “As he heads toward his 58th birthday on May 13, Dill is playing some of the best golf of his career, thanks to better equipment, a strict training regimen [read regimen] and a successful diet.” Raul Dominguez Jr., “Thanks to a Fresh Start, This Dill’s Not in a Pickle,” San Antonio Express-News, 26 Mar. 1997, at D3.

Cf. calvary.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

regiment misused for regimen: Stage 2
Current ratio (strict regimen vs. *strict regimen): 35:1

register; registrar. Both designate a governmental officer who keeps official records. The OED notes that register was commonly used in this sense from 1580 to 1800 and that registrar is now the usual word. But in AmE register retains vitality: various levels of government have registers of copyrights, registers of deeds, registers of patents, registers of wills, and the like. As a matter of AmE usage, a registrar is usually a school official, whereas a register is usually someone who records documents for state or local government.

Apart from the agent-noun sense, the usual meaning of register is “a book or other record in which entries are made during the course of business.”

registrable (/rej-i-strә-bal/) is so spelled in AmE and BrE alike—e.g.: “The stakes are open to all AKC registrable pointing breeds.” Doug Smith, “Wall-eyes Are Hot on Mille Lacs,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 26 May 2002, at C19. This form was thoroughly established in 19th-century BrE and in early-20th-century AmE. *Registerable can now be regarded as a misspelling—e.g.:


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

registrable misspelled *registrable: Stage 1
Current ratio: 10:1

registrant /rej-i-strәnt/ does not rhyme, in the final syllable, with restaurant. Yet somehow, within the influential Securities and Exchange Commission in Washington, D.C., the pervasive pronunciation is /rej-i-strәnt/, with a moderately strong final syllable.

registrar. See register.

registrate, though dating from the 18th century, is an ill-conceived back-formation from registration, the verb register being standard—e.g.:

It is true, however, that registrate is correctly used when denoting the setting of pipe-organ stops. But this usage is rare outside the American Guild of Organists.

Language-Change Index
registrate misused for register: Stage 1 Current ratio (registered vs. registrated): 7,650:1
regret. See resent (n).

regretful; regrettable. Errors made are regrettable; the people who have made them should be regretful. The most common error is to misuse regretful for regrettable, especially in the adverbial forms—e.g.:
• “Yet regretfully [read regretfully], there may be less than full understanding that MARTA’s rail-service areas are really a function of trip volume densities and urban economics.” Ray Magliozi & Tom Magliozi, “Is MARTA Just a Downtown Train?” Atlanta J.-Const., 4 Mar. 1992, at A14.
• “But realistically and regretfully [read regrettably], we can’t pick and choose.” “The Postal Code,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 11 Aug. 2015, at A10.
See sentence adverbs.

Language-Change Index
regrettfully misused for regrettably: Stage 4 Current ratio (regrettably not vs. *regrettfully not): 10:1
regulable (/reg-yә-lә-bәl/), meaning “able to be regulated; susceptible to regulation,” has long been standard in AmE. It was in BrE, too, until the 1970s, when the longer regulatable became predominant in BrE by a significant margin. Even so, in AmE the longer word is a blemish—e.g.: “Where the highway leads is cloudy, but the traffic keeps growing and does not seem to be readily regulatable [read regulable].” Walter Goodman, “At Age 9, Light-Years Ahead,” N.Y. Times, 13 Apr. 1995, at C16. (The sentence would sound better if readily were changed to easily. See sound of prose.) See -able (D) & -atable.

regularly; routinely. These are nearly synonymous, but regularly implies a more orderly sequence at predictable intervals <Karl regularly eats cereal for breakfast> <Gillian routinely checks her car’s oil and tires before taking a trip out of town>.

regulatory; regulative. Although both adjectives were once common, regulatory achieved vast predominance in AmE beginning in 1920 and in BrE beginning in 1960. It’s accented in AmE on the first syllable (/reg-yә-lә-tә-reә/), in BrE often on the third (/reg-yә-lә-tә-reә/). Regulative might generally be regarded as a needless variant, but in theology regulative principle is a set phrase.

Current ratio: 30:1
reify (= to make material, or to convert mentally into a thing) is a transitive verb—e.g.:
• “In his first two years, Clinton’s single biggest mistake was seeking to reify, in one great leap, his panoramic revelation of the perfect healthcare system.” Ronald Brownstein, “Expect Newt Gingrich to Renew Debate About Government’s Role,” Dayton Daily News, 22 Nov. 1994, at A11.
• “Taste, touch, sight, smell, sound—all these senses are at work here, in order to reify those abstractions that hover at the back of our minds.” Peter Thorpe, “Our Senses Frolic in Poet’s Multi-Media Approach,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 28 May 1995, at A80.

It shouldn’t be used intrinsively—e.g.: “I’m reminded of younger abstract painters like Robert Harms, in whose work objects threaten to emerge, whereas in Park’s they threaten to reify into paint or glance.” Eileen Myles, “Darragh Park at Tibor de Nagy,” Art in America, July 1994, at 94. The meaning of that sentence is unclear even given the greater context, which (like much other art commentary) is infected with abstracititis.

rein; reign. Like many other homophones, these words are frequently mistaken for each other in print—but perhaps no other pair is confused in so many different ways. Besides the blunders below, see free rein.

Rein in, not *reign in, is the correct phrase for “to check, restrain.” The metaphorical image is of the rider pulling on the reins of the horse to slow down (i.e., “hold your horses”)—e.g.:
• “Though the White House has tried to reign him in [read rein him in], Roger Clinton (Secret Service code name: ‘Headache’) has ambitions to become more than the President’s dysfunctional younger brother.” Walter Scott, “Personality Parade,” Parade, 1 Aug. 1993, at 1.
The error also occurs with the noun forms: one holds the reins, not the reigns. E.g.:
• “Ron Low has a hold of the Oilers’ reigns [read reins] for now, but should he not work out, look for former Canucks and Flyers coach Bob McCammon to take

• “Now, Tony DiCicco, the goalie coach in 1991, is holding the regius [read reins] and has worked to build the U.S. from the back.” Shari Rampenthal, “Williams Targets High Jump,” Wis. State J., 10 May 1995, at D2.

• “In other cases, the computer recommended keeping tighter reign [read rei on] on inventory, pressing the vendor for more discounts, or raising prices.” Saul Hansell, “Listen Up! It’s Time for a Profit,” N.Y. Times, 20 May 2001, § 3, at 1, 14.

As further evidence of Murphy’s Law at work, the opposite error (rein for reign) occurs as well—e.g.:


• “Rarely do Oscar voters make the right choice for Best Foreign Language Film, and their reliably incorrect instincts reined [read reigned] supreme again earlier this year with the anointing of the peculiar Dutch import, ‘Character.’” David Baron, “‘Character’ Has Some Serious Flaws,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 29 May 1998, Lagniappe §, at 28.

• “Confusion reined [read reigned] when everyone within a five-mile radius was asked to evacuate.” Cheryl Jane Kountze, “May 1976’s Deadly Fog,” Houston Chron., 4 Jan. 2003, at 35.

Language-Change Index
1. *rein in for rei in: Stage 2
   2. *hold the reigns for hold the reins: Stage 1
      Current ratio (hold the reins vs. *hold the reigns): 23:1
   3. *rein supreme misused for reign supreme: Stage 1
      Current ratio (reign supreme vs. *rein supreme): 195:1

reinforce (= to strengthen) has been the universal form since the early 17th century. That’s an anomaly, since the base verb is enforce, not *inforce. (Likewise with reinstate.) Rather than making the word solid (reensforce) or retaining the -e- with a hyphen or diacritical mark (re-enforce, reënforce), the -e- in such words was changed to -i- whenever the prefix was added. Reinforce is sometimes seen in AmE, but always in a special sense: “to enforce again.”

reiterate, -tion; iterate, -tion. It is perhaps not too literalistic to use iterate in the sense “to repeat,” and reiterate in the sense “to repeat a second time [i.e., to state a third time].” But the distinction is observed by only the most punctilious writers, reiterate being the usual term in either sense. See iterate.

Since an iteration repeats a former event, the term can’t logically apply to the first anything—e.g.:

• “Allison’s first iteration [read appearance] in 1989 drenched Houston. It returned last year as a system that caused historic destruction in the nation’s fourth-largest city, earning retirement as an Atlantic storm name.” Voter Turnout, Elections Top NAACP Agenda,” Sun-Sentinel (Fl. Lauderdale), 7 July 2002, at A3.

• “Its first iteration [read version], in 1947, was such a disaster that it had to be redrawn two years later—and was still being amended 37 years after that.” Fred Hiatt, “Operation Tough: Revamping Government,” Newsday (N.Y.), 16 July 2002, at A25.

• “Many of the most daring are being commissioned by an emerging online force—such corporate giants as Nestle USA, Pepsi, Coca-Cola and General Motors that sat out the first iteration [read generation] of Web advertising while the rest of the nation went dot-com crazy.” Doug Bedell, “On the Web, in Your Face,” Dallas Morning News, 25 July 2002, at A1.

Language-Change Index
*first iteration for first version, etc.: Stage 1
*reknowned. See renowned.

relapse; recur. The patient relapses; the illness recurs. Let us hope this wording blunder doesn’t recur: “Prostate cancer is less likely to relapse [read recur] in men who are treated by more experienced surgeons, according to a new study,” “Experience Matters in Prostate Surgery,” N.Y. Times, 26 July 2007, at A15.

Language-Change Index
relapse misused for recur: Stage 1
relate back. Except in law, this phrase is generally a redundancy. Since the 18th century, lawyers have used it to mean that something done at one point is considered to have been done at an earlier time. For more, see Garner’s Dictionary of Legal Usage 764 (3d ed. 2011). See revert. Cf. refer back.

relatedly. See -edly.

relate to (= to empathize with) is a voguish expression characteristic of popular American cant from the 1970s on. “Southern writers can relate to what it’s like growing up in Atlanta.” It is unlikely to lose that stigma anytime soon. Cf. identify.

Language-Change Index
relate to in the sense “empathize with”: Stage 4

relation. A. And relative. These terms are interchangeable in the sense “a person with familial connections to another,” although currently relative is much more usual.

B. And relationship. Relation is the broader term in this pair, since relationship refers either to kinship or to the fact of being related by some specific bond, especially a social or emotional bond. The phrase in relationship with is almost always incorrect for in relation to. To be correct, the phrase would almost have to be in his (or her) relationship with, etc.

relative to (= in relation to; in comparison with) is, in Eric Partridge’s words, “gobbledygook” (Ué-A at 263). Though that pronunciation is a bit strong, the phrase can be easily replaced to good advantage—e.g.:

• “If you made a list of the worst banking crises relative to [read in relation to] a nation’s GDP over the past 15 to 20 years, America’s S&L crisis doesn’t even make the top 50.” Rob Norton, “The Big Costs of Policy Mistakes,” Fortune, 29 Sept. 1997, at 44.

• “The estimates obtained here for fathers and sons are low relative to [read compared with] those found in Solon (1992), Zimmerman (1992), and Altonji and

Although relative to is shorter than most phrases that can replace it, its meaning tends to be less clear, as illustrated in the examples above.

Relatively to is a comparatively rare—and unidiomatic—equivalent. E.g.: “It points to the benefits [that] such countries as the UK, Italy and Sweden have enjoyed by allowing their currencies to weaken relatively to [read in relation to] those of France and Germany.” Robert Chote, “IMF Report Upsets Paris sound English. The word dates back to the 16th century but wasn’t widely used until the 19th century, during the middle of which a furor arose over it. Critics thought it badly formed because the -able suffix, they said, works only with transitive verbs; that is, eat-able means “able to be eaten,” but reliable doesn’t mean “able to be relied.” It was also incorrectly denounced as an Americanism—this though it was born more than 200 years before Americanisms were ever talked about. Some writers therefore suggested that it should be rely-on-able or rely-upon-able (analogous to come-at-able). The critics’ voices have long since been silenced, and nobody today pauses over the word. See -able (c).

reluctant. For the misuse of reticent for reluctant, see reticent.

remain. In correspondence, it was once common to include the phrase I remain or we remain in a complimentary close such as Yours sincerely or Very truly yours. Today, the phrase I remain is not only stilted but also lame.

remark; re-mark. See re- pairs.

remedial; remediable. Remedial = (1) providing a remedy; corrective <read remedial measures>; or (2) designed to improve one’s deficiencies in a given field <a remedial-reading class>. Remediable = capable of being remedied; curable <read remediable problems>.

remediate, a back-formation from remediation, is generally either a needless variant of remedy or a piece of gobbledygook. There’s only one exception: in environmental law, remediate is a term of art. It’s common for environmental lawyers to speak of polluted property or of pollutants on property to be remediated—e.g.: “The evidence suggested that there was little groundwater pollution and that any such contamination was remediated [read had been remedied].” E.E. Mazier, “Removal of Underground Tanks to Preempt Oil-Leak Liability Did Not Constitute ‘Damages,’” N.J. Lawyer, 12 Aug. 1996, at 28. Otherwise, though, the word itself is a pollutant—e.g.: “Students who don’t pass will be allowed to take the test again or will be allowed to retake the course.” Tara Tuckwiller, “Putnam Doesn’t Act on Pay Raises,” Charleston Gaz., 24 June 1997, at C3.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX remedy for remedy (outside environmental law): Stage 1

remember. See recollect (A).


“Today’s commemorations of the 52 people who died when Khan and his co-conspirators attacked London's transport network on 7 July 2005 will make the continuing questions over racial and cultural divisions in this corner of Yorkshire seem especially relevant,” Richard Garner, “Segregated Areas Link Up for Cricket in Home Town of 7/7 Ringleader,” Independent, at 18.

President Harry S. Truman is said to have blundered often in this way.

remembrance.

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remembrance.
or memorial) is pronounced in three syllables: /ri-memm-bants/. An epenthetic schwa sound shouldn't occur after the -b-.

reminisce (= to think or talk about events in one's past, esp. pleasant ones) is a stubbornly intransitive verb. In other words, you reminisce about things. You don't *reminisce things*: e.g.:• “Don loved reminiscing his [read reminiscing about his] Navy years with his veteran buddies.” “Wilhelm, Donald Calvin” (obit.), Tampa Bay Times, 8 Jan. 2013, at B6.
• “Each Trojet had a wonderful time reminiscing their [read reminiscing about the] 2013–2014 season.” Kennedy Valinevicius, “Trojets Hold Banquet,” JG–TC (Mattoon–Charleston, Ill.), 12 Apr. 2014, at C6. (On the each . . . their issue in that sentence, see each (a.).)

Current ratio (reminisce about the past vs. *reminisce the past): 26:1

remissible. So spelled—not *remissable. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 42:1

remission; *remittal; remittance; *remitment. Remission = (1) forgiveness; or (2) diminution of force, effect, degree, or violence. Sense 2 is especially common in reference to virulent diseases—e.g.: “Hall opens [the book] with a case: a cancer patient in 1993 receiving a new treatment called T.N.F. (tumor necrosis factor), which initially looks like a brilliant achievement but turns out to be all too fleeting—after some remission the patient dies before Hall manages to interview this testament to modern medicine.” Roy Porter, “Offering Resistance,” N.Y. Times, 29 June 1997, § 7, at 9. *Remittal is a needless variant.

Remittance means “money sent to a person, or the sending of money to a person”—e.g.: “The hospital bill sent last week to Mark Davis was straightforward: $605 for services provided May 29. Remittance bill sent last week to Mark Davis was straightforward: sending of money to a person”—e.g.: “The hospital...” Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric 65 (Grenville Kleiser ed., 1911). Surprisingly few modern grammarians discuss what has become an increasingly common problem: the separation of the relative pronoun (that, which, who) from its antecedent. For example, in the sentence “The files sitting in the office that I was talking about yesterday are in disarray,” the word that—technically—modifies office, not files. But many writers today would intend to have it modify files. They would loosely employ a “remote relative.”

The best practice is simply to ensure that the relative pronoun immediately follows the noun it modifies. As the following examples illustrate, lapses involving which are extremely common:

• “There is a story told in the Shabbat about the famous Jewish scholar Rabbi Hillel which has some pertinence to the text before you.” Neil Postman & Charles Weingartner, Linguistics: A Revolution in Teaching ix (1966). (Which modifies story—12 words and 4 nouns before. A possible revision: A story told in the Shabbat about the famous Jewish scholar Rabbi Hillel has some pertinence to the text before you. Or: There is a story told in the Shabbat about the famous Jewish scholar Rabbi Hillel—a story that has some pertinence to the text before you.)

• “Legislators are constantly making decisions about law reform which depend on moral values.” Simon Lee, Law and Morals 3 (1986). (Which modifies decisions—4 words and 2 nouns before. A possible revision: Legislators are constantly making decisions about law reform, and many of these decisions depend on moral values.)

• “This will take the game back to its roots in the 1920s, when we had the Decatur Staleys, owned by Staley's starch company, which later became the Chicago Bears.” John Rothchild, “Rooting for the Federal Expresses,” Time, 30 May 1994, at 53. (Which modifies Decatur Staleys—6 words and 2 nouns before. The Chicago Bears started out as Staley's starch company? Fascinating. Actually, the problem is the parenthetical phrase owned by Staley's starch company. A possible revision: This will take the game back to its roots in the 1920s, when we had the Decatur Staleys, owned by Staley's starch company. That team later became the Chicago Bears.)

• “I looked at the dead body of my mother, which Astel was just in the process of covering with a sheet.” Peter David, Sir Apropos of Nothing 127 (2001). (Which modifies body,
Remote Relatives

4 words and 2 nouns before. A possessive phrase—my mother's dead body—would have prevented the problem.)

But the relative pronoun that is almost as troublesome, and when used remotely is even more likely to cause confusion—e.g.:

- “There is a word unrecognizable even to some crossword puzzle addicts that is useful in describing its strategy of survival between May and October. I estimate.” Leslie Hanscom, “Some Don't,” Newsday (N.Y.), 21 May 1989, Mag. §, at 9. (That modifies word—8 words and 2 nouns before. A possible revision: A word unrecognizable even to some crossword-puzzle addicts describes my strategy of survival between May and October. I estimate.)

- “Justice Blackmun's tone was urgent, as if in the twilight of his career he wanted to reopen a dialogue on the death penalty that had all but disappeared from the Court with the retirement of Justices William J. Brennan Jr. and Thurgood Marshall, who both believed that the death penalty was inherently unconstitutional.” Linda Greenhouse, “Death Penalty Is Renounced by Blackmun,” N.Y. Times, 23 Feb. 1994, at A1, A10. (That modifies dialogue—5 words and 2 nouns before. A possible revision: Justice Blackmun's tone was urgent, as if in the twilight of his career he wanted to reopen a dialogue on the death penalty. That dialogue had all but disappeared from the Court with the retirement of Justices William J. Brennan Jr. and Thurgood Marshall, who both believed that the death penalty was inherently unconstitutional.)

- “The Census Bureau has a remedy for the next scheduled head count, in 2000. It is called sampling, a method similar to that used in public opinion polls that extrapolates the characteristics of a large group by talking to a representative part of it.” Steven A. Holmes, “2 Communities, Poles Apart, Illustrate Debate on Census,” N.Y. Times, 30 Aug. 1997, at 1. (That modifies method—9 words and 2 nouns before. A possible revision: The Census Bureau has a remedy for the next scheduled head count, in 2000. It is called sampling, a method similar to that used in public-opinion polls. It extrapolates the characteristics of a large group from a representative sample.)

- “C-130 aircraft packed with radio transmitters flew lazy circles over the Persian Gulf broadcasting messages in Arabic to the Iraqi people that were monitored by reporters near the border.” Patrick E. Tyler, “War Imminent as Hussein Rejects Ultimatum,” N.Y. Times, 19 Mar. 2003, at A1. (That modifies messages—7 words and 3 nouns before. Probably the best edit would be to make a second sentence: The messages were monitored by reporters near the border.)

Even who and whose are used remotely, and just as confusingly (especially if more than one person has been mentioned nearby)—e.g.:

- “Patricia Buthmann and Tim Tyrroler on Tuesday lost their effort to block being evicted from the Casa Carranza apartments . . . because a woman who had stayed with them was found to possess two syringes that appeared to be drug paraphernalia.” Kris Mayes, “Renters Run Afoul of Eviction Law,” Phoenix Gaz., 29 Sept. 1994, at B1. (At first, the relative pronoun who may seem to modify them as part of an archaic construction; in fact, it modifies woman—5 words and 2 nouns before. A possible revision: Patricia Buthmann and Tim Tyrroler on Tuesday lost their effort to block being evicted from the Casa Carranza apartments . . . because a woman who had stayed with them was found to possess two syringes that appeared to be drug paraphernalia.)

- “She is the mother of four children who at age 15 aborted what would have been her first child, and evidently she seeks to redress that wrong.” William F. Buckley, “Both Sides Gearing Up on Abortion,” Fresno Bee, 26 Jan. 1995, at B9. (Who aborted whom? It reads as if the woman's 15-year-old quadruplets aborted what would have been her first child—a time-warp problem. Who is intended to modify mother—4 words and 2 nouns before. A possible revision: The mother of four children, she at age 15 aborted what would have been her first child, and evidently she seeks to redress that wrong.)

- “Just last year, they succeeded in removing a Victorian house near the Capitol Building, whose owner had refused every entreaty to leave for half a century.” Peter S. Canellos, “The Second Battle of Concord,” Boston Globe (Mag.), 29 Sept. 1996, at 14. (Whose refers to house—5 words before—but seems at first to refer to Capitol Building. A possible revision: Just last year, they succeeded in removing a Victorian house near the Capitol Building; its owner had refused every entreaty to leave for half a century.)

- “Clearly 'Cruyff' mustn't be confused with that autocratic Dutchman with a similar name who used to manage Ajax and Barcelona.” “Let's Have a Bit of a Blow for Battling,” Daily Telegraph, 2 Apr. 1997, at 44. (Who refers to Dutchman—5 words and 2 nouns before. A possible revision: Clearly, "Cruyff" mustn't be confused with the similarly named autocratic Dutchman who used to manage Ajax and Barcelona.)

At times, the remote relative may even appear in a phrase such as in which—e.g.: “The unexpected announcement renewed speculation about the 74-year-old Pope's broader state of health, particularly because he planned an important speech at the United Nations on the family in which he was expected to discuss the Vatican's views of the recent population conference in Cairo.” Alan Crowell, “Pope, Citing His Health, Cancels His Planned Trip to New York,” N.Y. Times, 23 Sept. 1994, at A1. (In which modifies speech—8 words and 3 nouns before. A possible revision: The unexpected announcement renewed speculation about the 74-year-old Pope's broader state of health, particularly because he planned an important speech at the United Nations on the family. In that speech, he was expected to discuss the Vatican's views of the recent population conference in Cairo.)

As in many of the examples quoted above, remote relatives often seem to result from the writer's ill-advised combining of two sentences into one. Among the advantages of avoiding remote relatives—preventing miscues and even ambiguity—is an improved average sentence length.

For more on relative pronouns, see that (A). For a similar problem with prepositional phrases, see illogical (F).

B. The Exceptional which. Some exceptionally well-edited publications, including The New Yorker

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
and The Atlantic Monthly, adhere to the that—which rule but nonetheless use which instead of that to signal that the relative clause is separated from its antecedent. E.g.: “Before joining the Bush Administration, he [Richard Haass] had held the job at the Brookings Institution which James Steinberg now holds.” Nicholas Lemann, “How It Came to War,” New Yorker, 31 Mar. 2003, at 36, 39. (A possible revision: Before joining the Bush Administration, he had held a job at the Brookings Institution—the job now held by James Steinberg. Or: Before joining the Bush Administration, he had held the job that James Steinberg now holds at the Brookings Institution.)

The estimable Barbara Wallraff, formerly senior editor at The Atlantic Monthly, defends the exceptional which: “When another noun intervenes between the noun being modified by the restrictive clause and the clause itself, and that second noun might be misread as the antecedent, we use which without a comma to signal the connection to the first noun.” Word Court 116 (2000). For example, to mitigate the remote relative a book about movies that I enjoyed (where it is the book and not the movies that were enjoyed), the exceptional which would make it a book about movies which I enjoyed. While the device might be more effective if it were widely understood and used, it can’t clear up the ambiguity in this example. And it is further hampered by the still-widespread use of which without a comma to signal the connection to the first noun. (see metathesis.

remuneration. So spelled. *Remuneration is an all-too-common misspelling and mispronunciation—e.g.:

- “I’m at school at 6:30 a.m., work through my lunch hour and prep period (tutoring, revising essays with students, giving makeup tests, and/or grading papers—all without extra remuneration [read remuneration], by the way), and I leave school anywhere between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m., depending on after-school meetings and student appointments.” Cindy Haworth, “Nurse’s Notion Is Fallacy,” Aziz Republic, 15 July 1997, at E7.

See metathesis.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

Remuneration misspelled *remuneration: Stage 1

Current ratio: 320:1

rencontre; rencounter. The dictionaries provide little certainty about these words. W11 lists the main entry under rencontre; the COD lists the main entry under rencounter, as does W2. Under rencontre, the COD labels both spellings archaic, although the Merriam-Webster dictionaries list rencontre as current in the senses (1) “a hostile meeting or contest between forces or individuals; combat”; and (2) “a casual meeting.” The OED adds the sense “an organized but informal meeting of scientists,” dating from 1975 in BrE.

The empirical evidence shows that although rencounter predominated in AmE and BrE alike, since 1820 or so rencontre has been the predominant spelling in both varieties and for all senses.

rend > rent > rent. But *rended has long been a variant past-tense and past-participial form, perhaps for fear that rent might cause a miscue. A misreading seems more likely in the first sentence that follows than in most others, but it’s probably better to use the traditional form—e.g.:

- “Unlike ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ Ms. Seaquist’s work, thus far, assumes that we all not only understand the issues that have rended [read rent] Bosnia and led to the horror, but that the issues allow only one legitimate position.” Joel Henning, “Bosnia: A Phone Call to Action,” Wall Street J., 18 Dec. 1996, at A18. (On the ungrammatical lack of parallelism in that sentence, see not only . . . but also.)
- “Veronica’s dream of singing in Johannesburg floods Abraham with memories and he refuses to have his heart rended [read rent] again.” Michael Eck, “Fugard’s ‘Valley Song’ a Mesmerizing Drama,” Times Union (Albany), 19 July 1997, at B11.
- “If you’re not winning, then you’re out in public, garments rended [read rent], whipping yourself so everyone can see.” Cathal Kelly, “Panic Time in Washington,” Toronto Star, 19 Sept. 2013, at S4.

See irregular verbs. Whenever the past-participial rent might be confusing, try torn apart or broken instead.

For the malapropism of misusing render for rend, see heart- rending.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*rended for past-tense rent: Stage 1

Current ratio (have rent vs. *have rended): 58:1

rendezvous, n. Pl. rendezvous, not *rendezvouses. The singular is pronounced /ron-day-voo/, the plural /ron-day-vooz/.

rendezvous, vb. Dating from the 17th century, this verb makes rendezvouses /ron-day-vooz/ in the third-person present tense and rendezvoused /ron-day-voed/ in the past tense. The present participle is rendezvousing /ron-day-voing/.

renenge; *renegue; *renig. The first is the standard form in AmE and BrE alike. The second is a chiefly BrE variant. The third is a chiefly AmE variant.

renounce. See denounce.
renounceable; *renunciabie. The former is standard in AmE and BrE alike. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 28:1

*renouncement. See renunciation.


The noun form is renown; there is no verb (despite the past-participial adjective renounced). The adjective is sometimes wrongly written *rekown or renown—e.g.:
• "There will be a DVD viewing of a lecture by the renown [read renowned] author Doug Tallamy. "What's Happening," Orlando Sentinel, 21 May 2015, at G1.

The adjective is pronounced /ri-nownd/.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. renowned misspelled *rekowned: Stage 1
Current ratio: 687:1
2. *rekown for renowned: Stage 1
Current ratio (renowned vs. *rekown): 807:1

rent, n.; rental, n. Generally, prefer rent instead of the noun rental whenever it will suffice. Reserve rental for a record of rent payments received <the Grosvenor Estate rentals were incomplete> or the property itself <he owns only one small rental>.

rent, vb.; lease, vb. In AmE, these terms are used both for what the tenant does and for what the landlord does. In BrE, the lessor leases (or lets) and the lessee rents. So in AmE, rent is ambiguous since it may refer to the action taken by either party. The word has had this double sense from at least the 16th century. Both the lessee and the lessor are renters, so to speak, though this term is usually reserved for tenants. See lease.

rental, n. See rent, n.

*renumeration. See remuneration.

*renunciabie. See renounceable.

renunciation; *renouncement. The former has long been standard in AmE and BrE alike. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 42:1

reoccur. See recur & relapse.

reoccurrence. See recurrence.

rep (= corded cloth) is the standard spelling <a rep tie>. *Repp is a variant spelling.

reparable; repairable. Although the latter has traditionally been something of a needless variant, some differentiation seems to be taking place. Reparable is now often relegated to metaphorical, abstract senses <are the two countries’ diplomatic problems repairable?>, while repairable increasingly appears in literal, concrete senses <is the bicycle chain repairable?>. The antonyms are irreparable and unrepairable.

In frequency of occurrence in print sources, reparable overcame repairable in BrE in the 1870s, and in AmE nearly a century later, in the 1960s. But both remain in fairly common use.

Reparable is pronounced /rep-a-ra-bal/. (Cf. irrepairable.) Repairable is pronounced /ri-pair-a-bal/.

reparative; *reparatory. Since the early 19th century, the former has been standard in AmE and BrE alike. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 20:1

repartee (= rapid conversation that is replete with intelligent and amusing remarks and replies) is pronounced /rep-or-tee/ or /rep-ahr-tee/—preferably not /-tay/.

*repay back. Although this redundancy dates back to the 18th century, it is considered poor style. Use repay or pay back—e.g.: "Students who obtain Stafford loans borrow at a reduced interest rate and wait until after graduation to repay them back [read repay them or pay them back]." Mike Bucsko, "Grove City to Stop Federal College Aid," Pitt. Post-Gaz., 11 Oct. 1996, at A1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*repay back for repay or pay back: Stage 1
Current ratio (pay back vs. *repay back): 471:1

repeal, a transitive verb meaning "to remove from the statute books by legislative action," doesn’t take from (which is implied from its definition). When the preposition from is needed, another verb is called for—e.g.: "Unlimited sick leave would be repealed [read removed] from state law." Randy McClain, "Panel Sends Teacher Sick-Leave, Sabbatical Bills to Senate," Advocate (Baton Rouge), 16 Apr. 1999, at A7.

repea, whether as adjective, noun, or verb, is best pronounced /ri-peek/- not /ree-peek/.

*repeat again; *repeat back. Both are needless redundancies. See redundancy.

*repeat the same. This phrase is redundant—e.g.: "Gov. Parris N. Glendening repeated the same [read repeated those] sentiments in a letter May 8 to foundation members and cited a $2.8 million expansion plan

repel. A. And repulse. Although both verbs mean "to drive back," the traditional distinction is that repulse is primarily physical <after repeated warnings, he was repulsed from the premises>; repel is primarily figurative <the body odors on the subway repelled her>. Hence repel is the verb corresponding more closely in meaning to the adjective repulsive. You can find this distinction in any number of older usage books—e.g.: “The person who feels repulsion is repelled, not repulse; repulsed means 'rejected.'” H.A. Treble & G.H. Vallins, An A.B.C. of English Usage 155 (1936). See repellent.

Some writers observe that distinction, using repulse for what beats back and repel for what disgusts—e.g.:

• “Capsaicin oil on seeds and grains [will] make them edible for birds but repulsive to squirrels. The seeds and grains repel squirrels but don’t harm them in any way.” Janice Mawhinney, "Birdseed Claims to Keep Squirrels at Bay," Toronto Star, 25 Feb. 2001, Life §, at 3.
• “While the marigold’s pungent smell apparently repelled these pests, the odor was also repulsive to many humans.” Diana Blowers, “Kettering’s Mari-Golden Anniversary,” Dayton Daily News, 23 May 2002, at C1.

Today, however, the verbs are as likely to be used interchangeably, perhaps because repulse seems to answer to repulsive (= disgusting, obnoxious) and repel to repellent (= that pushes away or beats back)—e.g.:

• “The middle passages contain grotesque parts about ways that the body both attracts and repulses.” Patrick Z. McGavin, “’Cremaster 3’ Offers a Stunning Concept,” Chicago Trib., 13 Sept. 2002, Movies §, at 9.
• “The last time residents recall their sleepy county being the center of international news was 139 years ago, when the Confederate Army successfully repelled advancing Union troops in the Battle of Chickamauga, north of Noble.” Brian Basinger, “Quiet Area’s Last Horror Was a Civil War Battle,” Augusta Chron., 25 Feb. 2002, at B6.
• “Renegade soldiers tried to take over three garrisons in the capital but were repelled by loyalist troops.” “Last of Mutineers Yield to Troops,” Chicago Trib., 11 Aug. 2002, at 5.

Because this tendency seems irreversible, you might take any of three tacks. First, you might keep (for now) to the traditional distinction, which is fading. Just don’t be the last to cling to it. Second, you might embrace the reversal in meaning; everyone will know what you mean, and the risk to credibility is slight because so few people ever learned the old distinction. Third, you might treat these verbs as SKUNKED TERMS and avoid them altogether for the next couple of centuries while the new meanings solidify.

B. And rappel. See rappel.

repellent; repulsive. Both mean, literally, "causing to turn away." Repulsive is stronger; it applies to whatever physically pushes back <repulsive forces> or disgusts or offends in the extreme <Fred's constant posing before mirrors and self-adulatory talk are only two examples of his repulsive narcissism>. Repellent is often more dispassionately descriptive and (typically) nonmetaphorical <a sunblock that is repellent to insects>. Avoid *repellant, a variant spelling of repellent. See repel (A).

repercussion (= an effect resulting from an act or event, esp. a bad one that will last for some time), a word most commonly used in the plural, is pronounced /ree-par-kash-әn/—not /rep-/.

repertoire; repertory. Although these terms are etymologically doublets, they have undergone a good deal of DIFFERENTIATION. Repertoire = (1) all the pieces of music, dances, or plays that a performer or group knows and can perform <they have no classical music in their repertoire>; or (2) the total number of things that someone or something can do <the behavioral repertoire of toddlers>. Repertory = a type of theater in which the troupe alternates plays on different nights as opposed to performing the same play night after night <repertory company> <repertory theater>.

repetitive; repetitious; *repetitional; *repetionary. The first two terms are undergoing DIFFERENTIATION. Repetitive generally means "repeating; containing repetition" <repetitive cadences>. It is a largely colorless term. Repetitious, which has taken on pejorative connotations, means "full of tedious repetitions" <a highly repetitious essay in need of pruning>. Neither word was in frequent use until the early 20th century; since 1915 or so, repetitive has occurred with much greater frequency than repetitious.

*Repetitional and *repetionary are needless variants of repetitive.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 8,811:780:5:1

replace. See substitute, vb.

replace; re-place. See re-pairs.

replete means not “complete,” but “abundantly supplied with; full to overflowing.” *Repleat is an infrequent misspelling—e.g.: “A representative for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, asked for the organization’s position on trapping, faxed The Sun a two-page fact sheet reelat [read replete] with lurid descriptions of ‘gruesome deaths.’” Debbie Price, “New Generation of Trappers in the Hunt,” Baltimore Sun, 2 Mar. 1997, at B1. Admittedly, *replete was a variant spelling in the early 18th century, but it was laid to rest by 1750 and is revived today only by error.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
replete misspelled *repleat: Stage 1
Current ratio: 855:1
replicable, not *replicable, has always been the standard form since the word emerged in the 1940s—e.g.: “Theoretically still required to shed all programming replicatable [read replicable] by a commercial channel, Alan Yentob’s BBC1 thumbed its nose at Birtist teachings, notably via the Lottery.” John Dudgale, “The Woof and the Smooth,” Guardian, 2 Jan. 1995, at T14. See -able (d) & -atable.

Language-Change Index
replicable for replicable: Stage 1
Current ratio (replicable vs. *replicable): 201:1

replying to your letter of; referring to your letter of. Commonly found in business correspondence, these participial openers are widely condemned as weak and stilted. Also, they typically result in danglers. E.g.: “Replying to your letter of March 7, the report you inquired about is soon to be acted on by the standing committee.” (A possible revision: The standing committee will soon act on the report that you asked about in your letter of March 7.)

reportage (= the reporting or depiction of events, esp. through journalism) is preferably pronounced /rep-ər-øj/, an anglicized pronunciation, it is rarely if ever heard in AmE today. (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

Another odd malapropism is the substitution of reprise for reprieve — e.g.: “It remains true that because of the acceptance of the trade dollar, and its subsequent circulation in the United States, the inflationary interests were granted a reprise [read reprieve] on the issue between 1873 and 1876, when the trade dollar’s coinage was discontinued.” Richard Hofstadder, The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays 279–80 (2012).

reprove; re-prove. See re- pairs.

repudiatory; *repudiative. Although both forms were common from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th, since the 1970s repudiatory has become the standard term. *Repudiative is now a needless variant.

Current ratio: 14:1

repugn. See impugn (A).

repulse. See repel (A).

repulsive. See repellant.

reputation. See character.

requiescat in pace. See R.I.P.

require. See necessitate. For a misusage of adjure to mean require, see abjure (c).

requisite. See prerequisite (A).

*requisite requirement is a patent redundancy.

requal; *requirement. The former has been predominant since the early 16th century. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 154:1

rescindable; *rescissible. The first is older (18th c.), more prevalent, and more recognizable in relation to the verb. It is the only form listed in the OED; W3 contains both. The second is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 1.2:1

reversion. A. And *reversion; *reversion; *reversion. For “an act of rescinding, annulling, vacating, or canceling,” rescission is the standard and the etymologically preferable spelling. It has been vastly predominant since about 1800.

But some writers have been misled by their smattering of Latin: perhaps they have realized that *re- cision is from the Latin noun rescisio, meaning “a cutting back, or lopping off.” And through the process known as folk etymology, these writers may have wrongly thought *recessio to be the correct form, rescission a corruption. (See etymology (D).) Yet rescission is the true Latin form (fr. the accusative rescissionem) and English form. Rescission is preferable also because of its consistency with the verb rescind.
Residue is the usual and preferred term for most contexts. Residuum is a technical term used correctly in chemical contexts. Residual, n., = a remainder; an amount still remaining after the main part is subtracted or accounted for (OED). Residuary, n., is a needless variant except in legal contexts. See residual.

*residuous. See residual.

residuum. See residue.

resign; re-sign. See re- pairs.

resilience (= [1] the ability of a substance such as a resin to return to its original shape after it has been beaten or pressed, or [2] the ability to become strong, successful, or happy again after a difficult or trying circumstance) has been the standard noun since the 18th century. *Resiliency is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 5:1

c. And re-sent. See re- pairs.

resent. A. For begrudge. Unlike begrudge, resent shouldn’t be used with a direct and an indirect object—e.g.: “It is easy for women to resent men their easy access to sexual arousal since our own is often wrapped in thick layers of guilt and insecurity.” Celia Barbour, “Looking at Pictures,” N.Y. Times, 23 Apr. 1994, at 15. The idiom should be to begrudge men their easy access because the verb resent always takes a simple direct object.

B. For regret. If it’s within your control and you’ve done it, you regret it; if it’s foisted on you, you resent it. E.g.: “I think that every person I know who likes me, who talked with Gail Sheehy, frankly resents [read regrets] having done so, because she so systematically manipulated and was so totally dishonest in the article.” Greg Pierce, “Gingrich v. Sheehy,” Wash. Times, 11 Sept. 1995, at A5 (quoting Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
resent misused for regret: Stage 2

C. And re-sent. See re- pairs.

resend; re-sound. See re- pairs.

residence; residency. See citizenship.

resident. See citizen (A).

residual; residuary, adj.; *residuous. In most contexts, residual is the general adjective meaning “relating to or constituting a residue; leftover” <residual effects>. But in the specialized context of estates and trusts, residuary is the preferred adjective meaning “of, relating to, or involving all the property and money that remains after someone’s death and after any bills have been paid.” E.g.: “A person who is entitled to the residuary estate (what is remaining after all legacies and other outgoings have been paid) is entitled to receive such an account, which should show that everything has been dealt with correctly.” “Briefcase,” Fin. Times, 27 Sept. 1997, at 7. *Residuous is a needless variant of the other two words.

residue; residuum; residual, n.; residuary, n. Both residue and residuum mean “that which remains.”
respond back. Because the prefix re- means “back,” this phrase is usually a redundancy—e.g.:

- “Perrin also recommended no additional action be taken until the county responds back [read responds] to the municipality with respect to its willingness to front-end the associated costs.” Ian McCallum, “Sewer Plan Shelved,” Times Journal (St. Thomas, Ont.), 15 Aug. 2005, News §, at 1. (The verbing of front-end in that sentence may also irritate some readers.)

- “Any member needing a baby sitter e-mails the monthly coordinator a week prior to [read before] the date needed. Members who are available to baby-sit at that time respond back [read respond] to the coordinator and the requesting member chooses a sitter.” Molly Kozik, “Baby Sitting Co-op Gives Parents a Source of Relief,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 16 July 2006, North Aurora §, at 1.

Sometimes, though, the back is justified—e.g.: “I respond by pointing to my kayak at the water’s edge and he responds back with a huff.” Robert Hughes, “They Make War, Not Love with Nature,” Fla. Today, 4 Sept. 2006, Sports §, at D-2.

-ress. See sexism (d).

restaurateur. So spelled, as a French loanword from the late 18th century. *Restaurateur, with an intrusive -n-, is a common error that began appearing in the mid-19th century and spread especially after 1960. It occurs in writing as well as in pronunciation—e.g.:


- “Tom and Mickey Kopp, seated, were recently named Central New York’s outstanding restaurateurs [read restaurateurs].” Larry Richardson, “Chittenango Restaurant Savors Regional Award,” Post-Standard (Syracuse), 19 June 1997, at 15 (photo caption).

The mispronunciation—resulting, of course, from the spelling of restaurant—may also be influenced by raconteur. See spelling (A).

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restaurateur misspelled *restaurateur: Stage 2
Current ratio: 19:1

restful. See resive.

rest in peace. See r.i.p.

restitutionary; *restitutive; *restitutional; *restitutory. Unabridged dictionaries generally record only *restitutive and *restitutory, the two words that predominated in print sources from 1870 to 1930. But in law—where the subject of restitution is most common—the standard term has been restitutionary since about 1985. It is now vastly predominant. All other forms can now be regarded as needless variants.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 36:13:3:1
restive = (1) intractable, stubborn, unmanageable; or (2) restless, nervous, impatient. Although sense 1 is older, sense 2 has become more common. Some critics lament this development, but it seems irreversible—e.g.:• “Many of the movers and shakers who control so much of New York’s economic and financial life are already quite restive about the possible huge tax burden on those who live or work in New York.” “Time for New York to Simplify Its Income Tax,” N.Y. Times, 14 Apr. 1985, § 4, at 22.• “Each time I brought up the subject of how much he was paid, he became restive.” Marie Brenner, “The Unquiet American,” Wash. Post, 21 Sept. 1997, Mag. §, at 6.• “Fiorina’s support in the polls is driven in part by restive voters who are frustrated by the status quo and are seriously considering outsiders such as her, businessman Donald Trump and Dr. Ben Carson.” Seema Mehta, “Attacks Are a Good Sign for Fiorina,” L.A. Times, 3 Sept. 2015, at B1.

The more serious problem is that restive is sometimes misused for restful—e.g.: “Restive [read Restful] moment. Lori takes a time out from sports to relax in her living room.” “Armed with Attitude,” Fresno Bee, 4 Sept. 1997, at E6 (photo caption).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index
1. restive in the sense “nervous”: Stage 5
2. restive in the sense “restful”: Stage 2

rest on one’s laurels. The laurel in this phrase refers literally to the leaf of the bay laurel tree. It is typically used figuratively to denote honors or victories (as, in antiquity, a laurel wreath awarded in athletic events or used figuratively to denote honors or victories (as, in the sense “restful”: Stage 2

restful times misused for restful—e.g.: “Stage 2

refrain oneself. These words were once almost interchangeable, but have long since been distinguishable. Restrain (= [1] to hold [a person or thing] back from an action; or [2] to deprive of liberty) is now almost exclusively a transitive verb. Although the OED records occasional intransitive uses—in which restrain is construed with to or from—these are historical. And although from the late 16th century to the mid-19th century restrain was occasionally used as a synonym for the intransitive refrain (= to hold [oneself] back), that use is now rare and ill-advised. Refrain always concerns oneself in the sense “to abstain” from exchanging scurrilities with his accuser, whereas restrain concerns either someone else the police illegally restrained the complainant from going into the stadium or oneself (reflexively) I couldn’t restrain myself.

In the following sentences, refrain would have been the better choice—e.g.:• “Mr. Clinton will make the case that the United States will lack the moral authority to press India and Pakistan to restrain [read refrain] from testing nuclear weapons until the Senate approves the test ban treaty.” John M. Broder, “Clinton to Urge More Control on Aid to Schools: to Stick to Policy, Not His Trial, in State of the Union Address,” N.Y. Times, 18 Jan. 1999, at A1, A10.

• “Under the terms of the agreement, Alpine and the Carroll brothers have agreed . . . that they will restrain [read refrain] from selling or offering for sale ‘any securities of any kind.’” David Robb, “Film Solicitor Reined In Again,” Hollywood Rptr., 25 Aug. 1999, at 3.


• “The demotion was harder for Chiaverini to take, but he restrained [read refrained] from saying anything inflammatory after Palmer’s original comments.” Tony Grossi, “Chiaverini Down but Not Out,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 15 Sept. 2000, at D1.

Refrain is sometimes misused for restrain, as a reflexive verb—e.g.: “I had to refrain myself [read restrain myself or restrain] from snapping that I wasn’t quite ready to date.” Miriam Sagan, “How to Talk to a Widow,” Albuquerque J., 2 Mar. 1997, at 14.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index
1. restrain misused for refrain: Stage 2
2. *refrain oneself for restrain oneself: Stage 1

Current ratio (restrain oneself vs. *refrain oneself): 58:1

Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Relative Pronouns. See that (A).

résumé. So spelled, preferably, with both accents. The first acute accent is often dropped for three reasons. First, the word is typically pronounced /rez- [y] a-ray-zoo-mer/. Second, the accent over the final syllable (résumé) sufficiently distinguishes
this noun from the verb resume. Third, AmE is inhospitable to unnecessary diacritical marks, and many desktop dictionaries (W1 being a notable exception) have ditched the two-accent version. See vita. Cf. protégé & soufflé.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

resume for résumé: Stage 2
Current ratio (résumé vs. résumé): 12:1

resurface, like surface, may be intransitive or transitive, though the meanings differ. Resurface = (1) to come to the top again <the state resurfaced in the middle of the pond>; or (2) to put a new top on <the state resurfaced the road>.

resuscitate. So spelled. See SPELLING (A).

retaliatory; retaliative. The two forms have undergone differentiation. The first means "of, relating to, or constituting retaliation" <retaliatory eviction>, whereas the second means "vindicative, tending to retaliation" <a retaliatory landlord>. But there is a tendency for retaliatory to assume both senses.

retch, v.i. This verb, meaning "to vomit or try to vomit," is amazingly often misspelled wretch—e.g.:


Wretch, of course, is a noun meaning either "a miserable person" or "a contemptible lowlife." A person who is retching often feels like a wretch but is probably in no condition to think of the usage issue.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

retch misused for the verb retch: Stage 1
Current ratio (retching vs. *wretching): 89:1

reticent = reserved; unwilling to speak freely; taciturn. E.g.:

- "Making the album was a difficult process, but unlike their reticent singer, the band seem to enjoy discussing Portishead's agonizing creation." Rob Brunner, "Class Trip-Hop Portishead Follows 'Dummy' with a Smart New Disc," Entertainment Weekly, 17 Oct. 1997, at 76.

But the word is frequently misunderstood as being synonymous with reluctant—e.g.:

- "Malinowski said Pi-Pa-Tag officials have been wary about the earth-capping proposal from its inception, but now they're even more reticent [read reluctant] to approve such a plan." David Pedreira, "Asbestos Concerns Stauffer Neighbors," Tampa Trib., 29 July 1997, at 1.
- "Although the Marlins also have been reticent [read reluctant] to run (two steals in as many attempts), leadoff batter Devon White was hit by a pitch Sunday, promptly stole second and scored the first Florida run on Bobby Bonilla's single." Joe Gergen, "Marlins vs. Braves," Newsday (N.Y.), 14 Oct. 1997, at A73.
- "Now that the Wizards' playoff hopes are gone, Jordan can take time to soak in the farewells he was previously reticent [read reluctant] to embrace." Joseph White, "Wizards Set for Jordan's Final Home Game," Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 14 Apr. 2003, at D4.

The corresponding noun is reticence, not *retency (a needless variant). In the noun as well as the adjective, the difference between taciturnity and reticence is extremely subtle—e.g.: "Many cases go unreported because of a reticence on the part of the victims to publicly accuse close relatives, much like the silence that often cloaks child abuse." Jon Nordheimer, "A New Abuse of Elderly: Theft by Kin and Friends," N.Y. Times, 16 Dec. 1991, at A1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

reticent in the sense "reluctant": Stage 4
Current ratio (reluctant to vs. *reticent to): 62:1

retina (= the back-of-the-eye membrane that receives light and sends an image of what has been seen to the brain) has predominantly made the plural retinas since the 1950s in AmE and since the 1980s in BrE. Before that, the Latinate plural retinae (/ret-әn-ee/) was prevalent in all varieties of English. See PLURALS (B).

Current ratio: 4:1

retirement; *retiral; *retiracy. Retirement, of course, is the usual word. *Retiral (= the act of retiring) and *retiracy (= the state of being retired) are now needless variants.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 7,778:2:1

 retractable; *retractable. The word wasn't used much till the 1920s, and since then there has been no serious competition between the spellings: retractable is vastly predominant in AmE and BrE alike—hence standard. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 256:1

retraction; *retractation. In the figurative sense "the act of recanting" or "a statement in recantation," retraction has been the usual term in AmE since 1800 and in BrE since 1860. After the mid-19th century, *retractation became a chiefly BrE variant. In both varieties of English, retraction is the noun corresponding to retract in literal senses as well ("to draw back, etc.").

Current ratio: 33:1

retreat; re-treat. See re- pairs.
retreat back} is a common redundancy dating back to the 17th century—e.g.: “There is no way out of that blind alley but to retreat back [read retreat] into the very language that brought one in.” Joseph Brodsky, *Less than One* 287 (1986). Cf. *return back & revert.*

Retributive; retributory; *retributional; *retributionary. Retributionary. Retributionary = of or characterized by retribution. E.g.: “But justice will be served if the settlement is preventive, not just retributive.” “The Cigarette Pact,” *Boston Globe,* 25 June 1997, at A20. Retributory has the added sense “causing or producing retribution.” E.g.: “Many of the investment banks . . . were hit by retributory legislation.” Robert Sobel, “Kicking and Screaming,” Barron’s, 20 May 1996, at A43. Although euphony can govern the choice, it’s worth knowing that retributive has been vastly predominant in print sources since about 1770.

*Retributional and *retributionary are needless variants sometimes used but omitted from the major dictionaries.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 2,850:47:16:1

**retrofit,** n. & vt. The noun retrofit—dating from the early 1950s—is a hybride meaning “a modification of equipment or a building to include developments not available at the time of original manufacture or construction.” The term has been extended to verb uses. The past tense is retrofitted, not retrofit—e.g.: “The Tickells, 21, were driving the Veggie Van, a 3-ton Winnebago splashed with yellow daisies and retrofitted to run on used cooking oil.” Connie Koenn, “Sunday Brunch,” *L.A. Times,* 21 Sept. 1997, at E3.

RETRONYMS. In the beginning there was the telephone. Each one had the same essential features, including a dial. (For convenience, the word was shortened to the casualism *phone.*) Then came another type: the push–button telephone (often referred to by the trademark *Touch-Tone telephone*). So a neologism had to be developed to refer to the original type with a dial: the rotary telephone. That term is an example of a retronym—a word or phrase invented to denote what was originally a genus term but has now become just one more species in a larger genus. Retronyms are usually occasioned by cultural, historical, and technological developments.

Retronyms aren’t a recent phenomenon. When roller skates were invented in the 19th century, it became necessary to refer to the kind used on ice—originally just skates—as *ice skates.* When cars began appearing on turn–of–the–century roads, old-style carriages came to be called horse–drawn carriages to distinguish them from the new horseless carriages. In the 1910s, when sound first came to be synchronized with motion pictures (in *talking movies or talkies,* the original type of movie came to be known as the *silent movie.* That is, nobody ever referred to *silent movies* until sound was added to the newer type. In the mid–20th century, what had been known as the *Great War* became known as *World War I* (it certainly wasn’t called that in its day). A little later, when people started traveling in *jet airplanes,* the original type was distinguished by the phrase *propeller airplanes.* In the 1970s, when *unleaded gasoline* was developed, the original gasoline became known as *leaded gasoline.* And in the 1980s, cola drinkers rejected *New Coke* in favor of what then had to be renamed *Coke Classic.* The list of retronyms is constantly growing.

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William Safire, who first wrote about retronyms in his “On Language” column in *The New York Times* (27 July 1980), credits Frank Mankiewicz, then president of National Public Radio, with coining the term and collecting the first examples. As of September 2008, most printed dictionaries did not list the term, but it seems destined to full recognition in dictionaries of the future.
*return back* is a fairly common redundancy. Its heyday was the 18th century through the mid-19th, after which period it was largely stifled in print sources. But it still occasionally crops up—e.g.: "An initial examination by orthopedic specialist Frank Jobe had shown that Jaha might be able to return back [read return] shortly after the all-star break." Andrew Cohen, "Powerless: Jaha Out for Season," Wis. State J., 18 June 1997, at B1. Cf. *retreat back & revert.

Current ratio (soon returned to vs. *soon returned back to): 344:1

reversible. In AmE, the word is solid: reversible.

reversal; reversion. The first corresponds to the verb *reverse* (*a reversal of fortune*), the second to the verb *revert* (*a dangerous reversion to prewar policies*). Roughly speaking, a *reversion* is a throwback.

reverse, n. See converse.

reversibility. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *reversable*. See -able (A).

Current ratio: 1,733:1

reversion. See reversal.

revert = (1) to return to a former state, condition, or posture; (2) to go back in thought, speech, or action; or (3) (of property) to return to the former owner or to that owner’s heirs. Sense 1 is most common—e.g.: “Christina Martin, Gingrich’s spokeswoman, later dismissed a suggestion that he was reverting to the tougher rhetoric that characterized his first term as speaker.” Judy Holland, “Gingrich Rips Clinton’s Violations, Backs End to Limits on Donations,” News & Observer (Raleigh), 26 Sept. 1997, at A8.


Current ratio (reverted to vs. *reverted back to): 12:1

revertible. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike. *Revertible* is a chiefly AmE variant. See -ible (A).

Current ratio: 9:1

*reverend. In denoting a member of the clergy, this term has traditionally been restricted to adjectival uses, as one newspaper acknowledged after being upbraided by a careful reader: “We referred correctly to the Rev. Wiley Drake, . . . but an inside subhead read, *The reverend says.* Some dictionaries recognize *reverend* as a colloquial noun form referring to a member of the clergy, but our stylebook doesn’t: the word is an adjective.” Pat Riley, “The Rev. Robert Ross Offers Some Righteous Observations,” *Raleigh* Register, 3 Aug. 1997, at B4. The noun uses without the article—as in *Reverend Harold Myers* as opposed to *the Reverend Harold Myers*—have long been stigmatized as poor usage. And if the stigma is wearing off, it’s doing so very gradually.

reverend. See avenge.

reverent. In AmE, the word is solid: reverent.

reverie (= a daydream) has been the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike since the 17th century. *Reverie* is a chiefly AmE variant; don’t use it.

Current ratio (revered vs. *reverenced): 10:1

review, n.; *reviewal. The latter is a needless variant. For a misuse of *review, see revue."

Current ratio (a review vs. *a reviewal): 13,597:1


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*Reverie misused for repel or repulse: Stage 1

revisable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *reversible*. See -ible (A).

Current ratio: 166:1

*revisal. See review.

review; redact; recense. The first is the ordinary word. The second and third refer specifically to revising texts with close scrutiny. *Redact* = (1) to make a draft of; or (2) to edit. In American law, it is often used in the sense “to edit out or mask the privileged, impertinent, or objectionable matter in a document.” *Recense* is more of a literary term; it relates to scholarly editing of ancient texts and the like.

reviser; *revisor. The first has been the predominant spelling in AmE and BrE alike since the word first came into use in the 18th century. See -er (A).

Current ratio: 8:1

revision; *revisal. The latter is a needless variant.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxi, l–li.)

revisionary; *revisional; revisory; revisionist. 

Revisionary = of, relating to, or made up of revision <revisionary methods>. *Revisional is a needless variant. Revisory = having power to revive; engaged in revision <a revisory board>. Revisionist = having the purpose of changing the conventional beliefs about something, esp. in a political way.

revisionism (= the practice of rethinking traditionally accepted notions about events or ideas in light of later developments and revelations), a 20th-century word, is sometimes neutral in connotation—e.g.: “The author of this book covers familiar ground in unfamiliar ways. Eva Sheppard Wolf’s revisionism begins with her reduced estimate of slaves freed in the 1780s.” James Oakes, “Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner’s Rebellion,” The Historian, 22 Dec. 2008, at 808. But in practice, revisionism (like the agent noun reviser) carries pejorative connotations—e.g.:

- “Days later, Cheney took pains to single out [Rep. John] Murtha as ‘a good man, a Marine, a patriot,’ before going on to declare those who charge that the nation was deceived into war guilty of ‘revisionism of the most corrupt and shameless variety.’” Julie Schinfeld Davis, “Point Man Cheney Viewed as Liability,” Baltimore Sun, 25 Nov. 2005, at A1.
- “Rodney Stark comes out swinging right from the bell in ‘The Victory of Reason,’ his fiercely polemical account of the rise of capitalism. . . . The success of the West, including the rise of science, rested entirely on religious foundations, and the people who brought it about were devout Christians,” he argues in this provocative, exasperating, and occasionally baffling exercise in revisionism,” William Grimes, “Capitalism, Brought to You by Religion,” N.Y. Times, 30 Dec. 2005, at E42.

*revisor. See reviser.

revisory. See revisory.

revitalize has become a vogue word among politicians and businessmen to revitalize the inner city. Avoid it.

revocable is pronounced /rev-ә-ka-bil-i-tee/.

revokable; *rewindable. The first has been vastly predominant since the 16th century; it is pronounced /rev-ә-ka-bal/. *Rewokable (as well as *revokable) is a needless variant. See irrevocable. 

Current ratio: 121:1

*revocate. See revoke.

revoke (= to declare officially that a law, decision, or agreement is no longer effective) is the standard verb. *Revocate, a misbegotten back-formation, has occasionally appeared since the mid-20th century. It remains an error.

Current ratio: 1,818:1

revolutionary, n.; *revolutionist, n. Although *revolutionist is the older term in English (1710), it is now merely a needless variant of revolutionary, which

overthrew its rival during the first half of the 20th century. Current ratio (a revolutionary is vs. *a revolutionist is): 6:1

revue (= a musical show) is so spelled. Avoid the erroneous variant review in this sense—e.g.: “Grapevine’s Runway Theatre is performing ‘Leader of the Pack,’ a musical review [read revue] of popular songs of the 1960s written by songwriter Ellie Greenwich.” “Arts Roundup: For a Limited Time,” Dallas Morning News, 24 July 1997, at G5.

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review misused for revue: Stage 1

rewind > rewind > rewound. So inflected. *Rewindable is an infrequent error—e.g.: “Scenes can be freeze-framed and advanced, rewinded [read rewound] and fast-forwarded with the push-button precision of CD audio or laser disc players.” Steve Persall, “To DVD or Not to DVD?” St. Petersburg Times, 19 Feb. 1999, at 20. See irregular verbs.

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*rewinded for past-tense rewound: Stage 1

Current ratio (rewound vs. *rewinded): 227:1

rewrite is both noun and verb, although write itself cannot be a noun. E.g.:

- “It was Mr. Kenney who took over the rewrite of the rules.” John Ibbitson & Campbell Clark, “Immigration Minister ‘Flat-fooled’ on Crisis,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 4 Sept. 2015, at A3.

rhapsodic (= [1] of, relating to, or involving the recitation of an epic poem, or [2] written or spoken rapturously, with excited extravagance or overenthusiasm) has vastly predominated in print sources over its rival *rhapsodical in AmE since 1920 and in BrE since the late 1930s. The longer form is now a needless variant. See -ic.

Current ratio: 5:1

rhetoric = (1) the art of using language persuasively; the rules that help one achieve eloquence; (2) the persuasive use of language; (3) a treatise on persuasive language; and (4) prose composition as a school subject. These are the main senses outlined in the OED, which also records “ironical or jocular” uses from the late 16th century to the mid-19th century (such as this from 1742: “The rhetoric of John the hostler, with a new straw hat, and a pint of wine, made a second conquest over her”). There should probably be added a new sense, related to but distinct from the first sense: (5) “the bombastic or disingenuous use of language to manipulate people.”

Older books defined rhetoric in line with sense 1:
“Rhetoric is the Art of speaking suitably upon any Subject,” John Kirkby, A New English Grammar 141 (1746).

“Rhetoric is the art of aggrandizing and bringing out into strong relief, by means of various and striking thoughts, some aspect of truth which of itself is supported by no spontaneous feelings, and therefore rests upon artificial aids.” Thomas De Quincey, “Rhetoric” (ca. 1835), in 10 De Quincey’s Works 21, 29–30 (1862).

“Rhetoric is the art of adapting discourse, in harmony with its subject and occasion, to the requirements of a reader or hearer.” John F. Genung, The Working Principles of Rhetoric 1 (1902).

But the slippage toward the pejorative sense 5 began early. William Penn suggested its iniquitous uses in the 17th century: “There is a Truth and Beauty in Rhetoric; but it oftener serves ill ‘Turns than good ones.” William Penn, “Some Fruits of Solitude” (1693), in 1 Harvard Classics 329, 352 (Charles W. Eliot ed., 1909). By the 20th century, some writers with a classical bent were trying hard to reclaim the word—e.g.: “No one who reads [ancient authors] can hold the puerile notions of rhetoric that prevail in our generation. The ancients would have made short work of the cult of the anti-social that lies behind the cult of mystification and the modern hatred of rhetoric. All the great literary ages have exalted the study of rhetoric.” Van Wyck Brooks, All the great literary ages have exalted the study of rhetoric. “William Penn suggested its iniquitous uses in the 17th century: “There is a Truth and Beauty in Rhetoric; but it oftener serves ill ‘Turns than good ones. ’” (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

Rhyme royal; rime royale; *rhyme royale. Rhyme royal (= a seven-line stanza in iambic pentameter, with the rhyme scheme ababbaa) is standard in both AmE and BrE. Rime royale (sometimes anglicized as rime royal) is the standard French phrase. *Rhyme royale is a mistaken mixture of the two.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 70:1.5:1

rhythmic; *rhythmical. H. W. Fowler said, “Both forms are too common to justify any expectation of either’s disappearance” (FMEU1 at 506). But he did think that *rhythmical is the more ordinary term. In fact, though, rhythmic (the less rhythmic word) has outnumbered *rhythmical in print sources since 1890 by a wide margin. Cf. eurythmics.

Current ratio: 7:1

ribald (= of, relating to, or involving coarse, sexually suggestive or even sexually explicit humor or remarks) is pronounced /rib ald/-not /ri bahld/ or /ri bahld/. The corresponding noun ribaldry (= the quality, state, or fact of being ribald—or an instance of it) is /rib ald ree/.

riboflavin. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *riboflavine.

Current ratio: 89:1

rickety. So spelled. See SPELLING (A).

ricochet, vb., makes ricocheted /rik oshayd/ and ricocheting /rik oshay ing/ in AmE. Those are the preferred forms as well in BrE, which also has the variants *ricochetted /rik oshet ad/ and *ricochetting /rik oshet ing/. The -tt- form was superseded in AmE by 1930 and in BrE by 1950.

Current ratio (ricocheted vs. *ricochetted): 27:1

rid > rid > rid. *Ridded is a variant form to be avoided—e.g.:

- “The fish-eating public had a heyday the last time Williams and Badger were riddled [read rid] of non-game fish." Rich Landers, States Won't Take Chance with Rottenone, Spokesman-Rev. (Spokane), 21 Sept. 1995, at C1.
- “When the night was over, Shaw had made $20 and had riddled [read rid] the world of one more TV set.” Paul

have been made up on the spot, . . . the U.K. sextet nated as a truncated form of the musical term riff probably because this particular the diaphragm, and [3] the mange; an itchy rash). That's century—and has little discernible relation to the older, Chicago Trib. played with rude ebullience. "Gret Kot, "No Stretching so rudimentary they seem to of sound association—e.g.: "[Roone Arledge] was angered, sources say, that ABC Daytime had effectively gone behind his back to snare Walters. Walters told him that it was a fait accompli. Thus, "The View" has now caused a minor riff [read rift] between the two." Verne Gay, "The Daytime View," Newsday (N.Y.), 11 Aug. 1997, at B3. "The mayor of South Jordan says the city has not aban- doned a plan to construct a 111-acre wildlife preserve along the Jordan River, despite a major rift [read rift] with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service." Brent Israelsen, "S. Jordan to Revive Preserve," Salt Lake Trib., 4 Dec. 1999, at D3. "The way he sees it, things aren't bad at all. No rifts [read rifts] between him and crew chief Todd Parrott." Skip Wood, "Yates Works to Vault Jarrett Back to the Top," USA Today, 26 May 2000, at F9. "When the riff [read rift] between the forest monk and the nation's financial wizards became public, it caused many Thais to wonder how an elderly Buddhist monk could have forced powerful government leaders to explain the machinations of their fiscal policy." Sarah Rooney, "Monk vs. the Machine," S.F. Chron., 26 Sept. 2000, at A11.

By extension, the word came to apply to a comic's take on a particular subject, especially an extemporaneous tirade—e.g.: "The comedian Richard Lewis says he was knocked out when he first heard a [Jonathan] Winters album at the age of thirteen: . . . 'I asked to sit next to him at a Stanley Kramer dinner, and just leaning over for a string bean he'd go into a whole riff about where that string bean came from and that I was insane for eating it. Nothing can go by him.'" Gerald Nachman, Seriously Funny 621 (2004).

Rift arose in Middle English in the sense "a fissure or divide; a split or crack"—the meaning it still carries. E.g.: "Word out of Washington is that Bond wants to change teams because of a rift with coach Ron Wilson." Nancy Marrapese-Burrell, "End-of-the-Year Sale," Boston Globe, 1 Oct. 2000, at D2. Occasionally the term also refers to the rapids formed by rocks protruding from the bed of a stream. It formerly also meant "a burp"—a sense long obsolete.

Although the OED records two early-17th-century uses of riff in the obsolete sense "rift, chink," the modern use of the word in that sense appears to be nothing more than rank word-swapping resulting from sound association—e.g.:

- "[Roone Arledge] was angered, sources say, that ABC Daytime had effectively gone behind his back to snare Walters. Walters told him that it was a fait accompli. Thus, "The View" has now caused a minor riff [read rift] between the two." Verne Gay, "The Daytime View," Newsday (N.Y.), 11 Aug. 1997, at B3. 
- "The mayor of South Jordan says the city has not aban- doned a plan to construct a 111-acre wildlife preserve along the Jordan River, despite a major rift [read rift] with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service." Brent Israelsen, "S. Jordan to Revive Preserve," Salt Lake Trib., 4 Dec. 1999, at D3. 
- "When the riff [read rift] between the forest monk and the nation's financial wizards became public, it caused many Thais to wonder how an elderly Buddhist monk could have forced powerful government leaders to explain the machinations of their fiscal policy." Sarah Rooney, "Monk vs. the Machine," S.F. Chron., 26 Sept. 2000, at A11. 

Careful users of language preserve the age-old fissure between the words.
right, n. For some common errors, see last rites & rite of passage.


Current ratio (righted vs. *rightened): 490:1

righteous; rightful. See right, adj.
	right-of-way is hyphenated whether used as a phrasal adjective <a right-of-way easement> or as a noun <yield the right-of-way>. The plural has always been rights-of-way, not *right-ways. See plurals (g).

Current ratio (pl. form): 8:1

right to die. As a noun phrase, right to die is three words <advocates of the right to die>. But as a phrasal adjective, it should be hyphenated: “Both sides of a right-to-die case received a skeptical hearing today at the Supreme Court.” Linda Greenhouse, “Right-to-Die Case Gets First Hearing in Supreme Court,” N.Y. Times, 7 Dec. 1989, at 1.

right-to-lifer (= an opponent of abortion rights) is three words as a noun phrase, but hyphenated as a phrasal adjective  <right-to-lifer>. See phrasal adjectives (b).

Current ratio (pl. form): 14:1

right to privacy is three words as a noun phrase, but hyphenated as a phrasal adjective <right-to-privacy case>.

rigamarole (= a senselessly cumbersome, hassle-filled procedure) is the standard spelling. *Rigamarole is a variant spelling that is less than half as common in print. Despite its spelling, rigamarole is often pronounced /ri-g-ә-mә-rohl/, though the dictionaries record /ri-gә-mә-rohl/.

Current ratio: 14:1

rigor (= [1] exacting thoroughness, or [2] severe austerity) has been predominantly so spelled in AmE print sources since the late 1840s. In BrE, the spelling rigour has always been standard. See -or; -our.

rill; *rille. Rill = (1) a brook or stream; or (2) a long, narrow trench or valley on the moon’s surface. *Rille is a variant spelling for sense 2, but there is little reason to promote it.

rime. See rhyme.

rime royale. See rhyme royal.

ring > rang > rung; ringed. Senses that relate to encircling take the regular -ed inflections in the past tense and past participle <the enemy ringed the encampment>. Senses that relate to sound—the more usual senses—take the irregular inflections ring > rang > rung <the telephone rang>.

The past-participial rung is often misused as a simple-past verb—e.g.:


See irregular verbs.

The opposite error—rang as a past-participial form in place of rung—is much more common in BrE than in AmE:

- “His father, Mr. Charles Smith, told Birmingham Coronet’s Court he had rung [read rung] his son’s mobile telephone the previous evening.” “Suicide Son’s Final Message by Mobile Phone,” Birmingham Post, 19 Mar. 1998, at 4.
- “He said the phone had rung [read rung] all day with messages from well-wishers—even complete strangers:” Michael Howie, “Home at Last to Hug from Mum and Dad,” Aberdeen Press & J., 22 July 2000, at 1.
- “She got a message that Alice had rung [read rang].” Peter Allen, “I Fled the Flames Crying I’m Alive,” Daily Mail, 27 July 2000, at 10.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. rung misused for simple-past rang: Stage 1
   Current ratio (he rung vs. *he rang): 26:1
   2. rung misused for past-participial rung: Stage 1
   Current ratio (had rung vs. *had rung): 47:1

rinsable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *rinsible. See -able (a).

R.I.P. These initials stand for the Latin phrase requiescat in pace (= may he [or she] rest in peace), not the English rest in peace.

ripe. See rife.

riposte; *ripost. Riposte /ri-pohst/ (= a sharp comeback or swift retort) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Ripost is a variant.

Current ratio: 318:1

*risable. See risible.

rise. See arise & raise (b).

risible (= laughable, ludicrous) is so spelled—not *risable. (See -able (a).) It rhymes with visible. See ridiculous.
risqué ( = verging on indecency) is occasionally—in the speech of the marginally literate—misused for risky. The feminine risquée doesn’t properly exist in English.

ritardando ( = a musical direction to slacken the tempo gradually) predominantly makes the plural ritardandos in AmE, but the Italianate ritardandi in BrE. Oddly enough, the synonymous rallentando predominantly makes rallentandos in AmE and BrE alike—not *rallentandi. See plurals (b).

rite of passage; rite de passage. Because the English expression is synonymous with (and more recognizable than) the French one, the latter should be considered an unnecessary Gallicism.

Occasionally, rite is misspelled right in this phrase—e.g.:


Cf. last rites.

risqué

roister; *royster. Roister ( = [1] to brag and swagger; or [2] to engage in bumptious merrymaking) has been the standard spelling since the 1930s. *Royster is a variant.

role; roll. These are sometimes confused. Roll has many senses, including breadstuff, but the only sense that causes problems is “a list or register; roster” <the teacher took roll>. Role, by contrast, means “a function or part, as in a drama.” E.g.:

- “She has no children with names such as Johnny, John, Peter, Paul, Mary or Martha. Instead, a sampling of names on one of her roles [read rolls] includes Tiana, Victoria, Carmen, Melissa, Christopher, Phillip, Tyler and Allegra.” Marlene Feduris, “What’s in a Name?” Amarillo Globe-News, 24 May 1992, at D1.
- “Everyone played their roll [read role].” Mark Rosner, “UConn Nails Horns 96–86,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 16 Dec. 1993, at E1, E5 (quoting B.J. Tyler, a college basketball player, who should not be charged with this error).

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1. role misused for roll (= list) Stage 1
2. roll misused for role: Stage 1

roister

Roma. See gypsy.

Romania; *Rumania; *Roumania; *România. Romania (/roh-may-nee-ә/) became the predominant spelling about 1975. *Rumania was once the standard spelling; it was touted in linguistic literature as the preferred form, since it reflects the correct pronunciation (see Merritt Ruhlen, “When in Rome, Do as the Romanians Do,” Am. Speech 154, 155 [1970]). But it is now a mere variant. The other variant, *Roumania, is a Gallicism. The circumflex over the medial -a- is unnecessary in English-language contexts.

The choice in spelling has on occasion been an emotionally fraught issue: “A university press once made a book of papers by seven professors, each dealing with his own specialty in world affairs. One author insisted his paper would be unavailable unless the spelling ‘Rumania’ appeared in it, and another announced that his article would be withdrawn if he could not spell it ‘Roumania,’ retaining the o as a heritage from ‘Rome.’” Edward N. Teall, Putting Words to Work 123 (1940). Presumably neither one of those authors would be happy with today’s preference for Romania.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 92:7:5:1


Current ratio: 12:1
roof, n. Pl. roofs, not *rooves, for as long as the word has been recorded. But the mistaken plural occurs with some frequency—e.g.:  
• “But the view from the classroom (which his son uses to run a cramming school) is of rooves [read roofs] and television aerials, so the farmers’ cause seems already lost.” “The Last of the Left,” Economist, 4 Feb. 1995, at 32.
Cf. hoof. See plurals (c).

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*rooves* for roofs: Stage 1  
Current ratio (roofs vs. *rooves): 535:1

roofed, not *rooved, has been the standard form since the 17th century—e.g.:  
• “Salt is in a deep valley, with flat-rooved [read flat-roofed] houses built into the hillsides, where protesters took up position, leaving the police at a severe disadvantage.” Alan Cowell, “Unrest in Jordan Gains Islamic Tone,” N.Y. Times, 22 Apr. 1989, §, at 1.
Cf. hoofed.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**  
*rooved for roofed: Stage 1  
Current ratio (roofed vs. *rooved): 2,335:1

roomful. Pl. roomfuls—not *roomsful. See plurals (g).

**root around** (= to poke about) is preferably so spelled—not *rout around or *route around. But the illogical slips are fairly common—e.g.:  
• “Maybe he should root [read root] around in the attic for that pirate flag.” “The Fall of an American Icon,” Business-Week, 5 Feb. 1996, at 34.
• “Some of these [hotels] are available via Planet Hawaii, though users might have to route [read root] around for them.” Donna Marino, “Surfing the ‘Net,” Tour & Travel News, 8 May 1995, at 44.
To route around is to establish a route that bypasses something—e.g.: “Meanwhile, doctors began perfecting bypass surgery, in which a blood vessel is grafted into position to route around a clogged artery.” Eric B. Schoch, “Helping Heal Heartache,” Indianapolis Star, 2 Feb. 1997, at C1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**  
*root around* misspelled *rout around* or *route around: Stage 1  
Current ratio (root around vs. *route around): 40:1

*rooves. See roof.

**ropeable**. So spelled in both AmE and BrE—not the easily misread *ropable. See mute e.

Current ratio: 2:1

rosary; rosery. The first is a string of prayer beads or a set of prayers. The second is a garden or section of a garden devoted to roses. The terms are sometimes confounded—e.g.:  
• “Katrina remembered the Echo in the suitcase and before you could say rosery beads [read rosary beads], she had it in front of her face saying ‘take my picture.’” Jessica Flynn, “Neil’s Dead-Good Way to Read His Newspaper,” South Wales Echo, 29 June 2012, News §, at 27.
• “Now roses are lovely, of course, but the problem with formal rosaries [read rosaries] is that they tend to look horrible outside the summer—whatever the rose growers tell us in their propaganda,” Tim Richardson, “Japanese Gardens: Mysterious or Kitsch?” Daily Telegraph, 3 Feb. 2014, Lifestyle §.

rostrum. Pl. rostra or rostrums, the former having been long predominant in World English. See plurals (b). Cf. nostrum.

Current ratio: 5:1

rotery; rotatory. Rotory is the everyday adjective describing something that spins on an axis, especially a mechanical object <rotary razor>. In technical and scientific writing, rotatory describes something subject to or causing a spinning force <optical rotatory dispersion>.

rouble. See ruble.

rouche. See ruche.

rough-hewn. See hew (n).

*Roumania. See Romania.

round. See around.

rouse. See arouse.

route is pronounced either /root/ or /rowt/. For quite some time, pronunciation specialists have heavily favored /root/. But even those who say that they’re planning a cross-country route (/rowt/) would surely also say Route (/root/) 66. Cf. en route. For a misuse of route, see root around.
routinely. See regularly.

routinize (= to develop into a regular schedule) is pronounced either /roo-ˈtə-niz/ or /roo-ˈtee-niz/. Although this word (dating from the early 1920s) sometimes smacks of gobbledygook, it's also difficult to replace—e.g.:

- "Moreover, teachers can be trained to teach a particular subject, texts can be targeted, and many lessons can be standardized and techniques routinized:" Albert Shanker, "Education Reform: What's Not Being Said," Daedalus, 22 Sept. 1995, at 47.
- "At present there are concerted moves on the part of the government and industry to develop a set of regulations that will routinize the use of drones in Canada." Shayna Gersher, "Drone Surveillance in Canada Needs Regulations," Ottawa Citizen, 11 Apr. 2014, at A10.

See -ize.

row to hoe is an agricultural or gardening metaphor meaning "a challenging and perhaps arduous project" (<it's going to be a tough row to hoe>). Sometimes it's ludicrously written as the mondegreen ("it's going to be a tough row to hoe"). Sometimes it's is an agricultural or gardening metaphor meaning "a challenging and perhaps arduous project" (<it's going to be a tough row to hoe>). Sometimes it's is a redundant term—e.g.:

- "Though victories over Newcastle and Aston Villa showed Leicester how they can preserve their status, it will be a hard road [read row] to hoe this winter." Michael Henderson, "Leicester Dig in for Long, Hard Winter," Times (London), 25 Nov. 1996, at 33.
- "Even if David Robinson comes back, it will be a hard road [read row] to hoe into it in the playoffs." "NFL Has Finally Gone Too Far with Super Bowl Hype," San Antonio Express-News, 2 Feb. 1997, at C5.
- "Red-hot North Carolina has a tough road [read row] to hoe." "UNC Faces Tough Road," Star-Ledger (Newark), 19 Feb. 1997, at 54. (The error is elliptically repeated in the title.)

See lapsus linguae.

ruin, n.; ruination. Ruin is the ordinary term. Ruination, which is quite common, has traditionally been humorous and colloquial, but today often seems to convey a special earnestness or acknowledged hyperbole—e.g.:

- "They're liable to slip in a bit about their faith, and you can't have that nonsense because, Lord knows, it could be the ruination of the country." John Downing, "Maybe the End Is at Hand," Toronto Sun, 29 June 1997, at C3.
- "For the opposition parties, bad economic news on Prime Minister Stephen Harper's watch is manna from heaven. They have, in truth, been starved for ruination until now, notwithstanding their own best efforts." "About That 'Recession,'" Nat'l Post (Can.), 2 Sept. 2015, at A8.

*rumania. See Romania.

rumba (the Cuban dance) has been the standard spelling since the word was first used in the early 20th century. *Rhumba is a variant.

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Current ratio: 7:1


See abbreviations (b).

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rumbustious misspelled *rumboustious: Stage 1

Current ratio: 30:1

Run-On Sentences do not stop where they should. The problem usually occurs when the writer is uncertain how to handle punctuation or how to handle such adverbs as however and otherwise, which are often mistakenly treated as conjunctions.
Some grammarians distinguish between a “run-on sentence” (or “fused sentence”) and a “comma splice” (or “run-together sentence”). In a run-on sentence, two independent clauses—not joined by a conjunction such as and, but, for, or, or nor—are incorrectly written with no punctuation between them. Hence a run-on sentence might read: “I need to go to the store the baby needs some diapers.” Correctly, it might read: “I need to go to the store; the baby needs some diapers.”

With a comma splice, two independent clauses have merely a comma between them, again without a conjunction—e.g.: “I need to go to the store, the baby needs some diapers.”

The presence or absence of a comma—and therefore the distinction between a run-on sentence and a comma splice—isn’t usually noteworthy. So most writers class the two problems together as run-on sentences. But the distinction can be helpful in differentiating between the wholly unacceptable (true run-on sentences) and the usually—but-not-always unacceptable (comma splices). That is, most usage authorities accept comma splices when (1) the clauses are short and closely related, (2) there is no danger of a mis-cue, and (3) the context is informal. Thus: “Jane likes and closely related, (2) there is no danger of a mis—

Unjustified comma splices are uncommon in non-fiction writing, but they do sometimes occur—e.g.: “The remnants of Hurricane Opal will move north through the Tennessee Valley as a tropical storm this morning. Winds near the center of the storm will diminish rapidly, however, wind gusts over 60 miles an hour will persist around the storm center.” “Weather Report,” N.Y. Times, 5 Oct. 1995, at B8.

In that sentence, the mispunctuation makes for an ambiguous modifier because however could go with either the clause before or the clause after. The context suggests that the reading should be with a semicolon after rapidly. The best edit would be to replace however with but—and to delete the comma after it. See however (d).

* run the danger. See danger (b).

run the gantlet. See gantlet.

** rusticly** (= in a rural, countrified manner) is the adjective corresponding to rustic, adj. But some mis-spell it *rusticy*, maybe on the analogy of publicly—e.g.: “If you haven’t already guessed, Newport is not for the ‘rusticy [read rustically] challenged.” Adam Mertz. “State of Seclusion,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 14 Oct. 1994, at B5. See -ic.

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**rustically** misspelled *rusticy*: Stage 1

**s**.

's. See possessives.

**saccharin**, n.; **saccharine**, adj. In AmE and BrE alike, saccharin is the noun <saccharin is a well-known sweetener>, saccharine the adjective <saccharine television shows>.

**sacerdotal** (= priestly) is best pronounced /sas-ar-doh-tal/; /sak-/ is a variant pronunciation.

**sacreligious** (= violative of something sacred; profane) is so spelled. *Sacreligious, under the influence of religious, has been a fairly common misspelling since about 1800—e.g.: • "A second demand was that the film 'Mohammad, Messenger of God' be removed from this country on grounds that the Hanafis regarded it as sacrilegious [read sacrilegious], the jury was told." J.Y. Smith, “Hanafi Lawyer Argument Highly Praised by Judge,” Wash. Post, 20 July 1977, at C1.


• “There will surely be some who will find the pleasantly profane deity’s observations seriously sacreligious [read sacrilegious].” Michael D. Reed, “Second Coming Will Have You Rolling in the Aisles,” Victoria Times Colonist (Can.), 30 Aug. 2015, at C9.

Still another persistent misspelling is *sacreligious*—e.g.: “O Holy Night,” with ukulele accompaniment, borders on the sacriligious [read sacrilegious].” Jay Orr, “Merry Christmas BABY!” Nashville Banner, 5 Dec. 1996, at C16.

The correct spelling can be remembered easily with either of two mnemonic devices: (1) recall the noun sacrilege (similar to privilege); (2) reverse the first two vowels of religious.

The preferred pronunciation today is /sak-ri-lj-ass/, which has displaced /sak-ri-lee-joss/. See spelling (A).

**sacrosanct**, literally "most sacred," is now often ironic. Sometimes the irony appears unintentional—e.g.:
“Ray Kroc, who founded the McDonald’s empire, wrote that the French fry was ‘sacrosanct,’ its preparation a ritual to be followed religiously.” — Danny Penman, “Judgment Day for McDonald’s,” Independent, 19 June 1997, at 20.

sadly. See sentence adverbs.

safe-deposit box. This is the original and predominant term, not *safety-deposit box—e.g.: “He’ll just go quietly, back to his day job at Home Depot, doing business with customers who don’t know about that silver medal in his safe-deposit box [read safe-deposit box].” Mike Downey, “Bobsled Pioneer Prepares for a Slower Lifestyle,” Chicago Trib., 13 Feb. 2003, Sports §, at 1. The extra syllable in safety probably originated as an auditory error: people heard the phrase and associated the de- prefix on deposit with the -ty suffix on safety, and then duplicated the sound. In modern print sources, safe-deposit box is six times as common as *safety-deposit box.

The phrasal adjective safe-deposit always requires a hyphen in this term.

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*safety-deposit box for safe-deposit box: Stage 2

Current ratio (safe-deposit box vs. *safety-deposit box): 6:1

said, adj. Legal writers formerly used this word as a supposedly more precise equivalent of the, this, that, these, or those. But as lawyers have generally learned that it isn’t any more precise—and, indeed, that it can lead to various technical problems—the term has become much less frequent. Still, some writers use it for a mock-legal flavor—e.g.: • "If you call an invention, an idea, or a suggestion ’practical,’ you are voicing the opinion that said [read the] invention, idea, or suggestion can be translated from theory into actuality.” Norman Lewis, Better English 127 (rev. ed. 1961).

• “The complement of a copulative infinitive is in the objective case, agreeing with the subject of said [read the] infinitive, if the infinitive has a subject.” Ibid. at 347.

• "A telephone Christmas is a much less stressful Christmas, especially if said [read the] phone is left off the hook.” Robert Kirby, “Christmas by Telephone Has a Nice Ring,” Salt Lake Trib., 2 Dec. 1997, at B1.

As the edits suggest, you’re generally well advised to cut the legalese unless you’re being very much tongue-in-cheek—e.g.: "Any regular Joe who isn’t the boy toy of a fabulously rich ($800 million) pickle heirress could have gotten exactly the same consideration.” Mike Downey, “Pols & Politics,” Boston Herald, 18 May 1997, at 31. Cf. same (A) & such (A).

sailor; sailer. A sailer is someone who sails—always in reference to a person. A sailor is a vessel or vehicle that sails or that moves by the use of a sail—e.g.: “The second part of the project is to launch an operational sailer with eight sails to be tested in an 850-km. (528-mi.) circular orbit, also using a Volna rocket.” Michael A. Dornheim, “Solar Sail Test to Launch This Week,” Aviation Week & Space Tech., 16 July 2001, at 42.

It isn’t unusual to see sailer misspelled for sailor—e.g.: “The current exercises involve about 15,000 sailors [read sailors] and Marines, and include cruisers and destroyers, with nonexplosive bombs dropped from the air, according to the Associated Press.” Mark Skertic & Lynn Sweet, “Ordeal Awaited Gutierrez After Vieques Arrest,” Chicago Sun-Times, 30 Apr. 2001, at 3.

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sailor misspelled sailer: Stage 1

Saint Nicholas. See Santa Claus.

sake. See possessives (n).

salaam. So spelled. See spelling (a).

saleable; saleable; *sellable. The standard spellings are saleable in AmE and saleable in BrE. (See mute e.) *Sellable, arguably a more logical form, was formerly used by some writers but never gained widespread currency. Cf. unsaleable.

sale. Something for sale is simply being offered for a specified price. Something on sale is being offered at a discounted price. See hard sell.

saleable. See saleable.

salesperson; salesman. To avoid sexism, many prefer the former. Salesperson seems to be one of the few words in which -person isn’t particularly grating. Even so, as a matter of word frequency, salesman today holds a slight edge in AmE and a bigger one in BrE.

salesroom; saleroom. The former is standard in AmE, the latter in BrE. That split has remained fixed since the mid-19th century.

salience; *saliency. The former is standard in AmE and BrE alike. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 6:1

saline. Although the better pronunciation was once thought to be /say-laen/, both that pronunciation and /say-leen/ are now standard.

salinization. See desalinization.

salmon is pronounced /sam-on/, not /salm-an/. But salmonella is pronounced with the -l-: /sal-mo-nel-a/.

salutory; *salutiferous; salubrious. Salutory = beneficial; wholesome. *Salutory is a common misspelling, especially in BrE—e.g.: • “Fans of the gone-but-not-forgotten Butterflies should rush to see Wendy Craig in this salutory [read salutary] tale about how not to treat your relatives.” “Pick of the Day: Sleeping Beauty,” Independent, 19 Dec. 1995, at 10.


*Salutiferous is a NECESSARY VARIANT of salutary. Salubrious, a near-synonym of salutary, means “healthful; promoting health or well-being.” E.g.:


• “And stepping into the spa is still a salubrious experience, with its soft new age music and ylang-ylang and citrus-scented air.” Elizabeth Evans, “A Better Fit for Fit Eaters,” Orange County Register, 29 Nov. 1996, at F33.

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*salutory for salutary: Stage 1 Current ratio (salutary vs. *salutory): 109:1

salvable. See savable.

Salvadoran; *Salvadorean; *Salvadorian. For a citizen of El Salvador, the first is standard in AmE and BrE alike; the other two are variant forms. See denizen labels.

salvage, n.; salvage. Salvage = (1) the rescue of property (as at sea or from fire); or (2) the discovery and extraction of something valuable or useful from rubbish. Selvage = the edging of cloth. See selvage.

salvageable. See savable.

salvo. Pl. salvos—preferably not *salvoes. See plurals (d).

Current ratio: 3:1

same. A. As a Pronoun. This usage, commonly exemplified in the phrase acknowledging same, is a primary symptom of legalese and commercialese. In 1926, when the usage was at its height, H.W. Fowler wrote trenchantly that it “is avoided by all who have any skill in writing” and that those who use it seem bent on giving the worst possible impression of themselves (FMEU1 at 511). The words it, them, and the noun itself (e.g., the envelope) are words that come naturally to us all. Same or the same is an unnatural expression:

• “Even though such a witness discloses a new lead, it is better to make note of same [read that fact], but not to depart from the original objective until its possibilities have been exhausted.” Asher L. Cornelius, The Cross-Examination of Witnesses 18–19 (1929).

• “Equity enabled them to hold any kind of property in trust for their own benefit, and to dispose of the same [read it] at pleasure.” Stephen Pfeil, “Law,” 17 Encyclopedia Americana 86, 90 (1953).

As these examples illustrate, the phrase is rendered sometimes with the definite article, sometimes without. Cf. said & such (s).

Unfortunately, the pretentious construction has spread to general writing—e.g.:

• “It appears that Hagler and Spinks—who are in the midst of multimillion dollar fights or arranging same [read them]—don’t seem too put out about the forced abdications.” Jack Fiske, “Governing Bodies Conduct Strip Search,” S.F. Chron., 28 Feb. 1987, at 45.

• “Two more yards and it would have been Young’s first NFL touchdown. Noting same [read that fact?], he spit out a wad of smokeless tobacco before leaving the dressing room.” John Crumpacker & Gwen Knapp, “Sacks Coming in Bunches for the Line with No Name,” S.F. Examiner, 3 Dec. 1996, at B5.

In fact, when used as a pronoun, same is even less precise than it (transparently singular) or they (transparently plural). Same can be either and is therefore often unclear.

Interestingly, an ambiguous same once gave rise to a major constitutional question: whether John Tyler was in fact the tenth President of the United States. When President William Henry Harrison died on April 4, 1841, Article II of the Constitution read as follows:

In case of the removal of the President from office, or of his death, resignation, or inability to discharge the powers and duties of the said office, the same shall devolve on the Vice-President. [U.S. Constitution, Art. II, § 1.]

There was some uncertainty whether same referred to the powers and duties of the said office or to the said office itself. (Note that an it or a they would have prevented the ambiguity.)

For some time, senators debated whether Tyler—after being inaugurated on April 9—had assumed the presidency or only the President’s powers (and continued as Vice President). Although Congress passed a resolution referring to Tyler as “the President of the United States” (Cong. Globe, 27th Cong., 1st Sess. 4, 5), one scholar more than a century later asserted that “constitutional historians are in unanimous agreement that the framers intended the Vice-President to act as President but not to be President” (Clinton Rossiter, The American Presidency 209 [2d ed. 1960]). But the conundrum was quite complex: in a thoughtful essay on the point, David P. Currie concludes that “it is inconceivable either that Tyler became President or that he did not; I see no satisfactory way out of the box” (“His Accidency,” 5 Green Bag [2d series] 151, 154 [2002]). Ultimately, it all hinged on the ambiguity of same.

In 1967, the 25th Amendment remedied the ambiguity by providing that if the President dies, resigns, or is removed, “the Vice President shall become President” (U.S. Constitution, Amend. 25, § 1). If the President is disabled, the Vice President assumes the office’s powers and duties as “Acting President” as long as the disability continues (ibid., §§ 3, 4).

B. *Same . . . as are. Are often appears superfluously when writers state that two or more things are identical—e.g.:
sanitary; ✳sanatory.

✳sanatorium

Although some writers have tried to distinguish in AmE. (See plurals (b).) since the late 19th century and today predominates anglicized sanatoria

Although the traditional plural is sanatoria, the anglicized sanatoriums has also been widespread since the late 19th century and today predominates in AmE. (See plurals (b).)

Although some writers have tried to distinguish sanatorium as a facility for physical healthcare from sanatarium as one for mental healthcare, the distinction has never taken hold.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 119:78:5:1

sanction = (1) to approve; or (2) to penalize. The word is generally understood as bearing sense 1. Hence lawyers, who use it primarily in sense 2, are likely to be misunderstood. See CONTRYMONS.

As a noun, sanction is burdened by the same ambiguity, meaning either (1) “approval” <governmental sanction to sell the goods>, or (2) “penalty” <the statute provides sanctions for violations of the act>. In phrases such as give sanction to, the word means “approval”—while issue sanctions against shows disapproval.

sanctionable, like sanction, carries a double sense of approval and disapproval. Most often, sanctionable means “deserving punishment”—e.g.: “It had never been suggested that a physician’s discussion of marijuana as a medical option was illegal or otherwise sanctionable, the suit states.” Mike McKee, “Doctors Fight Back on Prop 215,” Recorder (S.F.), 15 Jan. 1997, at 1.


sanguinolent. All these words share the Latin root sang- “blood” (also found in the French loanword sangfroid “cold-bloodedness”). Sanguine (= happy and confident about the future; optimistic) is the most common of the four <sanguine disposition>. The relation to blood has to do with the ancient idea of bodily humors—blood being predominant in a sanguine temperament. Sanguinary (= [1] involving bloodshed and killing <sanguinary plays like Titus Andronicus>, or [2] bloodthirsty, murderous <sanguinary killers>) invokes the idea of blood in an entirely different way. Sanguineous (= [1] blood red <sanguineous paint>, or [2] of, relating to, or involving blood <sanguineous relations>) is the most connotatively neutral—neither positive nor negative—except when functioning as a needless variant of sanguinary in sense 1. Sanguinolent (= tinged with blood) is the most bookish of them all <sanguinolent sputum>. Cf. consanguineous.


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sanguinary misused for sanguine; Stage 1
sanitary; *sanatory. Sanitary = of, relating to, or involving health or, more usu., cleanliness <sanitary surgical tools>. Sanative = health-producing; healthful <sanative treatments>. *Sanatory is a needlessly variant.

*sanatorium; *sanitarium. See sanatorium.

sank. See sink.

San Marino; *San Marinoite. For a citizen of San Marino, California, the first is standard; the second is a needlessly variant. For a citizen of the world’s fifth-smallest country—San Marino—see Sammarinese. See also denizen labels.

sans is an archaic literary gallicism to be avoided, unless a tongue-in-cheek or archaic effect is intended. Without is virtually always preferable to sans (as long as one is using the English language)—e.g.:


• "It was here, originally sans [read without] dancers and dance moves, that the singer actually became the star.” Mike Bell, “Janet Jackson Delivers Hits and Misses,” Calgary Herald, 3 Sept. 2015, at C2.

As an English word, it’s pronounced /sanz/, not /sahnz/. In fact, though, its most frequent use in English is as part of a larger French phrase <sans doute > <sans culottes>, in which it would normally take more of a French pronunciation.

sans serif; *sans-serif; *sanserif. The first is the standard spelling; the others are variant forms. It’s pronounced /san ser- if/, not /sa-reef/. See document design (A).

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 14:8:1

Santa Claus; *Santa Klaus; Father Christmas; St. Nicholas; Saint Nick. The ubiquitous name Santa Claus dates from the late 18th century as a loanword from the Dutch Sinterklaas, or its dialectal variant Sint Klaas “Saint Nicholas.” Originally an Americanism that has been traced to a New York publication of 1773, it did not come into widespread AmE use until the mid-19th century, especially after 1840. The variant spelling *Santa Klaus made infrequent appearances in print from about 1850 to 1950.

In BrE, the traditional name is Father Christmas, which dates from the mid-17th century but didn’t come into common use until about 1820. Interestingly, the Americanism Santa Claus has overtaken Father Christmas in BrE print sources since 1960, now predominating by a nearly 2-to-1 ratio.

By far the oldest term in English is St. Nicholas (St. usually abbreviated thus), referring to the 4th-century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor, who is known as the patron saint of Russia and Greece, as well as of sailors and children. After the Reformation in the 16th century, his popularity died out in Protestant Europe—except in Holland. Dutch colonists brought Sinterklaas to New York, then known as “New Amsterdam.” In English-language print sources, St. Nicholas appeared more commonly than Santa Claus until the mid-20th century. The ratio today for Santa Claus/St. Nicholas/Father Christmas in World English print sources is 6:3:1. The shortened forms St. Nick and Saint Nick typically occur in jocular contexts.

sarcoma (= a malignant tumor within the body’s connective tissues) predominantly makes the plural sarcomas (standard since the late 19th century). The etymologically correct Greek plural *sarcoma was in sharp decline by 1910 and had been thoroughly eclipsed in frequency of use by 1940.

Current ratio: 87:1

sarcophagus. A. Plural. The standard plural is sarcophagi. The anglicized form sarcophaguses, though defensible, rarely appears. See plurals (b).

Current ratio: 58:1

B. And sarcophagous. Sarcophagus is a noun meaning “stone coffin”; sarcophagous is an adjective meaning “meat-eating, carnivorous.” Interestingly, the two words share their etymology: the Greek sarcophagos (= flesh-eating) referred to a kind of limestone thought to decompose the flesh of corpses placed in it.

Today, the differentiation is complete: sarcophagus is the noun and sarcophagous (or its variant, sarcophagic) the adjective. But like other homophonic pairs, some writers keep them straight while others don’t—e.g.:

• “He can never please his parents, particularly his frosty mother, who has the glazed look of a gold Egyptian sarcophagus.” Stephen Hunter, “Early Fassbinder Film Gives Hint of Director’s Greatness,” Baltimore Sun, 3 Nov. 1994, at D7.

• “The walls were painted to resemble old stone, with bits of dried moss creeping out from between them. The sarcophagus [read sarcophagus], left, is about 4 inches tall and is on the dining room table.” Renee Garrison, “Pyramid Power,” Tampa Trib., 27 July 1996, Home & Garden §, at 1.

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sarcophagus is misused for the noun sarcophagus: Stage 1

sari; *saree. Meaning “a long piece of cloth wrapped around one’s body like a dress (esp. common in India),” the word is most commonly spelled sari throughout World English, though *saree is also sometimes found.

Current ratio: 8:1

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
SASE. See self-addressed stamped envelope.

SAT. This term originated in 1926 as an initialism for the Scholastic Aptitude Test, developed by Princeton psychology professor (and eugenicist) Carl C. Brigham from an IQ test he had created for the U.S. Army during World War I. It was first administered to high-school students that same year, and was later adopted by Harvard. In 1948, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey, first administered the test for the College Board. From the beginning, the test was known primarily in its shortened form: sat (with each letter individually sounded).

In 1993, faced with controversy that the test was culturally biased and did not accurately measure aptitude, ETS changed the name of the test to the Scholastic Assessment Test. Some wondered what a test could be other than an assessment, and four years later ETS took the position (which it has maintained since) that SAT is not an initialism (or, loosely, an acronym—see abbreviations (a), (b)) at all: the name of the test is the sat, they declared, and the letters don’t stand for anything. (The College Board now calls it the SAT Reasoning Test on its website.) But in popular usage, the original full name and the redundant interregnal name are still used routinely—e.g.:

• “Though Massachusetts has a reputation as a high-performing state, its combined scores of the Scholastic Assessment Tests have generally mirrored national averages and have pulled ahead only in the last six years.” Anand Vaishnav, “Massachusetts Students Post Modest Gains in SAT Scores,” Boston Globe, 28 Aug. 2002, at B1.

The declaration that the letters of a well-known initialism no longer stand for what most people assume they do was not entirely unprecedented. In 1963, Texas Agricultural & Mechanical University (better known as Texas A&M) did the same thing. But the PR people did not try to change the school’s strong traditions: the students remain Aggies. Likewise, in the mid-1990s, Microsoft declared that OLE no longer stood for “object linking and embedding”—that OLE simply stood for OLE.

satisfical; *saturic; satyric. The first two are adjectives that emerged in the early 16th century. They correspond to satire. Satisfical is the usual word, *saturic being a needless variant.

Saturic means “of, relating to, or involving satyrs (= half-human, half-goat figures in Greek mythology).” Hence satyric drama is a form of ancient Greek play having a chorus of satyrs.

satyric. See satirical.

Saudi; *Saudi Arabian. For a citizen of Saudi Arabia, the first is the standard term; the second is a needless variant. By contrast, Arab denotes not citizenship but race. Current ratio: 32:1

savable; salvageable; salvable. Savable (so spelled—not *savable) means “capable of being saved.” Originally this word was used in theological senses, and it still carries religious connotations. Salvable, too, has a theological sense (“admitting of salvation”), as well as the sense (used of ships) “that can be saved or salvaged.” Salvageable, dating from the 1910s in AmE, has become common in the sense “that can be salvaged”—e.g.: “The NTSB will study the engine and other salvageable parts to try to determine if there was a mechanical failure.” Tom Wells, “Skydive Survivor May Quit the Sport,” Chattanooga Times, 27 May 1997, at A6.

Current ratio (savable vs. *savable): 3:1

savanna (= a grazing plain in the subtropics) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike, savannah being a variant. But the city and the river in Georgia are spelled Savannah.

save, in the sense “except,” is an archaism best avoided. But as the following examples illustrate, it still occasionally appears—e.g.:

• “He did, however, have six runner-up finishes in that time period—one in each year, save [read except] for 1986 when he had two.” “Rose Thinking Green These Days,” Chattanooga Free Press, 28 Mar. 1997, at H2.

*saveable. See savable.

*savable and except is a fairly common but unjustifiable redundancy that arose in the 18th century and has persisted—e.g.: “LifeCo is ‘basically prepared to go forward with obtaining a final judgment of foreclosure save and except for the fact [read except]’ that it does not yet have a complete list of tenants renting space in the garage.” Alex Finkelstein, “LifeCo, Insurer Continue to Dog Juarez,” Orlando Bus. J., 8 July 1994, §, at 1, at 7. (Granted, the journalist was merely quoting the company.) Worse yet is the collapsed phrase *save except, a solecism—e.g.: “There are leagues for bowlers of all ages, save except [read except] infants and toddlers.” Rachel Gordon, “When the Hour Is Late and You’re Still on a Roll,” S.F. Examiner, 26 Mar. 1994, at A5.

saving(s). In refined prose, write a saving of $100, not a savings of $100. Technically, savings is a plural, not a singular. Yet as an adjective in the phrases savings bank, savings account, and the like, the plural form is unimpeachable. Cf. daylight saving(s) time.

Current ratio (a saving of vs. *a savings of): 1:1:1

savior; saviour. The first is AmE, the second BrE. The AmE spelling did not become predominant until the early 1930s. See -OR, -OUR.
**savor; savour.** The first is AmE (predominant since about 1840), the second BrE (always predominant). The corresponding adjective is savory (AmE) or savoury (BrE). See -or; -our.

**saw > sawed > sawed.** The past participle sawn is mostly archaic except as an adjective <sawn lumber> and as a past form in BrE <it was sawn through>. *Sawed-off* is the overwhelming favorite in AmE, *sawn-off* the overwhelming favorite in BrE. But in the past few decades, *sawn-off* (whether in reference to shotguns, antlers, or branches) has made small inroads against *sawed-off* in American writing. Canadians stick closer to BrE on this score—e.g.: “A sawn-off sweatshirt worn by the beach blonde [Pamela Anderson] is on the auction block for an estimated $1,500 to $2,000.” Rita Zekas, “And This Is Just In . . .,” *Toronto Star*, 7 May 1997, at SW4. In American print sources, sawed-off shotgun outnumbers sawn-off shotgun by an 17-to-1 ratio. See irregular verbs (b).

As a verb, *saw* has long been thought to be the preferable past participle, though it still vies closely with *sawn*—e.g.: “The complex could use many of the logs previously chipped for pulp or sawn [read sawed] into log-grade lumber, company officials said.” “The Bottom Line,” *Oregonian* (Portland), 23 May 1997, at B1.

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sawn for sawed as a past participle: Stage 3

Current ratio (be sawed into vs. be sawn into): 1:1.1

**say; state,** vb. Whenever possible, use *say* rather than *state*. The latter typically sounds stilted. But there is a substantive as well as a tonal difference: *say* means “to tell; to relate,” while *state* means “to set out (formally); to make a specific declaration.” See *tell*.

Theodore Bernstein, the assistant managing editor of *The New York Times*, ridiculed his colleagues’ overreliance on synonyms of *said*: “In the days of our forefathers Tom Swift almost never said anything; he usually averred, asseverated, smiled, chuckled, grinned (plainly or mischievously), groaned, expostulated, ejaculated, declared, or asserted . . . . The simple verb *said* never seems to be good for more than one inning; then writers or editors feel they must rush in all kinds of bush-league relief pitchers.” *The Careful Writer* 283–84 (1965).

**sc.**, the abbreviation for *scilicet (= that is to say; namely), is a pedantic abbreviation. Because the equivalent terms *namely* and *i.e.* are more widely known, they generally serve better. Even *viz.* is better known than *sc.* See *viz.*

**scalawag; scallywag; *scallawag.** For this Americanism meaning “a scruffy, disreputable person” dating from the mid-19th century, the first is the standard spelling. Though the word predates the American Civil War, it was popularized during Reconstruction to denote a white Southerner who cooperated with freedmen and carpetbaggers to control state and local governments. It still retains this limited sense in historical writing. In BrE, the variant spelling *scallywag* has predominated since about 1900. *Scallawag* is still another variant.

**scallop; *sclop*.** The standard form has been *scallop* since about 1800. *Sclop* is a variant.

**scaly.** So spelled—not *scaley.*

**scampi** (= large prawns), though itself plural, is considered a mass noun when it refers to a dish that includes large prawns <I ordered the scampi or I ordered scampi>. Though common, the redundancy *shrimp scampi* is best avoided.

Current ratio (the scampi vs. *the shrimp scampi*): 3:1

**scan** is ambiguous: it may mean either (1) “to examine carefully, scrutinize,” or (2) “to skim through, look at hurriedly.” In AmE, as it happens, sense 2 now vastly predominates. That usage may be bolstered by the ubiquitous electronic scanner, which contributes to the idea of haste. See *contronyms*.

**scapula** (= a shoulder blade) makes the plural *scapulae* (/skap-yə-lee/)—the homegrown *scapulas* being a secondary variant.

Current ratio: 15:1

**scarce.** See rare.

**scarcely any** is sometimes displaced by the dialectal double negative *scarcely no* (even, as the example shows, in BrE)—e.g.: “It is a pity that it got scarcely no [read scarcely any] publicity because Liffe’s performance was little short of stunning.” Anthony Hilton, “Facts of Liffe Set the Scene for the Future,” *Evening Standard*, 8 Jan. 1997, at 33. *Scarly* has enough negative force that negatives should be avoided with it.

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*scarcely no for scarcely any: Stage 1*  
Current ratio (scarcely any vs. *scarcely no*): 364:1

**scarf, n. & vb.** Although the plural noun *scarfs* is listed in most dictionaries as standard, *scarves* is more than eight times as common in modern print sources. Having been vastly predominant since the 1940s, *scarves* should be accepted as the preferred form. See *plurals* (c).

As a form of the verb *scarf* (= [1] to wrap with a scarf, or [2] to eat ravenously), *scarfs* is correct <the designer scarfs the models with Indian silks> <John usually scarfs down lunch>.

**scarify; scoriﬁ.** *Scarify* (from *scar*) means (1) “to make superficial marks or incisions in; cut off skin from”; (2) “to break up the surface of (the ground) with a spiked machine [a scarifier] for loosening soil
or building roads'; or (3) "to pain by severe criticism."

Sense 1 is most common—e.g.:  
- "Rub the seed across some sandpaper to weaken the hard seed coat or scarify it with a knife for better germination." Robert Stiffler, "Scots' Soil-Test Kit Promises Quicker Results," Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 20 Apr. 1997, at G2.
- "Buy scarified Bahia grass seed to increase germination." "What to Do This Month," Tampa Tribune, 12 Apr. 2003, Baylife §, at 10.

Sense 1 applies also to body adornment by cutting and scraping—e.g.: "Worse, once piercing becomes commonplace among people like, well, Leslie, the trendsetters up the ante with other forms of body alteration: cutting (scarification as adornment), branding (searing flesh with high heat in artistic patterns) and—please don't eat during this next sentence—tongue splitting, in which the tongue is cleaved nearly in half so as to cause it to fork like a lizard's." Buzz McClain, "Is There a Ring In Your Future?" Wash. Post, 11 Nov. 2003, at F1. So goes the march of civilization.

Sense 3 is also fairly common—e.g.: "With a combination of dazzling philosophical acumen and scarifying wit, Stove does for irrationalism in Karl Popper's philosophy . . . what the Romans did for Carthage in the Third Punic War." Roger Kimball, "Who Was David Stove?" New Criterion, Mar. 1997, at 21.

A separate scarify, based on the root word scare, dates from the late 18th century but remains mostly dialectal. It often carries a lighthearted connotation—e.g.:  
- "Saturday the attraction is the high-jump, a scarifying attempt to better the world horse-jumping record of 7 feet 1 1/2 inches over a wall for a bonus prize of $5,000." Angus Phillips, "For Horse Show Set, It's Cash and Carry," Wash. Post, 27 Oct. 1988, at D1.

It would be helpful if the two words were pronounced differently, but dictionaries record no such distinction. Both are pronounced with the first syllable sounding like scare: /skair-i-fa/.

Scorify = to reduce to dross or slag. The term surfaces most commonly in cognate forms, such as scorifier—e.g.: "Hanging adjacent to the furnace are the specialized tongs for handling crucibles, cupels and the dishlike ceramic containers called scorifiers." "Silver City's Fargo Stage Comes to Silver City, Idaho," Bulletin (Bend, Or.), 2 Apr. 1997, at T14.

scavenge, vb.; scavenger, vb. The verb scavenge is a back-formation from the noun scavenger. Scavenge having taken hold as the predominant verb in the late 19th century—first in BrE and then in AmE—the verb scavenger should be considered a needless variant.

Current ratio (scavenged vs. *scavengered): 364:1

sceptic. See skeptic.

sceptre; *scepter. The spelling sceptre has been standard in AmE and BrE alike since the 18th century—though many American dictionaries spell the word *scepter. See -er (b).

Current ratio: 2:1

schema (= a plan, diagram, outline, or preliminary draft) is pronounced /skē-məl/. In frequency of use, the anglicized plural schemas overtook the Greek plural schemata during the 1990s in both AmE and BrE.

Current ratio: 3:1

scherzo; scherzando. Although the musical term scherzo (= a playful, sprightly composition) has predominantly formed the plural scherzos since the late 19th century, the story is different for scherzando (= a musical direction to perform playfully). Only the Italianate plural scherzandi exists for this term.

schism (= division, separation) is now almost always used figuratively—e.g.:  
- "Confronting the schism between Blacks and Koreans, two women are discovering a recipe for friendship and healing in a two-bedroom West Hollywood apartment where the aromas of kimchee and corn bread mingle in the air." Helie Lee & Stephanie Covington, "Kimchee and Corn Bread," Essence, Apr. 1997, at 94.
- "There is also a generational schism, with retired people and those aged over 55 still very much in favour of remaining part of the UK." Ben Borland, "Sturgeon Knows She Wouldn't Win New Referendum," Express (U.K.), 4 Sept. 2015, at 12.

Pronunciation experts have long agreed that the word is pronounced /siz-əm/, not /skiz-əm/ or /shiz-əm/. Yet the traditional pronunciation grows rarer year by year. See PRONUNCIATION (b).

schismatic; *schismatic. The shorter term has been predominant throughout the English-speaking world since about 1850.

Current ratio: 5:1

schizophrenic; schizoid. Each of these words can function as both adjective (= characterized by schizophrenia) and noun (= a person with schizophrenia). But both words are most often adjectives, and schizophrenic is the more common term. If any difference exists, it's that a schizoid (or schizoid personality) is someone who is seclusive, shut in, and unsociable, whereas a schizophrenic (or schizophrenic
personality) has a serious psychological disorder involving greater dissociation between the intellect and the emotions.

The words are pronounced /skit-sa-fren-ik/ and /skit-soyd/.

scholium (= a marginal note or comment, esp. of an erudite kind) has always predominantly made the naturalized classical plural scholia. The variant scholium has rarely been used.

Current ratio: 211:1

*schtick; *schtik. See shtick.

scilicet. See sc if.

scintilla (= a minute particle; a trace) forms the plural scintillas or (less good) scintillae. (See PLURALS (B).) The word is pronounced /sin-ti-ə/, not /skin-/. Current ratio: 2:1

*scirocco. See sirocco.

scissors. As a term for the cutting instrument, scissors has been treated as a plural since the 14th century, and that is the preferred modern construction <where are the scissors?>. But the phrase a pair of scissors, which first appeared in the 15th century, is singular because the noun pair controls the verb, not the prepositional phrase of scissors a pair of scissors is in the drawer.

Since the mid-19th century, scissors has occasionally been construed with a singular verb. Although this usage has never been the usual form in AmE or BrE, it does occur—e.g.: "An efficient tool for this purpose, a nose (safety) scissors is small, has rounded blunt-tipped ends, and costs about $24." Lois Fenton, "Philibin's Monochromatic Look Catches On," Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 16 Apr. 2000, at G4.

As a term used in sports (e.g., wrestling, gymnastics), scissors always takes a singular verb <the scissors is a classic wrestling move> <in the pommel-horse competition, the scissors is a demanding display requiring great gymnastic skill>. Since about 1825, scrimmage has greatly preponderated over *scrummage in frequency of use.

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scull. See skull.

sculpt; sculpture, v.t.; *sculp. Although the preferred verb was long thought to be sculpture <to sculpt a bust>, sculpt (a back-formation from sculptor) is now the predominant form and should be accepted as standard. *Sculp is a needless variant.

The predominance of to sculpt over to sculpture is a more recent phenomenon than you might suspect: the linguistic coup occurred in AmE in the late 1980s and in BrE in the early 1990s.

For the agent noun, sculptor is preferred over *sculpturer.

Language-Change Index
sculpt as a verb: Stage 5
Current ratio (in order of headwords): 86:60:1

scurvy, adj. & n.; scurfy, adj. Scurvy (= contemptible) is a metaphorical term expressing scorn. Typical of Elizabethan English, and now an archaism, it appears mostly in jocular contexts—e.g.: “If Dwayne Rudd does anything wrong, anything, which leads to the Brownies losing again, he will be fed to the Bengals. No, not those scurvy Cincinnati Bengals—the ones at the Cleveland zoo.” Jerry Greene, “Rudd’s Fine Excuse for Inexcusable Act,” Orlando Sentinel, 15 Sept. 2002, at D11.

As a noun, scurvy denotes the disease, common among sailors up to the 19th century, brought on by a deficiency in vitamin C. The chief symptoms are spongy, bloody gums and loose teeth, as well as bloody mucous membranes. For another delightful entry (suggested by that description), see mucus.

Scurfy means “(of an organism) full of dandruff or similar white flakes occurring as a result of disease or parasites.” E.g.: “Right about now is the time to treat euonymus scale (the scurfy white stuff) on euonymus and pachysandra and other scale insects on mugo pines, lilacs, peach, plum and cherry trees.” Carol Bradford, “Sequence of Garden Events Remains the Same Year In, Year Out,” Post-Standard (Syracuse), 7 Apr. 2002, Garden §, at 26.

scutum (= a bony or horned plate or scale found on some reptiles and insects) makes the plural scuta. But the anglicized shortened form scute, made by apocope, has the straightforward plural scutes. Since about 1875, scutes has occurred with greater frequency than scuta in English-language print sources worldwide.

Current ratio (scutes vs. scuta): 7:1

Scylla and Charybdis, between. As described by Homer, Scylla /sɪl-ə/ was a sea monster who had six heads (each with a triple row of teeth) and twelve feet. Though primarily a fish-eater, she was capable of snatching and devouring (in one swoop) six sailors if their ship ventured too near her cave in the Strait of Messina. (In the accounts of later writers, she is rationalized into a rocky promontory.) Toward the opposite shore, not far from Scylla’s lair, was Charybdis /ko-rib-dis/, a whirlpool strong enough thrice daily to suck into its vortex whole ships if they came too close.

Hence to say between Scylla and Charybdis is a close literary equivalent of between a rock and a hard place or between the devil and the deep blue sea. The main difference between the phrases is that there is no comfort between a rock and a hard place; there is a safe, though precarious, way to proceed between Scylla and Charybdis. All three phrases are clichés. See literary allusion.

sear. See sere.

seasonable; seasonal. Seasonable = (1) appropriate to the season; opportune <for us, an August trip to Aspen is quite seasonable: we don’t ski>; (2) timely <your letter was not seasonable>; or (3) (of weather) suitable to the time of year <seasonable April showers>. Seasonal = (1) of, relating to, or characterizing the seasons of the year, or any one of them <El Niño has caused seasonal changes in weather>; or (2) dependent on the seasons, as certain trades <seasonal shipping patterns>.

Interestingly, seasonable was the much more common word till about 1900, when a reversal in word frequency occurred with this pair.

Seattleite; *Seattlite. The first is the standard spelling; the second is a variant form. See denizen labels.

Current ratio: 12:1

seaward(s). See directional words (a).

seaworthy. One word—not hyphenated. See -worthy.

secede. See cede.

second-guess, v.t. So hyphenated.

second language. See foreign language.

secretariat (= the position or quarters of a secretary) is the standard spelling. *Secretariate is a variant.

*secretariship. See secretaryship.

secretary is pronounced /sek-a-rə-tər-ē/—not /sek-a-tər-ē/. See pronunciation (b).

secretaryship; *secretariship. The first spelling has always been standard. The second is a variant form.

Current ratio: 5,549:1

secrete = (1) to hide; or (2) to exude or ooze through pores or glands; to produce by secretion. Although secrate away is technically redundant, it avoids the possible miscue from the conflicting senses <then, in a frenzy, he secreted away all the contraband drugs>. Sense 1 is increasingly confined to literary and legal contexts.

secretive; secretory. The first is the adjective (“inclined to secrecy, uncommunicative”) corresponding to sense 1 of secrete (just above). The second is the adjective (“having the function of secreting”) corresponding to sense 2 of secrete. Secretive is best
pronounced /see-kra-tiv/ for sense 1 and /si-kree-tiv/ for sense 2. Secretory is pronounced /si-kree-to-reel/.

seduceable. So spelled—not *seduceable. See -ABLE (A).
Current ratio: 12:1

see, n. See bishopr. see > saw > seen. So inflected. Using the past tense for the past participle, and vice versa, is typical of dialect. Usually these errors occur only in reported speech—e.g.:
• “If I was [read had been] here on time, I would have saw [read seen] what happened and the guy or gal who did this would be caught.” Giovanna Fabiano, “Vehicle Hits, Kills Woman in Raritan,” Courier-News (Bridgewater, N.J.), 7 Sept. 2002, at A2 (quoting Louie Deltarota).

Language-Change Index
seen as a simple past for saw: Stage 1 Current ratio (I saw vs. *I seen): 37:1

seem. On the sequence of tenses in phrases such as seemed to enjoy (as opposed to seemed to have enjoyed), see TENSES (A).

segment, v.t.; *segmentalize; *segmentize. The first has been standard since the mid-19th century. The second and third forms are NEEDLESS VARIANTS. See -IZE.
Current ratio (segmenting vs. *segmentalizing vs. *segmentizing): 3,457:1.3:1

segue is a noun (meaning “a seamless transition”) and an intransitive verb (meaning “to transition smoothly”). (It’s also a transitive verb, but only in music.) The misspelling *segway (except in the trademarked company name) is particularly embarrassing—e.g.:
• “[Barack Obama] applauded the work of junior Joe Pearson, of Barrington, who works under lead biodiesel research Professor Ihab Farag. It was a good segway [read segue] to Obama’s own proposal that would reduce the amount of carbon in the fuel Americans pump into their tanks,” Obama, in Nashua, Pledges to Get U.S. Out of War,” Union Leader (Manchester, N.H.), 21 Apr. 2007, at A2.
• “For almost 30 years, Larry Monroe has been spinning records and CD on KUT-FM radio. . . . Monroe’s signature is the ‘segway’ [read segue]. He takes pride in piecing together creative set lists in which the songs are united by theme, a condition of heart or climate, or an artist’s affinity for a single word in a refrain.” Brad Buchholz, “Sharing the Language of Dylan,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 13 Sept. 2007, at E1.

Language-Change Index
*segue for segue: Stage 1 Current ratio (segue vs. *segway): 68:1

seigneur; *seignior. Seigneur /say-nyuhr/, a 16th-century borrowing from Middle French, refers to a man of rank or authority, especially a feudal lord—or else (today) to a Canadian member of the landed gentry. *Seignior is a variant spelling.

seize. These homophones are related, but they have undergone DIFFERENTIATION. Seize is principally a non-technical lay word meaning: (1) “to take hold of (a thing or person) forcibly or suddenly or eagerly”; (2) “to take possession of (a thing) by legal right” <to seize contraband>; or (3) “to have a sudden overwhelming effect on” <to be seized by fear> (OAD). Seize should be confined to these senses. In the legal sense “to put in possession, invest with the fee simple of,” the spelling seize is standard in both AmE and BrE; it corresponds better with the noun seisin.

seldom. Because this word is an adverb as well as an adjective, the NONWORD *seldomly is never (not merely seldom) needed—e.g.:
• “Hogan was a man so focused that he seldomly [read seldom] noticed what was going on around him.” Jeff Babineau, “Hogan’s Legacy,” Orlando Sentinel, 3 Aug. 1997, at C4.

It isn’t even listed in most dictionaries. For other adverbs ending in a superfluous -ly, see ADVERBS (C).

Language-Change Index
*seldomly for seldom: Stage 1 Current ratio (seldom vs. *seldomly): 1,002:1

*seldom ever. In this phrase—which seems to be a collapsed form of seldom if ever—the word ever is superfluous. True, the usage dates back to the 17th century, but it can hardly be recommended despite that history. E.g. “And as everyone knows, Fleck, who seldom ever [read seldom] missed a meeting, will attend those sessions as long as he is able.” Madeleine Mathias, “‘Lafayette Treasure’ Gets New Title at 98,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 27 May 1997, at B1. Since the late 18th century, seldom if ever has steadily occurred more frequently in print. Cf. *rarely ever.

Language-Change Index
*seldom ever for seldom: Stage 2 Current ratio (seldom vs. *seldom ever): 617:1

self. Pl. selves. See PLURALS (C).

self-addressed stamped envelope. Though sometimes condemned, this phrase is now firmly entrenched in AmE (especially in the abbreviated form sase). Self-addressed isn’t merely “addressed by oneself,” but commonly means “addressed for return to the sender.” The prefix self- prevents vagueness: an envelope that’s merely addressed could be addressed to anybody.
How should one pronounce *sase? And which indefinite article should it take, a or an? Dictionaries say that each letter should be enunciated /ess-/ay-ess-ee/. But in informal speech, many people prefer to sound it out /say-zee/. It would seem logical in formal writing to treat *sase as if each letter were sounded out <an sase>. Yet *an has a slight lead over *a as its introductory article in all varieties of World English.

Current ratio (an SASE vs. a SASE): 1.2:1

**self-admitted**, like **self-confessed**, is a redundancy—e.g.:


Cf. **self-confessed**.

**self-complacent** is redundant, complacent being sufficient—e.g.:


Cf. **self-confessed**.

**self-confessed** is a redundancy that has come to be widespread. Yet it is not above editorial reproach—e.g.: “A court that frees a self-confessed [read confessed] murderer on a technicality would seem to bear militates in its favor. See diacritical marks.

**sensation**; **sensationalistic**. Sensational answers to sensation (excitement) and may mean either “awesome” <a sensational performance by the orchestra> or “commanding attention” (in the sense, actually, of “awful”) <the sensational O.J. Simpson trial>. Sensationalistic (= overblown; distorted to shock the emotions), answering to sensationalism, always carries strongly negative connotations—e.g.: “Print media are being just as sensationalistic as TV. The Oct. 21 cover of Newsweek featured the figure of a skeleton carrying...

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

sensational misused for sensationalistic: Stage 1

*sensatory. See sensory.

**sense. Generally, when sense means "logic" or "sensible," it's followed by in <what's the sense in delaying any further?>. An exception: when sense denotes "meaning," it's followed by of <what is the sense of that word?>.

sensitize; *sensitivize. Although in 1926 H.W. Fowler championed the latter, the former is now standard in AmE and BrE alike. *Sensitivize, a rare word, is now rightly seen as eccentric. See -ize.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

sensitize: Stage 5
Current ratio: 1,802:1

sensor. See censor.

**sensorium (= the body's sensory apparatus) predominantly makes the plural sensoria—not *sensoriums.

Current ratio: 4:1

sensory; *sensorial; *sensatory. Sensory = of, relating to, or involving sensation or the senses. *Sensatory and *sensorial are needless variants.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 10,226:202:1

**sensuous; sensual. Although these words derive from the same root (sens-, meaning "appeal to the senses"), they have undergone differentiation. Sensuous = of, relating to, or involving the five senses; arousing any of the five senses. The word properly has no-risk connotations, though it is gravely distorted by hack novelists. Here it is correctly used: "Words thus strung together fall on the ear like music. The appeal is sensuous rather than intellectual." W. Somerset Maugham, "Lucidity, Simplicity, Euphony," in The Summing Up (1938).

*Sensual = relating to gratification of the senses, esp. sexual; salacious; voluptuous <sensual desires. This is the word intended by the hack novelists who erroneously believe that sensual carries sexy overtones. Sensual is correctly used here: "Lartigue shows a land where a benevolent sun shines on women and water, cars, painted fingernails, tennis champs, swimmers—a sensual topography of blonde and brunette." Rosemary Ranck, "Where Sorrow Never Came," N.Y. Times, 14 Dec. 1997, § 7, at 23. And it's badly misused here: "There is something special about naked babies, a purely sensual [read aesthetic?] sight devoid of sexuality." Gail Stewart Hand, "Oh, Baby, You Look Great in the Buff," San Diego Union-Trib., 6 Jan. 1997, at E3.

**SENTENCE ADVERBS** qualify an entire statement rather than a single word in the sentence. A sentence adverb does not resolve itself into the form in a — manner, as most adverbs do. So in Happily, the bill did not go beyond the committee, the introductory adverb happily conveys the writer's opinion on the message being imparted. The following words are among the most frequent sentence adverbs ending in -ly:

- accordingly
- fortunately
- oddly
- admissible
- importantly
- paradoxically
- apparently
- interestingly
- regrettably
- arguably
- ironically
- sadly
- certainly
- legally
- strangely
- concededly
- logically
- theoretically
- consequently
- mercifully
- curiously
- naturally

Improvising sentence adverbs from traditional adverbs like hopefully (= in a hopeful manner) and thankfully (= in a thankful manner) is objectionable to many stylists but seems to be on the rise. Avoid newfangled sentence adverbs of this kind. And in formal prose, even those like hopefully and thankfully shouldn't appear. Though increasingly common, they have a tarnished history. See hopefully & thankfully.

Because sentence adverbs reveal the writer's own thoughts and biases, writers often overuse them in argumentation—but danger lurks in words such as clearly, obviously, undoubtedly, and indisputably. See clearly & overstatement.

**SENTENCE ENDS.** Rhetoricians have long emphasized that the punch word in a sentence should come at the end:

- "The most emphatic place in a clause or sentence is the end. This is the climax; and, during the momentary pause that follows, that last word continues, as it were, to reverberate in the reader's mind. It has, in fact, the last word. One should therefore think twice about what one puts at a sentence-end." F.L. Lucas, Style 39–40 (1955).

- "A word or phrase gains importance by being placed at the beginning or the end of a sentence. The end is the more important position of the two, for the sentence that trails off in a string of modifiers runs downhill in interest. By saving an important part of the predicate till the end, you emphasize the main idea." Alan H. Vrooman, Good Writing: An Informal Manual of Style 131 (1967).
• “Because the end of a sentence is the last thing a reader sees, it is a position of emphasis. Don’t use it to express minor thoughts or casual information. Don’t write ’Both candidates will appear here in July, if we can believe the reports.’ (This is correct only if you want to stress the doubtfulness of the reports.) Don’t write ’Pray for the repose of the soul of John Bowler, who died last week in Cleveland.’ (Your reader will start wondering what he was doing in Cleveland.)” Daniel McDonald, The Language of Argument 219 (5th ed. 1986).

Yet the point eludes writers who end sentences with a flat phrase such as in many cases, with a date that isn’t critical, or with the very noun phrase that appeared at the beginning.

One way to test how effective your sentences are is to read them aloud, exaggerating the last word in each sentence. If the reading sounds awkward or foolish, or if it seems to trail off and end on a trivial note, the sentence should probably be recast.

**Sentence Fragments.** See **incomplete sentences.**

**Sentence Length.** What is the correlation between sentence length and readability? No one knows precisely. Rhetoricians and readability specialists have long suggested aiming for sentences of varying lengths, but with an average of about 20 to 25 words. And empirical evidence seems to bear out this rough guideline. In 1985, three authors calculated figures for several publications, using extensive samples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Average Sentence Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh Press</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader’s Digest</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Mechanics</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science Digest</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field &amp; Stream</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsweek</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific American</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall Street Journal</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


They arrived at a provocative conclusion: “Varying your sentence length is much more important than varying your sentence pattern if you want to produce clear, interesting, readable prose.” *Ibid.*

If you’re aiming for an average sentence length of 20 to 25 words, some sentences probably ought to be 30 or 40 words, and others ought to be 3 or 4. Variety is important, but you must concern yourself with the overall average.

Standards have changed, of course, with time. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the long sentence was much more common than it is today. For many modern readers, long sentences are less and less readable. They are plodding. They waste time. Long sentences slow the reading and create a solemn, portentous impression; short sentences speed the reading and the thought. For the modern writer, it’s “a counsel of perfection never to write a sentence without asking, ‘Might it not be better shorter?’” F.L. Lucas, Style 103 (1962). (For more on this phrasing, see *counsel of perfection.*)

For a good technique to shorten sentences, see **remote relatives.**

**separate.** So spelled—not *seperate. See spelling (A).**

Current ratio: 1,468:1

*separate between.** This phrase often appears ill-advisedly in place of *distinguish between or separate from*—e.g.:


• “You marvel at the distance that separates between that ancient time and [read separates that ancient time from] this one.” Joshua Siskin, “You Didn’t Plant It, Don’t Know About It, but There It Is,” *Daily News* (L.A.), 11 Nov. 1995, at L16.

• “Just as Shen Wei does not separate cultural influences in his art, he increasingly does not separate between the media [read distinguishing between the media] he uses to express himself.” Jordan Levin, “Chinese Choreographer Shen Wei to Debut Painting & Dance Show During Art Basel Miami Beach,” *Miami Herald*, 26 Nov. 2014, Entertainment §. (On the change from media to medium, see *media.*)

**Language-Change Index**

*separate between for separate from or distinguish between: Stage 1*

Current ratio (distinguish between vs. separate between): 256:1

*separate out. See phrasal verbs.*

*separate. See separate.*

**septet** (= a group of seven) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Septette* is a variant.

Current ratio: 28:1

*sepulchre; *sepulcher; *sepulture. Oddly enough, *sepulchre* is the standard spelling in AmE as well as BrE—not *sepulcher. The word means “burial place, tomb,” and is pronounced /sep-al-kar/. *Sepulture, sometimes a needless variant of *sepulcher, justifies its separate form in the sense “burial.” These words are formal, even literary.

**sequential; sequacious.** *Sequential = forming a sequence or consequence <a sequential narrative>. Sequacious = slavishly servile <she is surrounded by sequacious protégés>.

**sequential order** is a redundancy that has spread since about 1950—e.g.: “These [Ernest Hemingway—Maxwell Perkins] letters contain long—emphasize long—discussions of money, of advances on work, royalties, serializations, advertising and the sequential order [read sequence or order] in which stories should be published in collections.” John Balzar, “Fragments of Friendship,” *L.A. Times*, 19 Jan. 1997, Book Rev. §, at 9.
sequester, v.t.; *sequestrate. Generally, *sequestrate means nothing that sequester, the more common term, does not also mean. Both terms are old: sequester dates from the 14th century, *sequestrate from the early 16th century. Sequester = (1) to set aside; separate <the judge sequestered the jury>; or (2) to temporarily remove (something) from the owner’s possession; esp., to seize (a debtor’s property) until creditors’ claims are paid <the judge sequestered the bankrupt estate’s remaining assets>.

Apart from arcane legal uses, *sequestrate is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 14:1

seraph /ser-әf/. This term, referring to a six-winged angel, has two plurals: a Hebrew one (seraphim) and a native English one (seraphs). Seraphim is about three times as common in print as seraphs, and it sometimes even appears alongside the anglicized plural for cherub—e.g.: “Her ’Angels’ is a similar exposition, where the angelic hierarchy (angels, seraphim, and cherubs) is displayed in the bright upper part of the painting.” Sylvia Krissoff, “Show Covers Opposite Ends of Spectrum,” Grand Rapids Press, 14 Dec. 1997, at B5. Cf. cherub. See plurals (b).

The double plural *seraphims is erroneous—e.g.: “Dolly Epstein, who says she has collected more than 100 angels since 1991, began collecting seraphims [read seraphim or seraphs] two years ago.” Carmen Duarte, “Customers at Angelic Gift Shop Get Spiritual Lift with Purchases,” Ariz. Daily Star, 9 Sept. 1998, at E6.

Language-Change Index
*seraphims for seraphim or seraphs: Stage 2
Current ratio (seraphim vs. seraphs vs. *seraphims): 17:6:1

sere; sear. Although both spellings have been used for the adjective meaning “dried and withered,” sere is standard. In that sense, sear is a variant to be avoided. But sear has legitimate senses, first as a verb: (1) “to burn quickly with powerful heat”; (2) “to have an extremely strong sudden and unpleasant impact on, as by scorching”; or (3) “to briefly cook the surface of (food) at high temperature.” Sear is also two nouns: first, referring to a scar or mark by the quick burns of a gun’s lock; second, the catch that holds the hammer of a gun’s lock.

serendipity (= luck in making happy accidental discoveries) forms the adjective serendipitous, a useful term of recent vintage (ca. 1943).

sergeant; serjeant. In medieval times, this word (ultimately deriving fr. L. servient “serving”) came to mean someone performing a specific function in the household or jurisdiction of a king, lord, or deliberative assembly and reporting directly to the top authority under which that person served. Of the more than 50 variant spellings of the term over the centuries, the preferred spelling in AmE today is sergeant. In BrE, there is some differentiation between spellings: sergeant is largely military <sergeant-major> and serjeant largely legal <serjeant-at-arms>. *Sargeant is a common misspelling stemming from the pronunciation of sergeant /sar-әnt/ and perhaps also from the casualism sarge.

Serial Comma. See punctuation (d).

series. Though serving as a plural when the need arises, series is ordinarily a singular <the series is quite popular>. But it is also a noun of multitude, so that phrases such as a series of things take a plural verb—e.g.:

• “There have been a series of such incidents as refugees from both sides have begun reconstructing houses.” “Muslim homes explode in Serb area,” Ariz. Republic & Phoenix Gaz., 11 Nov. 1996, at A17.


• “In the 1960s and 1970s a series of articles were published, sketching out the main characteristics of European class structure and its changes during the postwar decades.” Max Haller, Class Structure in Europe xi (2003).

• “A series of studies have since identified a number of factors, including heat transferred into deep oceans and small volcanic eruptions, that affected the temperature at the surface of the Earth.” Karl Mathiesen, “Global Warming Has Not Slowed, Data Shows,” Irish Times, 6 June 2015, at 10.

See synesis. Even so, the collocation there has been a series has predominated over there have been a series in print sources since the phrasing became common about 1800. The same is true for there is a series, which has consistently predominated over there are a series. Cf. species.

Series keeps the same form in the plural. The form *serieses is an archaic plural that still occasionally appears—e.g.:


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*serieses for series or serieses: Stage 1
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serum (= [1] a liquid injected into a person’s blood to fight infection or poison, [2] the thin part of blood, or [3] the liquid from a plant) forms the plural sera or serums. The former has always preponderated in English-language print sources.
service, n. & vb. Originally a noun in the 13th century, service came into use as a transitive verb as early as the 16th century—but infrequently until the mid-20th century. As a verb, service may mean "to provide service for" <the mechaniced serviced the copying machine>, "to pay interest on" <to service a debt>, or generally "to perform services for." Ordinarily, the verb to serve ought to be used in broad senses. Service, v.t., should be used only if the writer believes that serve would not be suitable in idiom or sense, especially since service can also denote the male animal's function in breeding.

servicemark (= a name, phrase, or other device intended to identify the services of a certain business) is now preferably one word, not two and not hyphenated. See trademark.

serviette (= a napkin), which first sprang into widespread use in the 1770s in BrE, has always occurred more frequently in that variety. It was at its height of popularity in BrE from about 1910 to 1950. Nancy Mitford made much of its non-U status. See class distinctions.

Sesquipedality is the use of big words, literally those that are "a foot and a half" long. Although the English language has an unmatched wealth of words available for its users, most of its resources go untapped. The OED contains more than 600,000 words, yet even educated people have only about 10% of that number in their working vocabulary. See David Crystal, The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language 123 (1995); Tom McArthur, The Oxford Companion to the English Language 1091–92 (1992).

This discrepancy gives rise to a tension between two ideals. On the one hand, vocabulary-builders have long maintained that a rich personal word-stock is your key to success:

• "A rich vocabulary is the most common and invaluable possession of the leaders in every profession, in every commercial enterprise, and in every department of active living. . . . Vocabulary is so intimately tied up with success that from now on we might as well talk of the two as though they were one and the same thing," Wilfred Funk, The Way to Vocabulary Power and Culture 1 (1946).

• "You are likelier to succeed (both in school and after) if you have the words you need at your command. You can, by using this book diligently, attain not only a larger vocabulary but, even more, an improved vocabulary," Arthur Waldhorn & Arthur Zeiger, Word Mastery Made Simple 8 (1957).

• "It has been stated on the basis of a study of student academic mortality at one large university that the lack of an adequate vocabulary is the most important single factor contributing to failure in college." Donald M. Ayers, English Words from Latin and Greek Elements xiv (rev. Thomas D. Worthen, 2d ed. 1986) (citing G. Rexford Davis, Vocabulary Building 1 [1951]).

On the other hand, writing guides are full of advice to shun big words:

• "There is a tendency, almost an instinct in the American, to use and prefer high-sounding words. The American, as such, likes to be unsimple and grandiloquent when it comes to his manner of expression." Richard Burton, Why Do You Talk Like That? 124 (1929).

• "It is a habit, amounting almost to mania, among inexperienced and ignorant writers to shun simple words. They rack their brains and wear out their dictionaries searching for high-sounding words and phrases to express ideas that can be conveyed in simple terms." Edward Frank Allen, How to Write and Speak Effective English 57 (1938).

• "Those who run to long words are mainly the unskillful and tasteless; they confuse pomposity with dignity, flaccidity with ease, and bulk with force." H.W. Fowler, FMEU2 at 342.

• "The more you surrender to the temptation to use big words . . . the further you are apt to stray from your true feelings and the more you will tend to write in a style designed to impress rather than to serve the reader." John R. Trimble, Writing with Style 80 (1975).

Which of these two views is correct? It’s entirely possible to resolve the seeming paradox and to hold that they’re both essentially right. Build your vocabulary to make yourself a better reader; choose simple words whenever possible to make yourself a better writer.

The last part of that antithesis is hard for some wordsmiths to accept. And it needs tempering, because hard words have a legitimate literary tradition. English has inherited two strains of literary expression, both deriving ultimately from ancient Greek rhetoric. On the one hand is the plain style now in vogue, characterized by unadorned vocabulary, directness, unelaborate syntax, and earthiness. (This style is known to scholars as Atticism.) On the other hand we have the grand style, which exemplifies floridity, allusiveness, formal and sometimes abstruse diction, and rhetorical ornament. Proponents of this verbally richer style (called Asiaticism) proudly claim that the nuances available in the “oriental profusion” of English synonyms make the language an ideal putty for the skilled writer to mold and shape precisely. The Asiaticist sees the opulence of our language as providing apt terms for virtually every conceivable context.

Still, using the abundant resources of English is widely, if not wisely, discouraged. This attitude is as old as Modern English. During the 16th century, when our language had just begun to take its modern form, learned Englishmen who enriched their lexically impoverished tongue with Latin and Greek loanwords were vilified as "smelling of inkhorn" or as "inkhornists." One of the more notable borrowing neologists of the Renaissance, Sir Thomas Elyot, author of The Governor, wrote in 1531: "Divers men, rather scorning my benefite ['beneficence'] i.e., adding to the English word-stock] than receyving it thankfully, doo shew them selves offended (as they say) with my straunge terms." The "strange terms" this redoubtable inkhornist gave us include accommodate, education, frugality, irritate, metamorphosis, persist, and ruminate. He sought not to parade his formidable erudition, but rather "to augment our Englishe tongue, whereby men shulde as well expresse more abundantly the thynge that they conceived
in theirs hartin (wherefore language was ordeyned) having wordes apte for the purpose." In retrospect, of course, the efforts of Elyot and others like him were not in vain because they enriched the language.

The problem, though, remains: to what extent is it advisable to use big words? The Fowler brothers generally thought it inadvisable: "Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched." H.W. Fowler & E.G. Fowler, The King's English 14 (3d ed. 1931). But "prefer" raises an important question: how strong is this preference to be? Sheridan Baker elaborates the idea more fully, and quite sensibly:

“What we need is a mixed diction,” said Aristotle, and his point remains true 24 centuries and several languages later. The aim of style, he says, is to be clear but distinguished. For clarity, we need common, current words; but, used alone, these are commonplace, and as ephemeral as everyday talk. For distinction, we need words not heard every minute, unusual words, large words, foreign words, metaphors; but, used alone, these become bog, vapors, or at worst, gibberish. What we need is a diction that weds the popular with the dignified, the clear current with the sedgy margins of language and thought.


Intermingling Saxon words with Latin ones gives language variety, texture, euphony, and vitality. The best writers match substance with form. They use language precisely, evocatively, even daringly. So we shouldn’t assume that Hemingwayan spartanism is the only desirable mode, unless we’re ready to indict T.S. Eliot, H.L. Mencken, Vladimir Nabokov, John Updike, Edmund Wilson, and many another masterly writer.

Having established a reputable pedigree for the judicious employment of unfamiliar words, we can approach a standard for discriminating between useful and relatively useless abstrusities. Consider words as analogues to mathematical fractions, both being symbols for material or conceptual referents; would a self-respecting mathematician say 12/48 instead of 1/4 just to sound more erudite? Certainly not. Likewise, a writer or speaker generally should not say obtund when the verbs dull and blunt come more readily to mind. Nor would one say saponaceous for soapy, dyslogistic for uncomplimentary, macrobian (or longevous) for long-lived, arenaceous or sabulous for sandy, immund for dirty, nates for buttocks, or venenate for the verb poison.

Of course, it’s impossible to set down absolute rules about which words are and are not useful. Still, it’s almost always degenerate to avoid the obvious by clothing it in befogged terminology. In the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Whatever is translatable in other and simpler words of the same language, without loss of sense or dignity, is bad.”

But what about the mathematician who arrives at 15/16? Is it really best to round off the fraction to 1? Maybe in some contexts, but not in all—certainly not in the professional context. Likewise with the writer who, when describing an asthenic person, should not balk at using asthenic rather than the vaguer weak, because the former evokes the distinct image of muscular atrophy, which the latter lacks. And why engage in circumlocutions when a single word neatly suffices?

One could make similar arguments for thousands of other English words. Coterie and galere have almost identical meanings—something like “a group of people united for a common interest or purpose”—but no everyday word exists for this notion. The same is true of cathexis, eirenic, gravamen, obelize, oriflamme, protreptic, and any of numberless other examples. Samuel Johnson came closest to rationalizing his sesquipedalian penchant when he wrote: “It is natural to depart from familiarity of language upon occasions not familiar. Whatever elevates the sentiments will consequently raise the expression; whatever fills us with hope or terror, will produce some perturbation of images and some figurative distortions of phrase.”

Certainly you might have occasion to use abstruse vocabulary for reasons other than stylistic dignity or the lack of a simpler term. Three stand out. First, it’s often desirable to avoid the apt but vapid word. To select one of several examples, in the days when aggravated was first coming to be widely used for “irritate, annoy,” the fastidious speaker or writer could either combat the word’s debasement and use it correctly or seek refuge in exacerbate. As a result, exacerbate is no longer an unusual word. (And of course, make worse is always an available standby.)

Second, big words can often have a humorous effect, though the fun is limited to those who can understand them. Such jocular phrases as campanologist’s tintinnabulation (= bell-ringer’s knell), alliaceous halitosis (= garlic breath), pernoctative nepotation (= riotous carousing through the night), and bromidrotic fug (= sweaty stench) can be delightfully amusing.

A third reason for waxing lexiphanic is to soften one’s scurrility—to abstract it so that one’s audience does not immediately visualize an unpleasant image. For example, R. Emmett Tyrell, the political analyst, once used fecalbuccal to describe certain politicians. He couldn’t—and wouldn’t—have said that if he’d been forced to simplify. For a similar example of my own use of stercoraceous, see the last paragraph under copse.

In the end, there seem to be three legitimate stances for the writer. The first is that if you truly want to communicate with a wide readership, you have to build your core of small, familiar words. The second is that if one of your purposes is to edify, use challenging words while allowing the context to reveal their meanings, as in the following examples:

• umbrilloiferous: “His arms were like pipes, and had a way of branching from his shoulders at sharp angles so that the

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umbrella-bearing, or *umbrelliferous*, limb, for example, shot up on a steeply ascending vertical before articulating crisply at the elbow into a true vertical.” Patrick McGrath, *Blood and Water and Other Tales 68* (1988).

- *enucleate* [A psychiatrist is talking to a woman in love with a madman]: “Appearances to the contrary, Edgar Stark is a deeply disturbed individual.” “I know this, Jack.” “I wonder if you do. Do you know what he did to that woman after he killed her?” She said nothing. “He decapitated her. Then he *enucleated* her. He cut her head off, and then he took her eyes out.” Ibid. at 72.


The third stance is that if you know you’re writing for a specific audience with a prodigious, specialized vocabulary—whether one particular reader or the intelligentsia generally—then use hard words that are truly unsimplifiable. But question your motives: are you doing it to express yourself well, or are you just showing off?

For those who wish to do the second or third of those three things, there is no shortage of books on the subject. These are among the best:

- J.N. Hook, *The Grand Panjandrum: And 1,999 Other Rare, Useful, and Delightful Words and Expressions* (1980).

**session; cession.** *Session* = (1) a meeting of a body of people; an assembly; (2) the term or period of such a meeting; or (3) a period of time devoted to a particular activity. *Cession* = (1) the act of ceding or giving up (as by treaty); or (2) a thing ceded.

**sessional; *sessionary.** The first is the standard adjective corresponding to the noun *session*. The second is a *needless variant.*

Current ratio: 951:1

**set one’s sights.** See site.

**Set Phrases.** Bits of language sometimes become fossilized, and when they do it’s foolish to try to vary them. Hence *carved in stone* should never become *carved in shale*, or whatever other variation one might lamely invent. Nor, to cite another example, should one change *comparing apples and oranges* to *comparing apples and pomegranates*. Wilson Follett called set phrases “inviolable” (if not quite inviolate): “The attempt to liven up old clichés by inserting modifiers into the set phrase is a mistake: the distended phrase is neither original, nor unobtrusive, nor brief, and sometimes it has ceased to be immediately clear, as in *They have been reticent to a tactical fault*” (MAU at 303).

In addition to the fault of inserting modifiers into set phrases, three other faults commonly occur.

First, it is wrong to force a set phrase into ungrammatical contexts—e.g.: “This was reported to *we the people*. “ Although the well-known phrase *we the people* derives from the Preamble to the Constitution, it was necessarily in the nominative case there as the subject of the sentence.

Second, it’s poor style to aim at novelty by reversing the usual order of a phrase, as by writing *well-being and health* instead of *health and well-being*, or *hearty and hale* instead of *hale and hearty*. Cf. *inelegant variation & clichés*.

Third, if the set phrase isn’t used in its common sense, it can cause a *miscue*—e.g.: “*Mehrunnissa washed her hands, fed Ladli her dinner, ate something herself, and put her daughter to sleep* [read *put . . . to bed*].” Indu Sundaresan, *The Twentieth Wife 307* (2002) (The set phrase *put to sleep* is a euphemism for euthanize. But Mehrunnissa did not kill Ladli.)

**seven seas.** This figurative term has been used since antiquity, but its meaning has varied among cultures. To the ancient Romans, the *seven seas* were a group of saltwater lagoons near what is now Venice. At about the same time, the Persians called the streams that flowed into the Oxus River the *seven seas*. Much later in Europe, the *seven seas* were the North, the White, the Baltic, the Aegean, the Mediterranean, the Adriatic, and the Black Seas.

In modern usage, the term denotes all the planet’s seas and oceans, not any seven in particular—e.g.: “If they want to sail the *seven seas*, the Air Force can’t give them that.” Lindsay Tozer, “First Coast Military Recruiters Say Navy Not the Only Option,” *Fla. Times-Union*, 21 July 2001, at B1 (quoting M.Sgt. Alister Alford, a recruiter).

**sew.** For a blunder involving *sowing wild oats, see sow* (n.).

**sewage; sewerage.** *Sewage* is the waste matter conveyed through sewers; *sewerage* means either the removal of sewage or the system of removal.

**sewn up (= [of an outcome] made certain) is sometimes mistakenly written *sown up*, as if the metaphor had to do with *sowing* (as opposed to *sewing*)—e.g.:

- “It seems that the powerful had the game *sown* [read *sewn*] up from the start.” James Gill, “Justice for Those
sex, adj.; sexual. Both sex discrimination and sexual discrimination are widely used. The former predominates, perhaps because sexual has come to refer more to sexual intercourse and things pertaining to it. Hence sexual is becoming rare in contexts not involving intercourse or the drive to engage in it. Today, sexual education seems to suggest something rather different from sex education—e.g.: “Family planning officials at MexFam said they hope that this legislation will improve the quality of sexual education [read sex education] and promote the use of condoms.” Abigail Davis, “Value of Safe Sex Stressed in Mexico,” Dallas Morning News, 30 July 1993, at A22. See gender. Cf. racial discrimination.

sex, n. See gender.

Sexism. A. Generally. If you start with the pragmatic premise that you want to avoid misleading or distracting a significant percentage of your readers, then you'll almost certainly conclude that it's best to avoid sexist language. Regardless of your political persuasion, that conclusion seems inevitable—if you're a pragmatist.

But does avoiding sexism mean resorting to awkward devices such as *he/she? Surely not, because that too would distract many readers. What you should strive for instead—if you want readers to focus on your ideas and not on the political subtext—is a style that doesn't even hint at the issue. So unless you're involved in a debate about sexism, you'll probably want a style that, on the one hand, no reasonable person could call sexist and, on the other hand, never suggests that you're contorting your language to be nonexistent.

B. The Pronoun Problem. English has a number of common-sex general words, such as person, anyone, everyone, and no one, but it has no common-sex singular personal pronouns. Instead, we have he, she, and it. The traditional approach has been to use the masculine pronouns he and him to cover all people, male and female alike. That this practice has come under increasing attack has caused the most difficult problem in the realm of sexist language. Other snarls are far more readily solvable.

The inadequacy of the English language in this respect becomes apparent in many sentences in which the generic masculine pronoun sits uneasily. Lawyers seem to force it into the oddest contexts—e.g.: “If a testator fails to provide by will for his surviving spouse [a she?] who married the testator after the execution of the will, the omitted spouse shall receive the same share of the estate he [i.e., the spouse] would have received if the decedent left no will.” Unif. Probate Code § 2-301(a) (1989).

As H.W. Fowler noted (with contributions from Ernest Gowers):

There are three makeshifts: first, as anybody can see for himself or herself; second, as anybody can see for themselves; and third, as anybody can see for himself. No one who can help it chooses the first; it is correct, and is sometimes necessary, but it is so clumsy as to be ridiculous except when explicitness is urgent, and it usually sounds like a bit of pedantic humour. The second is the popular solution; it sets the literary man’s [!] teeth on edge, and he exerts himself to give the same meaning in some entirely different way if he is not prepared to risk the third, which is here recommended. It involves the convention (statutory in the interpretation of documents) that where the matter of sex is not conspicuous or important the masculine form shall be allowed to represent a person instead of a man, or say a man (homo) instead of a man (vir).

FMEU2 at 404.

Although some writers make that him- or herself, which is perhaps even more obtrusive, at least two other makeshifts are now available.

The first is commonly used by American academics: as anybody can see for herself. Such phrases are often alternated with those containing masculine pronouns, or, in some writing, appear uniformly. Whether this phraseology will someday stop sounding strange to most readers only time will tell. This is one way, however, of: (1) maintaining a grammatical construction; and (2) avoiding the awkwardness of alternatives such as himself or herself.

But the method carries two risks. First, unintended connotations may invade the writing. In the 1980s, a novel was published in two versions, one using generic masculine pronouns and the other using generic feminine pronouns; the effects on readers of the two versions were reported to have been startlingly different in ways far too complex for discussion here. Second, this makeshift is likely to do a disservice to women in the long run, for it would probably be adopted by only
a small minority of writers: the rest would continue with the generic masculine pronoun.

A second new makeshift has entered Canadian legislation: *as anybody can see for themself*; *if a judge decides to recuse themself.* (Donald L. Revell et al., “Themself” and Nonsexist Style in Canadian Legislative Drafting,” 10 English Today 10 [1994].) The word *themself* (attested from the early 19th century—but nonstandard) may fill the need for a gender-neutral reflexive pronoun, but many readers and writers—especially Americans—bristle at the sight or the sound of it. So for the legal writer, this makeshift carries a considerable risk of distracting readers.

Typographical gimmickry may once have served a political purpose, but it should be avoided as an answer to the problem. Tricks such as *s/he, he/she, and s/he—he—and even the gloriously misbegotten double entendre, *s/he/it—are trendy, ugly, distracting, and often unpronounceable. If we must have alternatives, *he or she* is the furthest we should go. See *he* or *she*.

For the persuasive writer—for whom credibility is all—the writer’s point of view matters less than the reader’s. So if you’re writing for an unknown or a broad readership, the only course that does not risk damaging your credibility is to write around the problem. For this purpose, every writer ought to have available a repertoire of methods to avoid the generic masculine pronoun. No single method is sufficient. In a given context, you might consider doing any of the following:

- **Delete the pronoun reference altogether.** E.g.: “Every manager should read memoranda as soon as they are delivered to him” [delete to him] by a mail clerk.
- **Change the pronoun to an article, such as a or the.** E.g.: “An author may adopt any of the following dictionaries in preparing his [read a] manuscript.”
- **Pluralize, so that he becomes they.** E.g.: “A student should avoid engaging in any activities that might bring discredit to his school.” (Read: Students should avoid engaging in any activities that might bring discredit to their school.)
- **Use the relative pronoun who, especially when the generic he follows an if.** E.g.: “If a student cannot use Standard English, he cannot be expected to master the nuances of the literature assigned in this course.” (Read: A student who cannot use Standard English cannot be expected to master the nuances of the literature assigned in this course.)
- **Repeat the noun instead of using a pronoun, especially when the two are separated by several words.** E.g.: “When considering a manuscript for publication, the editor should evaluate the suitability of both the subject matter and the writing style. In particular, he [read the editor] . . .”


Though the masculine singular personal pronoun may survive awhile longer as a generic term, it will probably be ultimately displaced by *they*, which is coming to be used alternatively as singular or plural. (See CONCORD (b).) This usage is becoming common—e.g.:

- “It is assumed that, if someone is put under enough pressure, they will tell the truth, or the truth will emerge despite the teller.” Robin T. Lakoff, Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives 90 (1990).

Speakers of AmE resist this development more than speakers of BrE, in which the indeterminate *they* is already more or less standard. That it sets many literate Americans’ teeth on edge is an unfortunate obstacle to what promises to be the ultimate solution to the problem.


For a similar etymological progression, see none. **C. Words with *man*—and *man.**” For the lawyer more than for most men, it is true that he who knows but cannot express what he knows might as well be ignorant.” That sentence opens Chapter 1 of Henry Weihofen’s Legal Writing Style (2d ed. 1980)—a sentence that, ironically, is flanked by warnings against sexist language (pp. vii, 19–20). If Weihofen were writing today, no doubt he would express himself in neutral language.

Throughout the English-speaking world, writers’ awareness of sexism rose most markedly during the 1980s. In September 1984, the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department in Canberra, Australia, issued a press release entitled “Moves to Modify Language Sex Bias in Legislation.” The release states that “the Government accepts that drafting in ‘masculine’ language may contribute to some extent to the perpetuation of a society in which men and women see women as lesser beings.” The press release recommends, “where possible and appropriate, avoidance of the use of words ending in man, such as chairman, serviceman, seaman, and so on.” See “The De-Masculinisation of Language in Federal Legislation,” 58 Aus. L.J. 685, 685–86 (1984).

In a similar vein, American businesspeople and journalists have begun to write in more neutral language, sometimes obtusively neutral—e.g.:

- “The ice cream mixture is placed in the frozen canister and turned automatically, thus eliminating the use of salt, ice and personpower [read labor or toll],” Vivian Taylor, “A Passion for Ice Cream,” Fresno Bee, 14 Aug. 1996, at E1.
- “When the blow-dried anchorperson [read anchor] on the 11 o’clock news tells you the market rose or fell 100 points, you have learned absolutely nothing.” Martin Sosnoff, “Where Are the Analysts’ Yachts?” Forbes, 6 Oct. 1997, at 144.
• “The chairperson [read chair] must consider the point of order immediately and make a decision as to whether it is valid or not.” Beverley Weynton, Manage Meetings 48 (2002).

As a nonsexist suffix, -person leaves much to be desired. For every *chairperson, *ancherperson, *draftsperson, *ombudsperson, and *tribesperson, there is a superior substitute: chair, anchor, drafter, ombuds, and tribe member. Words ending in -person are at once wooden and pompous. Many words that ended in -man have been successfully transformed without using -person, among them police officer, fire-fighter, and mail carrier.

Some of the extremes to which the trend has been taken seem absurd, such as *herstory (to avoid his), *womyn (to avoid men), and the like. For the more ardent reformers, the line-drawing often doesn’t seem to be tempered with good sense. For example, in 1992, Time magazine reported:

NASA will no longer refer to “manned” flights but will describe the missions as “habited” and “unhabited,” or “crewed” and “uncrewed.” Says a NASA spokesman: “We have been ordered to delete any reference by sex, on the grounds that ‘manned’ flight is crude and ‘crewed’ is p.c.” Even so, some sociologists are still not satisfied. They prefer “space flight by human beings.” Female astronauts find these linguistic aerobics foolish. Says one: “Common sense is the victim of all this rhetoric.”


For other entries dealing with this and related issues, see chairman, foreman, humankind, male & ombudsman.

D. Differentiated Feminine Forms. Several word endings mark feminine forms (as in authoress, comédienne, confidante, heroine, majorette, and tutrix). As a whole, these are very much on the wane.

For example, words ending in -ess, such as poetess and authoress, are mostly archaic in AmE. (BrE is more hospitable to them; it’s not unusual to see references to managresses in British newspapers.) At some point they acquired a derogatory tinge, and they’ve never been the same. The quite understandable tendency has been to avoid sex-specific terms if the person’s sex is beside the point. And it usually is beside the point when identifying a poet, an author, or a waiter. Not everyone agrees that this is true of actors: although some women insist that they are actors, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences retains the “Best Actor,” “Best Actress,” “Best Supporting Actor,” and “Best Supporting Actress” categories. Still, the support for actress seems to be eroding.

One word that has persisted (especially in workaday journalism) is songstress, which unlike singer suggests “female singer-songwriter.” The feminine form has long been more common than its male counterpart (songster). It is jarring to hear phrases such as *lady lawyer, *woman doctor, *female booksalesman, or the Air Force’s *female airman. It sounds condescending, even if that wasn’t intended. But it isn’t at all jarring—except to insufferable pedants—to read or hear about a woman’s being an author or waiter.

As for words ending in -trix, the law seems to be one of two last bastions for such terms—e.g.: executrix, prosecutrix, testatrix. But even in law these terms are moribund. Increasingly, lawyers refer to women as executors, prosecutors, and testators. The other bastion? Sadomasochism—with dominatrix.

For other words with differentiated suffixes, see the entries at bacchant, blond, brunet(te), comedian, coquette, distract, doyen, fiancé, heiress & waiter.

E. Equivalences. Among the subtler problems of nonsexist usage is to refer to men and women in equivalent terms: not man and wife, but husband and wife; not chairmen and chairs (the latter being female), but chairs (for all); not men and girls (a word that diminishes the status of adult females), but men and women.

Even Mr., on the one hand, as contrasted with Miss or Mrs., on the other, causes problems on this score. Differentiating between one woman and another on the basis of her marital status is invidious, really, if we do not make the same distinction for men. The idea that it matters as an item of personal information whether a woman is married—but that it doesn’t matter whether a man is married—is surely an outmoded one. Though many people once considered Ms. an abomination, today it is accepted as the standard way of addressing a married or unmarried woman. Unless the writer knows that a woman prefers to use Mrs. or Miss, the surest course today is to use Ms. (/miz/).

F. Statute of Limitations. Those committed to nonsexist usage ought to adopt a statute of limitations that goes something like this: in quoted matter dating from before 1980, passages containing bland sexism—such as the use of the generic he or of chairman—can be quoted in good conscience because in those days the notions of gender-inclusiveness were entirely different from today’s notions. Although it is quite fair to discuss cultural changes over time, it is unfair to criticize our predecessors for not conforming to present-day standards. How could they have done so? Therefore, using “[sic]” at every turn to point out old sexist phrases is at best an otiose exercise, at worst a historically irresponsible example of mean-spiritedness. For a choice discussion of a textbook that uses hundreds of sics in this way, see James R. Nafziger, “A Sicness unto Death,” 1 Scribes J. Legal Writing 149 (1990).

G. Bibliography. For those wishing to inquire further into this interesting subject, the following books are worth consulting:


Language-change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)
sexual. See sexton. sextant. sextet (a group of six) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Sextette is a variant.

sexton. A sexton is an old-fashioned instrument used in navigation. A sexton is an officer who handles day-to-day affairs at a church or synagogue, with varying responsibilities depending on the religious institution. The two words are occasionally confounded, especially in obituaries—e.g.:

- "He was a parishioner of Holy Ghost Church, where he served as a sextant [read sexton]." "Obituaries," Providence J.-Bull., 17 Oct. 2000, at C3.
- "He was a member of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church and served for more than 50 years as sextant [read sexton] and treasurer of the St. John's Cemetery." "Deaths and Funerals," Dayton Daily News, 18 Nov. 2000, at B2.
- "Mr. Whitehurst was a member of New Saint Mark Baptist Church . . . , where he was a past chairman; member of Deacon Board; past president of the Floral Club; Pastor's Aide; Trustee Board; past treasurer of the church; and Sextant [read Sexton]." "David R. Whitehurst Sr," (obit.), Virginian-Pilot & Ledger Star (Norfolk), 29 Nov. 2001, at B8.

Language-Change Index
sextant misused for sexton: Stage 1

Shaked. See shakable.

Shakespeare; *Shakspere; *Shakespeare; *Shakespear; *Shakespear. Although each of these variations has appeared at one time or another in scholarly writing, Shakespeare has been the standard spelling since the mid-19th century.

Shakespearean; *Shakespearian. The first spelling is now standard in AmE and BrE alike. On the merits, Shakespearean is preferable because it preserves the final vowel in the great bard's name. *Shakespearian is a variant. Cf. Euclidean & Mephistophelean.

Current ratio: 5:1 shall; will. Grammarians formerly relied on the following paradigm, which now has little utility:
Simple Futurity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First person</th>
<th>Second person</th>
<th>Third person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I shall</td>
<td>you will</td>
<td>he will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we shall</td>
<td>you will</td>
<td>they will</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Determination, Promise, or Command

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First person</th>
<th>Second person</th>
<th>Third person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I will</td>
<td>you shall</td>
<td>she shall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we will</td>
<td>you shall</td>
<td>they shall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But with only minor exceptions, will has become the universal word to express futurity, regardless of whether the subject is in the first, second, or third person. Shall is now mostly restricted to two situations: (1) interrogative sentences requesting permission or agreement <shall we all go outside?> <shall I open the present now?>; and (2) legal documents, in which shall purportedly imposes a duty <the tenant shall obtain the landlord’s permission before making any changes to the premises>. In both of those situations, shall seems likely to persist, but in law it is declining because of increased recognition of its hopeless ambiguity as actually misused by lawyers. See Garner’s Dictionary of Legal Usage 952–55 (3d ed. 2011).

Professor Gustave Arlt of the University of California summed it up well, writing in the late 1940s: “The artificial distinction between shall and will to designate futurity is a superstition that has neither a basis in historical grammar nor the sound sanction of universal usage. It is a nineteenth-century affectation [that] certain grammarians have tried hard to establish and perpetuate. . . . [T]hey have not succeeded.” Quoted in Norman Lewis, Better English 270 (rev. ed. 1961).

And if the distinction isn’t real, there’s simply no reason to hold on to shall. The word is peripheral in AmE.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

will for old-school shall with first-person nouns: Stage 5

shamefacedly. Although shamefaced is two syllables, shamefacedly is four: /ʃaɪm-fæd-lɪ/. Cf. allegedly.

*shammy; *shamosi; *shamoy. See chamois.

shanghai, v.t., = (1) to drug or otherwise make insensible and then abduct for service on a ship needing crew members; or (2) to influence by fraud or compulsion. The inflected forms are shanghaied and shanghaiing.

The verb has its origin in the slang of 19th-century San Francisco. When gold was discovered in California, many sailors deserted their ships in the San Francisco Bay to seek their fortunes in the goldfields. So ship captains constantly needed new crewmen, willing or not. More than a few men in San Francisco passed out from drugs or alcohol and woke up to find themselves on extended voyages, especially to Shanghai, a major Chinese seaport and trading center. Hence, to be shanghaied soon meant to be kidnapped and impressed.

Sense 2 became common by the end of World War I.

shareable; shapeable. The first spelling is standard in AmE, the second in BrE. See mute e.

shape > shaped > shaped. The archaic part participle shapen exists only in the forms misshapen, ill-shapen, and well-shapen. The latter two, though much less common than misshapen, still occur—e.g.:


See irregular verbs (b).

*sharable. See shareable & mute e.

share. This word appears in various redundant phrases, such as *share in common, *share together, and *both share—e.g.:

- “Elway and Dan Marino have been playing contract leapfrog with Elway always getting the last leap. They both share [read have] the same agent, Marvin Demoff of Los Angeles, and that’s the way he’s always done it, ever since they were rookies.” Joseph Sanchez, “Tom Dempsey’s Record 63-Yarder Turns 25,” Denver Post, 5 Nov. 1995, Sports §, at C3.
- “This is one book families may want to own so it can be pulled out often to share together [read look at together or share].” Sue Struthers, “Poetry Allows Every Child to Taste Words,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 1 Dec. 1996, at D3.
- “Madison and St. Clair counties share common [read share or have common] roots emerging from basically working-class people.” “Did Racism Cause Defeat of Garcia?” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 7 Dec. 1996, at 34.
- “Coincidentally, although they shared [read had] little else in common and perhaps never even met, they both owed it to Heidelberg that they were admitted into George’s world.” Robert E. Norton, Secret Germany 624 (2002).

See redundancy.

shareable; *sharable. The spelling shareable has long been standard in AmE and BrE alike. That’s anomalous for AmE (see mute e), but the reason undoubtedly has to do with how easily *sharable can be misread.

Current ratio: 1.3:1
sheaf. Pl. sheaves. See sheaves & plurals (c).

sheath, n.; sheathe, vb. It’s an error to use sheathe (/sheeth/) as a noun or sheath (/sheeth/) as a verb—e.g.:

- “Madame de Sevigne’s friend, the Sun King, tamed his subjects by urging them to sheath [read sheathe] their swords and help with his nightshirt or hold his candle as he got undressed.” Jackie Ullschlager, “Maman Dearest,” Fin. Times, 4 Nov. 1996, at B1.

Just remember the difference between the analogous terms breath (n.) and breathe (vb.). See breath.

Sheath forms the plural sheaths, not sheathes—e.g.:

“Don Davis makes each of the hand-tooled leather sheathes [read sheaths] that come with his knives.” (photo caption).

Language-Change Index
1. sheathe misused as noun for sheath: Stage 1
   Current ratio (a sheath vs. *a sheathe): 325:1
2. sheath misused as a verb for sheathe: Stage 4
   Current ratio (to sheathe vs. *to sheath): 1:1:1

sheaves, n., is the plural both of sheaf (= a bundle) and of sheave (= a pulley). Avoid *sheafs, which has never been standard.

Current ratio: 40:1

shed > shed > she’d better; *she better. See better (A).

sheikh (= [1] an Arab chieftain; or [2] a Muslim official) has been the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Sheik is a primarily AmE variant. The word is pronounced /sheek/ or /shayk/.

Current ratio: 2:1

shelf. Pl. shelves, not *shelfs. See plurals (c).

shellac, n. & vb., is the standard spelling. But the proper inflections for the verb are shellacked and shellacking. See -c-.

sherbet /shar-bat/ is commonly mispronounced with an intrusive -r:- /shar-bart/. Because of this mispronunciation, the word is sometimes wrongly spelled *sherbert. See pronunciation (b).

Language-Change Index
1. sherbet mispronounced /shar-bart/: Stage 3
2. sherbet misspelled *sherbert: Stage 2
   Current ratio: 32:1

*sheroot. See cheroot.

*shily. See shy.

shine. As a transitive verb, it’s inflected shine > shined > shone <he shined his shoes>. As an intransitive verb, it’s inflected shine > shone > shone <the sun shone brightly>. Hence the standard collocations are shone on and shone forth, not *shined on or *shined forth.

Writers occasionally use shined where shine is the word they want—e.g.: “And neither shined [read shine] like the off-dormant Texas running game that has produced only two 1,000-yard rushers since Earl Campbell and none since Eric Metcalf in 1987.” Kirk Bohls, “Texas Starts from the Ground Up,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 19 Aug. 1993, at E1.

Still others confuse shone with shown—e.g.:

- “As March turns into April, there are houses here where it has been weeks since the sun has shown [read shone] through the windows, so high are the snowbanks.” Lorna Colehoun, “Winter Just Won’t Quit,” Union Leader (Manchester, N.H.), 31 Mar. 1997, at A1.

Rarely, a writer will slip the other way and spell shown as shone—e.g.: “Former No. 1 Pick Shone [read Shone] to Sonic Door.” Headline, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 1 Nov. 1996, at E6. See irregular verbs.

Language-Change Index
1. shined misused for shone: Stage 2
   Current ratio (sun shone brightly vs. *sun shined brightly): 26:1
2. shown misused for shone: Stage 1
   Current ratio (light shone down vs. *light shown down): 21:1
shirk. In the modern idiom, this word is almost exclusively a transitive verb, as in the expression that someone has shirked his or her duties. But the misformed phrase *shirk from* has recently emerged, probably out of confusion with shrink from—e.g.:  

- “The film doesn’t shirk [read shrink]” from conveying the keen sense that in the face of so much agony, an act of compassion had as random an impact in saving a life as did the mortar shells in ending so many.” James L. Graff, “The Way It Was,” Time, 11 Dec. 1997, at 82.

**Shut** > **shut** > **shat**. So inflected. *Shitted* is nonstandard. To many people, all forms of the word are considered objectionable.

Current ratio: 5:1

*shovelful.* See **shovelfuls**.

*shovelboard.* See **shuffleboard**.

*shovelful.* Pl. **shovelfuls.** See **plurals (g)**.

*shovel pass.* **shuffle pass.** The words *shuffle* and *shovel* cause confusion in a term from American football: *shovel pass,* in which the ball is scooped or flipped forward underneath as one might shovel dirt or snow. Some sportswriters have wrongly written *shuffle pass*—e.g.: “’But as I’m watching, they’re doing something about our game with the Bills and they show Buffalo running a play on film—(Jim) Kelly throwing

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**Language-Change Index**

_shiek_ misused for *shirks:* Stage 1  
Current ratio (shirk from vs. *shirk from*): 40:1

_shish kebab.* See **kebab**.

_shoot,* vb., makes **shoved** and **shoveling** in AmE, **shovelled** and **shovelling** in BrE. See **spelling (b)**.

**shovelboard.* See **shuffleboard**.

**shovelful.* Pl. **shovelfuls.** See **plurals (g)**.

*shovel pass.* **shuffle pass.** The words _shuffle_ and shovel cause confusion in a term from American football: _shovel pass,_ in which the ball is scooped or flipped forward underhand as one might shovel dirt or snow. Some sportswriters have wrongly written _shuffle pass_—e.g.: “’But as I’m watching, they’re doing something about our game with the Bills and they show Buffalo running a play on film—(Jim) Kelly throwing...
shrink > shrunk > shrank. So inflected. Some people erroneously believe that this is an irregular verb that continues as shred in the past forms—e.g.: “Earlier this year, Mr. Lumbers attracted national attention after he shred [read shredded] 17,000 open edition prints holding a retail value of about $600,000.” Kim Hanson, “Artists Urged to Change Approach to Business,” Nat’l Post, 29 June 1999, at C8.

shred > shredded > shredded. So inflected. Some people erroneously believe that this is an irregular verb that continues as shred in the past forms—e.g.: “Earlier this year, Mr. Lumbers attracted national attention after he shred [read shredded] 17,000 open edition prints holding a retail value of about $600,000.” Kim Hanson, “Artists Urged to Change Approach to Business,” Nat’l Post, 29 June 1999, at C8.

shriveled, adj. See shriveled and shrivelled.

shriveled, adj. See shriveled and shrivelled.

shriveled, adj. See shriveled and shrivelled.

shrivel, vb., makes shriveled and shriveling in AmE, shrivelled and shrivelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

shyly

shyly

shyly

shyly

shrved, adj. See shrived and shivering.

shuty. See shoot.

shy, adj. Since about 1800, the comparative of this word has been predominantly spelled shyer, the superlative shyest—in AmE and BrE alike. (W11 gives priority to the wrong forms: *shier and *shiest.) Shyly is so spelled—not *shily. Cf. sly & spry.

Siamese twins. For the phrase conjoined twins as a nonethic substitute, see conjoin.

sibylline (= prophetic; of, relating to, or involving fortune-telling) is often misspelled *sybilline—and has been so since the early 19th century, doubtless through the influence of the etymologically distinct word sybarite. E.g.: “There were Joan’s often sybilline [read sibylline] remarks—‘Of course, we always do Tibet from the north.’” Nicholas Haslam, “Joan Lady Camrose: Family Fortunes,” Guardian, 29 May 1997, at 17. The word is pronounced /sib-ә-lin or -leen/.

sic. A. Generally. Sic (= thus, so), invariably bracketed and preferably set in italics, indicates that a preceding word or phrase in a quoted passage is reproduced as it appeared in the original document. Sic at its best is intended to aid readers, who might be confused about whether the quoter or the quoted
writer is responsible for the spelling or grammatical anomaly. This interpolation has been much on the rise: in published writings, its use has skyrocketed since the mid-20th century.

**B. Benighted Uses.** Some writers use *sic* meanly—with a false sense of superiority. Its use may frequently reveal more about the quoter than about the writer being quoted. For example, a recent book review of an English book contained a *sic* in its first sentence after the verb *analyse*, which was so spelled on the book’s dust jacket. In AmE, of course, the preferred spelling is *analyse*; in BrE, however, the spelling *analyse* is not uncommon and certainly does not deserve a *sic*. In fact, all the quoter (or overzealous editor) demonstrated was an ignorance of British usage.

Finally, *sic* is easily overused when quoting from a source that uses many archaic forms.

*sic*, vb; *sick*, vb. *Sic* means to direct a person or an animal to chase or attack someone or something. *Sick*, once the dominant form, is a variant spelling today—e.g.: “We have tried *sicking* [read *siccing*] the dog on him but it just winds up being overcome by the somnolent vapors that fill the room and falls asleep by his side.” David Grimes, “Waking Up Is So Hard to Do,” Sarasota Herald-Trib., 7 Nov. 2002, at E1.

*sick*, adj.; *sickly*, adj. & adv.; *sicklily*, adv. While *sick* means “ill,” *sickly* (adj.) means “habitually ill” <*a sickly young man*> or “associated with sickness” <*a sickly complexion*>. Because *sickly* is an adverb as well as an adjective, the term *sicklily* can justifiably be regarded as a needless variant. See adverbs (8).

*sideswipe*; *sidewipe*. *Sideswipe* (= to strike a glancing blow), dating from the early automotive age (1926), is the term to use. *Sidewipe*, an artificial form that appeared occasionally in the early 20th century, has no valid standing.

Current ratio: 304:1

*siege* (= [1] a military blockade of a fortress, city, etc., or [2] a relentless attack or persistent threat) is preferably pronounced /seej/—not /seezh/.

**sight.** See *site*.

**sight unseen.** From a strictly logical point of view, the phrase makes little sense. In practice, however, it has an accepted and useful meaning: “(of an item) bought without an inspection before the purchase.” In this sense, it dates from late-19th-century AmE, but now it is used throughout the English-speaking world. See *illogic* (A). The phrase has been common since the early 20th century. Having arisen in late-19th-century AmE, it is now used throughout the English-speaking world.

Sometimes the phrase is erroneously written *site unseen*—e.g.: “Experts say the Web could be even more dangerous than the telephone because the medium will soon showcase virtual walk-throughs of property and homes for sale, in which purchases could be hustled *site unseen* [read *sight unseen*].” Bradley Inman, “Real Estate on the Web,” San Diego Union-Trib., 20 July 1997, at H3. See site.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*sight unseen* misspelled *site unseen*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 80:1

**signal**, vb., makes *signaled* and *signaling* in AmE, *signalled* and *signalling* in BrE. See spelling (8).

**signatory**, n.; *signatory*; *signator*. H.W. Fowler and George P. Krapp both recommended in the 1920s that *signatory* be adopted as the preferred noun (FMEU1 at 534: *A Comprehensive Guide to Good English* 540 [1927]). Today, however, *signatory* is virtually never used. Most dictionaries record only *signatory*, and that form vastly predominates in modern print sources—e.g.: “And since U.N. documents are designed to be inoffensive to their *signatories*, they contain language that offers an escape hatch.” Marilyn Greene, “Forums’ Value: Waste of Money or Time to Bond?” USA Today, 30 Aug. 1995, at A11.

*Signatory* may be an adjective as well as a noun (Krapp considered it the only adjectival form)—e.g.: “They would also be allowed to visit commercial chemical companies in *signatory* nations.” Peter Grier, “No Quick Farewell to Chemical Arms,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 Aug. 1995, at 1.

*Signator*, modeled on Latinate agent nouns, is a needless variant of *signatory*.

For those who like plain English, of course, *signer* is always available. It has been fairly common since the 17th century.

**signee** = a high-profile recruit, often an athlete, who is signed up by a school, employer, etc. Although the *signee* is the one who signs (active voice), the passive -ee makes sense in most contexts because the *signee* “is signed” by an organization. E.g.:

• “Prairie has Husky *signee* Dan Dickau and is expected to challenge for the Greater St. Helens League title with Evergreen of Vancouver.” *Times Stars of the Week*, Seattle Times, 10 Dec. 1996, at C3.


significance; signification. These should be distinguished. Significance = (1) a subtly or indirectly conveyed meaning; suggestiveness; the quality of implying; or (2) the quality of being important or significant. Signification = (1) the act of signifying, as by symbols; or (2) the quality of being important or significant.

significance is misused for signer: Stage 1

signer. See seigneur.

silex (= [1] silica-containing material, or [2] heat-resistant glass) has predominantly formed the plural silices since the 18th century. Silexes is a rarely used 20th-century variant.

Current ratio: 10:1

siliceous (= of, like, or containing silica) has been the standard spelling since the 18th century. *Silicious is a variant.

Current ratio: 5:1

*syllabub. See syllabub.

sillily. See adverbs (B).

*silvan. See sylvan.

simpatico. Like sympathy, this word derives from the Greek word sympa theia (= sympathy). But simpatico (= mutually fond or understanding) came to English in the 19th century as a loanword from either Italian (simpatico) or Spanish (simpático)—probably the former. In good English the word has always had the sim- spelling. Stumbling on the pattern of sympathy, writers often misspell the word—e.g.:

• “After a local newspaper printed the names of the people who signed the integration petition, dozens of the signees [read signers] asked to have their names removed,” Hannah Mitchell, “Threats and Triumphs: 35 Years at the NAACP,” Charlotte Observer, 6 Dec. 2002, at V1.

• “Each morning, according to Walker, the Phone Assurance Line volunteers telephone the signees on the list [read those who signed the list],” Bryan Dye, “Service Tells of Programs for Seniors,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 29 Jan. 2003, at B2.

Although simpatico is an adjective, some err by wielding it as a noun—e.g.: “Iowans this Sunday will want to see if there is some ‘sympatico [read perhaps, affinity],’ is there a gut feeling about this person. . . . They want to feel his cloth, they want to see just how real this guy is,’ [Sen. Tom] Harkin said.” Lynn Sweet, “ Dems ‘Confused,’ Obama Writes,” Chicago Sun Times, 15 Sept. 2006, News §, at 22 (quoting Senator Tom Harkin on the subject of presidential nominee Barack Obama). That type of misusage repels sympathy.

simplicity, a pejorative adjective meaning “oversimple, facile,” became a vogue word during the 1980s and 1990s: “With adults, a word catches on and it becomes a hobbyhorse that we ride to death. Remember when early critics of President Reagan’s economic plans called them ‘simplicistic?’ It was a word seldom used until then, but once let loose in the ‘80s, it was on every tongue. When someone didn’t like something but couldn’t articulate why, he’d call it ‘simplicistic.’” Michael Skube, “Let’s Bring Closure to Adult Slang, Which Just Isn’t Cool,” Atlanta J.-Const., 17 June 1997, at B3.

Some misuse the word as a synonym for simple—that is, not as a pejorative at all. E.g.:

• “Replay is not the answer. That sounds like a nice, simplistic [read simple] fix but what the NFL really needs is to improve its officiating and have better coordination among the officials.” Ira Miller, “Replay Not Answer to Many Blown Calls,” S.F. Chron., 6 Oct. 1995, at E3.

• “[Iris] meets humorous, energetic Miles (Jack Black), another composer attached to a sexy actress (Shannyn Sossamon) but much more sympatico [read simpatico] with Iris, who doesn’t know that she’s a knockout until her new friends in L.A. tell her.” Michael Sragow, “‘Holiday’ Sweet,” Baltimore Sun, 8 Dec. 2006, at C1.

Some simplicistic is a venial redundancy—e.g.: “Tom Dimmit, principal of Golden High School in the Jefferson County school district, says even that [proposal] is too simplistic [read simple].” Janet Simons, “The Great Homework Debate,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 17 Aug. 1997, at F5.
since expresses a milder sense of causation than because. Louisville's main weaknesses . . . in a humbling loss for Since lead to ambiguity—e.g.: "Since he was mad Saturday, then he should get even today." Greg Johnson, "It's Expect the Unexpected at Buick Open," Grand Rapids Press, 10 Aug. 1997, at E1. The problem is remedied by omitting then. Or the writer could have deleted Since and changed then to so.

*since . . . then* mangles the syntax of a causal construction—e.g.: "Since he was mad Saturday, then he should get even today." Greg Johnson, "It's Expect the Unexpected at Buick Open," Grand Rapids Press, 10 Aug. 1997, at E1. The problem is remedied by omitting then. Or the writer could have deleted Since and changed then to so.

sine die (= without a day being fixed) is used to indicate that no date has been set for resumption. The phrase is officialuse for "indefinitely." E.g.: "The court adjourned sine die." Appointment of Iredell, 2 U.S. (2 Dall.) 400, 400 (1790) (term notation). Sine die is used exclusively in reference to adjournment taken with no date set for resumption of the proceedings or meeting. A linguist complains that the phrase is "horribly mispronounced to the point where the first part sounds like the trigonometric function and the second like a synonym for 'perish.'" Mario Pei, Words in Sheep's Clothing 83 (1969). But /st-ni di-ee/ has long been established as the usual English-language pronunciation. Even so, /see-nay dee-ay/ is common in BrE.

sine qua non /st-neh kwah nohn or sin-ay kwah nohn/ (L. "without which not") = an indispensable condition or thing. This LATINISM is common in both lay and legal writing and should remain unmolested by plain-English reform—e.g.: "Ambiguity of constitutional language and uncertainty about constitution-makers' intent is the very sine qua non of judicial review as it has operated in the United States." Robert G. McCloskey, The American Supreme Court 117–19 (1980).

"While knowledge of the right to refuse consent is one factor to be taken into account, the government need not establish such knowledge as the sine qua non of an effective consent." Schneckloth v. Bustamonte, 412 U.S. 218, 227 (1973) (per Stewart J.).


"Attracting crowds is not merely an unforeseen byproduct of street performing, it is its sine qua non: A street performer who never gathers an audience would give up the pursuit very quickly." Berger v. City of Seattle, 569 F.3d 1029, 1073 (9th Cir. 2009).

Cf. but for.

sing > sang > sung. So inflected. Although the past-participle sung was often used as a simplepast verb

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l-ll.)

**Stage 1:** Rejected. **Stage 2:** Widely shunned. **Stage 3:** Widespread but . . . **Stage 4:** Ubiquitous but . . . **Stage 5:** Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). ● Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
through the mid-19th century, today the usage should be regarded as an error—e.g.:  
- “But the poet’s more than 1,500 songs, including many soulful lyrics that he sung [read sang] for films, also stirred the hearts of his poorer country members.” Pradeep, Hindi Poet, Songwriter,” L.A. Times, 14 Dec. 1998, at A27.  
- “Her co-star as she sung [read sang] her latest hit was a huge white python slung over her bare shoulders.” Kirk Montgomery & Mark Harden, “Aiming for Triple Crown,” Denver Post, 9 Nov. 2001, Weekend §, at 1 (referring to Britney Spears).

See irregular verbs.

**single**  
**sine**

**single; singular.** A. As Adjectives. **Single** = (1) only one in number; sole; individual <a single strand of hair at the crime scene>; or (2) unmarried <single white male seeks single female for conversation and possible romance>. **Singular** = (1) exceptional, remarkable, one-of-a-kind <a singular achievement>; or (2) odd, eccentric <singular behavior>. In the following example, the writer uses singular once correctly (in the sense “one-of-a-kind”) and once incorrectly (for single) in a forced attempt at a parallel: “It was not supposed to end this way. His final story was to have an Omaha dateline, where he was carried triumphantly off the field at majestic Rosenblatt stadium, his players propping up their singular coach whose career was driven by a singular [read single] goal. One more win.” Kirk Bohls, “The Memories Will Be Treasured Even if the Unthinkable Is True,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 18 July 1996, at A1.

B. As Nouns: **single for singular.** *Criteria and phenomena, heard everywhere as singles [read singulars or singular nouns], are encountering stern opposition from people who take care to speak of a graffiti, but never say a confetto.” Robertson Cochrane, “Verbum Sap,” 21 Verbatim 11, 11 (1994).

**singlehanded, adv.; singlehandedly.** When the word follows the verb, the preferred adverb is singlehanded <she did it singlehanded>. When the adverb precedes the verb, singlehandedly is called for <she singlehandedly brought the corporation back from the brink of bankruptcy>.

**single most.** This venial redundancy (single adds nothing to the superlative it precedes) appears most often in quoted speech, but it’s also common in edited text. Rare before 1950, it has spread like a contagion since then. It arguably adds emphasis—e.g.:  
- “To see or not to see? Stratford is a must for every big-bus tour in England, and probably the single most [read most] popular side-trip from London.” Rick Steves, Rick Steves’ Great Britain 2008 269 (2008).  
- “Yves Saint Laurent, widely considered the single most [read most] influential fashion designer of the second half of the 20th century, died Sunday at age 71 at his Paris home after a long illness.” Wendy Donahue, “Yves Saint Laurent: 1936–2008,” Chicago Trib., 2 June 2008, News §, at 1  
- “[Anna] Wintour is an intimidating but somewhat elusive presence in the movie, but when she lets her bobbed hair down she reveals surprising insecurity for someone widely considered to be the single most influential person [read most influential person] in the $300 billion worldwide fashion industry.” Lou Lumenick, “It’s a Cold Wintour,” N.Y. Post, 18 Jan. 2009, at 11.

**single out (= to select or distinguish from others) is a PHRASAL VERB that has been common since the 17th century. Although it’s simplistically literal to insist that this idiom cannot refer to more than one thing, to couple it with a word such as many or several can be jarring. E.g.: “In both reviews, she singled out [read focused on? spotlighted?] several dancers for praise, including Yuan Yuan Tan in ‘Chi Lin’ and Lorena Feijoo in Yuri Posokhov’s ’Damned.’” David Wiegand, “Making It Big in New York,” S.F. Chron., 16 Oct. 2002, at D3. (A possible rewrite: In each review she praised individual dancers, including Yuan Yuan Tan in ‘Chi Lin’ and Lorena Feijoo in Yuri Posokhov’s ’Damned.’)”

**sineural.** See single.

**sink > sank > sunk.** The standard inflections have been fixed only since about 1880—and still there is some flux in print sources. The past participle often ousts the simple-past form from its rightful place—e.g.:  
- “When the Montreal Expos announced that they had selected outfielder Errick L. Williams in the annual Rule 5 draft, it caused barely a ripple of interest. Until it sunk [read sank] in exactly who Errick L. Williams was.” Larry Stone, “Montreal Picks, Plans to Trade Heisman-Toting Ricky Williams,” Seattle Times, 15 Dec. 1998, at E4. (On the second sentence in that example, see INCOMPLETE SENTENCES.)  
- “A 28-year-old man attending last year’s Oktoberfest, Munich’s celebration of beer-drinking and frivolity, was dancing on a table top when a woman he had never met came up behind him and sunk [read sank] her teeth into his leg.” Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Ein Bier, Bitte, but Watch Out for Biters,” N.Y. Times, 17 Aug. 1999, at F9.

**sineus.** Although the plural in Latin is sinus (it’s a fourth-declension noun), in English sinus uses has been the standard plural since the 18th century. To write *several sinus* is to engage in befuddling pedantry.
**siphon** (= a bent tube for transferring liquid) is now the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Syphon* is a variant.

Current ratio: 6:1

**sirloin**. So spelled—not *sirloin*. But even the correct spelling is a historical corruption of *surloin* (fr. Fr. sur “above” + loin). Folk etymologists claim that a Tudor or Stuart king “knighted” the cut of beef (“Sir Loin”), but the tale has no historical basis.

**sirroc**o. *Scirroco*. Meaning “an extremely hot and blighting wind,” *sirroco* has been predominantly so spelled since it was first used in the 17th century. *Scirocco* is a variant spelling that in recent years has been outnumbered in print sources by a 6-to-1 ratio.

Current ratio: 6:1

**sistren**. See *brethren*.

*sit* > *sat* > *sat*. So inflected. Except as part of the compound verb *babysit*, the mistaken form *sitted* rarely appears as a past tense (and even with *babysit* it’s wrong—see *babysit*). When it does appear, *sitted* is usually a mistake for *seated*—e.g.: “Tony Janetta, a local plumber who takes a keen interest in city government, raised Mayor Betty Jo Rhea’s ire a week ago when he began punctuating his remarks by pointing a pencil at council members *sitted* [read *seated*] a few feet away.” “Second Reading,” *Herald* (Rock Hill, S.C.), 11 Jan. 1993, at A4.

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*seated* for *sitted*: Stage 1

Current ratio (*seated* vs. *sitted*): 5,834:1

**site**; **sight**. This is yet another example of homophonic confusion. A *site* is a place or location; a *sight* is (among other things) something seen or worth seeing. This example is an unusually close call: “The intern liked to ask the 42-year-old lawyer, who was working for the firm as an independent contractor, for advice ranging from how to maintain integrity as a lawyer to what *sights* [read *sites?] he should visit in California.” “Victims of Chance in Deadly Rampage,” *N.Y. Times*, 7 July 1993, at A7. Why a close call? Because a *site* is a place, but one talks about *seeing the sights*.

This one isn’t: “The *site* [read *sight*], therefore, of Fudge stepping out of the fire once more, looking disheveled and fretful and sternly surprised that the Prime Minister did not know exactly why he was there, was about the worst thing that had happened in the course of this extremely gloomy week.” J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* 10 (1st Am. ed. 2005).

The phrase *set one’s sights* is a *set phrase* with its origins in gunnsmanship. It means “to aim at” or “to have as one’s ambition.” Writers sometimes mangle the phrase, most commonly by writing *sites* for *sights*—e.g.:

- “Miller and Laura lost their re-election bids in November and will be replaced by Republican commissioners who had set their *sites* [read *sights*] on eliminating Harrison’s job.” Hector Gutierrez, “Golden Manager to Get Extra Severance Pay,” *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), 25 Dec. 1996, at A36.

Cf. *sight unseen*. For other errors with *site*, see *cite*, n. (b).

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1. **sight** misused for *site*: Stage 2
2. **site** misused for *sight*: Stage 2

*sit on one’s laurels*. See *rest on one’s laurels*.

*sitted*. See *sit*.

**situation** has, in one of its senses, become a *vogue* word and is often used superfluously—e.g.: “When most Americans are reminded of the *starvation situation* [read *starvation*] in Africa, they probably recall the vivid pictures displayed on their television screens of thousands of sick and dying Somalis.” “Starving Continent,” *Houston Chron.*, 17 July 1993, at C12. In fact, *situation* typifies one kind of *abstractitis*, as the linguist Dwight Bolinger explains: “The general favorite [abstract noun] for a number of years has been *situation*—empty enough to cover any situation. . . . The operator explains, *Yes, we know, everyone’s having the same trouble*—we’re in a slow-talk situation. A radio report says that the weather does not permit a helicopter to maintain a landing situation. Two people in a fight are in a conflict situation. The result of no rain is a drought situation. The nice thing about *situation* is that you can add it to any self-sufficient action noun: crime situation, inflation situation, strike situation, attack situation, retreat situation.” Dwight Bolinger, *Language: The Loaded Weapon* 131 (1980). Used in this way—and even standing alone as in the television-crime-show cliché *we’ve got a situation here*—the word is a *euphemism* for problem.

**sizable**; **sizeable**. The preferred spellings are *sizable* in AmE, *sizeable* in BrE. See *mute e*.

**skeptic** is the standard spelling in AmE, *sceptic* in BrE. The BrE variant occasionally surfaces in AmE—e.g.: “How far toward *skepticism* [read *scepticism*] may students be led by their possible bewilderment?” James Sledd, “Hans Kurath on English Pronunciation,” 40
Am. Speech 201, 205 (1965). Yet the AmE preference for *sketic* has been fixed since about 1940.

**skew; skewer.** To *skew* is to change direction; to *skew* statistics is to make them misleading, especially by including some factor that is irrelevant to the inquiry. To *skewer* is (1) to impale, or (2) figuratively, to satirize or criticize. As a noun, a *skewer* is (1) a stick or rod that food is impaled on for cooking; or (2) something that skews something, esp. statistics or perception. *Skewer* is occasionally misused for the verb *skew*—e.g.:

- “Not only do they compete with their truly wild counterparts for food and habitat, their numbers *skew* [read *skew*] population counts of migratory Canadas.” Bill Burton, “Undesirables Create Fowl Condition,” Capital (Annapolis), 13 July 1997, at C12.
- “Critics of the system say the danger of open primaries is that crossover voters will intentionally *skewer* [read *skew*] the results of the opposition party’s races in hopes of nominating a candidate who can be defeated by their own party.” Will Anderson, “Officials See Significant Cross-Ticket Voting in Primary,” Atlanta J.-Const., 15 July 2000, at G3.

As a noun in sense 2, *skewer* is used correctly here: “What was he doing in that bathroom with that girl at five in the morning, drunk?” Barker asked. ‘Alcohol is the number one *skewer* of reality.” Sandy Nelesen, “Tight End Emotional as Verdict Delivered,” Green Bay Press-Gaz., 4 Feb. 2001, at A1 (quoting Waukesha County District Attorney Paul Bucher).

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*skewer* misused for *skew*: Stage 1

**skewbald.** See *piebald*.

**skid > skidded > skidded.** *Skid* is an incorrect past tense that occurs only in AmE—e.g.:


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*skid* misused for past tense *skidded*: Stage 2

Current ratio (car *skidded* vs. *car skid*): 11:1

**skied** is the past tense of both the verb *ski* (<she skied (/skid/) down the advanced slopes>) and the verb *sky* (<he skied (/skid/) his tee shot, and it went only 100 yards>). For the second of these, *skyped* is a variant spelling that might have served well for purposes of differentiation, but usage in golf, baseball, and basketball has now settled on *skied*. In the present participle, *ski* becomes *skiing* and *sky* becomes *skying*.

**skillful. A. And *skillful*.** The AmE spelling is *skillful*, the BrE *skilful*. Cf. *willful*.

**B. And *skilled*.** Since the 16th century, the adjective *skilled* has commonly appeared in such collocations as *skilled artisan*, *skilled engineer*, and *skilled seaman*. *Skilled* has always predominated in word frequency over *skillful*—which can refer to professionals but often appears in collocations such as *skillful diligence* and *skillful management*.

**skill-less**—so hyphenated—is sometimes misspelled *skillless*. E.g.: “Regardless of what people think, it’s not a *skillless* [read *skill-less*] job,” said a clerk at a west end Safeway.” Mike Sadava, “No Stores to Shut if Strike Hits Safeway,” Edmonton J., 21 Mar. 1997, at B3. See PUNCTUATION (i).

**skim milk; skimmed milk.** Though the latter was the original form in the 18th century, *skim milk* is now standard AmE, outstripping the other in frequency of use by a 5-to-1 ratio. Yet in BrE, *skimmed milk* remains (just barely) the predominant form. See ADJECTIVES (f). Cf. *fine-toothed comb, iced tea & stained glass*.

Current ratio (World English): 3:1

**skullduggery; skullduggery; *scullduggery*; *scull-duggery*. Skullduggery (= trickery; unscrupulous behavior) has traditionally been the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. It remains so in BrE. But in the mid-1990s, about the time of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal, AmE sources began predominantly using *skullduggery*—and this predominance has continued. It’s in keeping with similar AmE spellings such as *skillful* and *willful*, for both of which BrE drops the first *-l-. The other two are variant forms.

**skull; scull.** *Skull* = the head of a skeleton. *Scull* = (1) a small light racing boat for use by one, two, or four persons; (2) one of a pair of oars used with such a boat; or (3) a single oar used at the stern of a boat to propel it forward by working the oar from side to side.

**SKUNKED TERMS.** When a word undergoes a marked change from one use to another—a phase that might take ten years or a hundred—it’s likely to be the subject of dispute. Some people (Group 1) insist on the traditional use; others (Group 2) embrace the new use, even if it originated purely as the result of word-swapping or slipshod extension. Group 1 comprises various members of the literati, ranging from language aficionados to hard-core purists; Group 2 comprises linguistic liberals and those who don’t concern themselves much with language. As time goes by, Group 1 dwindles; meanwhile, Group 2 swells (even without an increase among the linguistic liberals).

A word is most hotly disputed in the middle part of this process: any use of it is likely to distract some readers. The new use seems illiterate to Group 1; the old use seems odd to Group 2. The word has become “skunked.”

*Hopefully* is a good case in point. Until the early 1960s, the word appeared only infrequently—always with the meaning “in a hopeful manner” <she watched hopefully as her son, having teed off, walked...
down the first fairway>. Then a new use came into vogue, in the sense “one hopes; I hope; it is to be hoped” <hopefully, they’ll get it done on time>. The Group 1 objectors were vocal (for reasons explained under hopefully), and for a time the word acquired a bad odor. But with time the odor has faded, so that only a few diehards continue to condemn the word and its users.

To the writer or speaker for whom credibility is important, it’s a good idea to avoid distracting any readers or listeners—whether they’re in Group 1 or Group 2. On this view, hopefully is now unusable: some members of Group 1 continue to stigmatize the newer meaning, and any member of Group 2 would find the old meaning peculiar.

Among the skunked terms discussed at their own entries are data, decimate, effete, enormity, fulsome, impassionate, intrigue & transpire. (Among the other candidates for inclusion are celibate, chauvinism, and jejune.) For an early discussion of skunked terms (not using this label), see Edward A. Stephen son, “Stenochoric Patterns and Avoidance Choices,” 43 Am. Speech 309–11 (1968).

sky, vb. See seeked.

skyjacking; hijack. Today airline hijackings are still sometimes termed skyjackings. But hijacking remains the more common word. See hijack & portmanteau words.

slacken (off). See phrasal verbs.

slay. See see.

slander. See defamation.

*slanderize is a needless variant of slander, vb. It seems to occur mostly in speech—e.g.:

• “If you’re a politician, you should give an awful lot of thought to what you’re saying, particularly when you’re going to slanderize [read slander] your opponent.” Sam Howe Verhovek, “Sticking with One of Their Men,” N.Y. Times, 24 Oct. 1992, 8 1, at 25 (quoting Alan Riley, a sports-card dealer).


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*slanderize for the verb slander*  Stage 1 Current ratio (slander, vb. vs. *slanderize): 2,009:1

**SLANG**, a notoriously difficult term to define, has potentially four characteristics: (1) it is markedly lower in dignity than standard English; (2) it typically surfaces first in the language of people with low status or with a low level of responsibility; (3) it is more or less taboo in the discourse of those with high status or a high degree of responsibility; and (4) it displaces a conventional term to protect the user either from discomfort caused by the conventional term or from the annoyance of fully elaborated expression. See Bethany K. Dumas & Jonathan Lighter, “Is Slang a Word for Linguists?” 53 Am. Speech 5, 14–15 (1978). A term meeting any two of those four criteria probably qualifies as slang. Ibid. Most slang is linguistically rebellious—purposely infra dig. It is a mistake to think of slang as being the same as dialect, although the two may overlap.

It can hardly be surprising that reactions to slang vary widely. The famously nonconformist Walt Whitman called slang “an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself illimitably, which in the highest walks produces poets and poems.” “Slang in America” (1885), in 2 The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman 572, 573 (Floyd Stovall ed., 1964). Others have extolled it in hardly less exalted terms:

• “Pedants, prigs, purists, precisians, and all dry-witted and thin-witted persons naturally hate slang, because it is alive. But men of rich natures love slang. It is the wild game of language.” Educational Review (1892) (as quoted in C.H. Ward, What Is English? 391–92 [1925]).

• “[A]n accustomed word sometimes seems to lose its force through familiarity, and the substitution of a picturesque or ludicrous metaphor enlivens the dullness of ordinary straightforward speech. This impulse accounts for the growth of what we call slang.” Henry Bradley, The Making of English 174–75 (1904; repr. 1951).

• “Slang originates in the effort of ingenious individuals to make the language more pungent and picturesque—to increase the store of terse and striking words, to widen the boundaries of metaphor, and to provide a vocabulary for new shades of difference in meaning.” H.L. Mencken, “The Nature of Slang” (1919), in A Language Reader for Writers 150, 155 (James R. Gaskin & Jack Suberman eds., 1966).

Although prescriptive linguists are often depicted as stern opponents of slang, the most prescriptive of them all saw its place: “A little racy slang may well be used in the course of one’s daily talk; it sometimes expresses that which otherwise would be difficult, if not impossible, of expression.” Richard Grant White, Words and Their Uses, Past and Present 42 (1870). A decade later, in another book, White wrote a little more expansively: “Slang has, in many cases, a pith and pungency which make it not only pardonable, but tolerable. It often expresses a feeling, if not a thought, of the passing day, which could not be so forcibly described—[for the day]—in any other phraseology.” Every-Day English 484 (1880).

Other commentators, though, have described slang much less flatteringly:

• “Slang is to a people’s language what an epidemic disease is to their bodily constitution; just as catching and just as inevitable in its run. . . . Like a disease, too, it is severest where the sanitary conditions are most neglected, where

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*).  • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
there is least culture and thought to counteract it.” John F. Genung, *Outlines of Rhetoric* 32 (1893).  
- “Slang words belong to a generally unauthorized vocabulary, which every speaker of English should be able to do without.” H.N. MacCracken & Helen E. Sandison, *Manual of Good English* 3 (1917).  
- “The man and the woman who interlard their speech with colloquialisms and slang are like the individual who picks up weeds when he might gather flowers.” Frank H. Vizetelly, *How to Use English* 21 (1933).  

So where does the truth lie? Perhaps somewhere in between the two views. If the focus is on speech, then slang undoubtedly has its place in every normal person’s mouth. Some will use it more than others. It grows out of a desire for novelty (freshness), experience shared with others (specialization), a sense of humor and a delight in metaphor (playfulness), an economy of words (pithiness), and sometimes a desire to be part of an in-group (secrecy).

One commentator has unscientifically suggested an archetypal pattern for the spread of much slang: from the underworld to the lower classes, then to hip middle-class youths, then to Madison Avenue and TV comedians, and then to the general population. See Frances D. Ross, “The Spread of Slang,” *52 Am. Speech* 97 (1977). She notes that “steps are sometimes skipped or reversed” with a given slang term and that “there is generally a three- to fifteen-year lag between its first appearance and its wide use or understanding.” This may accurately describe how some slang develops and spreads, but certainly not all—since slang is produced by linguistic mavericks of all descriptions.

Most slang is ephemeral; it never makes its way into the general language. One linguist estimates that the “half-life of a slang expression is of the order of magnitude of one year, which implies that about one spec-imen in a thousand will survive for ten years.” Martin Joos, *The Five Clocks* 26–27 (1961). So a slang term can make writing look noticeably dated. But some of it does survive and become standard (e.g., *fad, joke, redeye flight, rubbernecking, skyscraper, slump*).

Slang is one of the main sources by which the language is renewed. We shouldn’t think of it as something new and threatening; it is old and for the most part wholesome. It has always been with us, and with our forebears from time immemorial—or should this be for *gee whiz, who knows how long?*

For more on slang, see the following books:


**SLASH.** See punctuation (q).

**slay > slew > slain. A. Generally. Slay = (1) to kill; or (2) to overwhelm, often with delight. In sense 1, the verb has gradually been disappearing from common use except in poetry, headlines, and references to crime victims—e.g., *her son was slain by a stranger in 2002*. Even that usage is unusual; the more usual word would be *killed or murdered.*

But as a past-participial adjective, *slain* has few if any suitable alternatives—e.g.: “He was the host at a Rose Garden ceremony in which he signed into law bills to fight legal drugs, keep track of sex offenders and provide college funds for the children of slain police officers.” Adam Nagourney, “Clinton in North, Dole in South, Study for Debate,” *N.Y. Times*, 4 Oct. 1996, at A1. Many would use a wordier phrase such as *police officers killed in the line of duty.*

**B. *Slayed for slew.* Although *slay* is the preferred past-tense form in both senses, the variant *slayed* sometimes appears—e.g.:”

- “As the candidate who politically *slayed* [read *slew*] the powerful Phillips in a strongly Democratic district, she has been a magnet for media attention.” Richard D. Walton, “Indiana’s Freshmen Hope to Offer Fresh Perspective,” *Indianapolis Star*, 5 Jan. 1995, at A1.
- “Simon *slayed* [read *slew*] the Wildcats at the free-throw line, where he was 14 of 17.” Timothy W. Smith, “Simon and Bibby: Ice Under Pressure,” *N.Y. Times*, 1 Apr. 1997, at B17.

This nonstandard variant also commonly appears in sense 2—e.g.:


See irregular verbs.

**Language-Change Index**

*slayed for slew: Stage 1

Current ratio (slew vs. *slayed*): 78:1

**sleight of hand.** This term—meaning “a hand-trick or other display of dexterity”—is the native English equivalent of *legerdemain*. *Sleight* (slät/) derives from the Middle English word *sleahthe* (= wisdom, cleverness). Although in the early 14th century it was recorded as *sliht*, the word we now know by that spelling is a quite different Anglo-Saxon word. Because the two words are homophones, writing
*slight of hand instead of sleight of hand has long been a fairly common error—e.g.:

- "There is no Joycean word-play to puzzle over; no ingenuous narrative slight [read sleight] of hand." Merle Rubin, "New Yorker Writer's Miniature Novels," Christian Science Monitor, 15 Jan. 1997, at 15. (If sleight of hand was involved, the intended word must have been ingenious—not ingenuous. See ingenious.)
- "Budgets were only 'balanced' with the use of one-time revenues from land sales, diversions of sewer and water funds (almost $100 million) and other budget slight[s] [read slight[s] of hand]." Mary Ball & Scott Barnett, "Solving San Diego's Fiscal Problems," San Diego Union-Trib., 6 May 2001, at G3.

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*slight of hand for sleight of hand: Stage 2
Current ratio (sleight of hand vs. *slight of hand): 13:1

slew, n. (= a large number), which most commonly appears in the phrase whole slew, is sometimes misspelled *slough (= a stagnant bog—pronounced /sloʊ/)—e.g.:

- "Watch for a whole slew [read sl we] of indictments to be issued today stemming from a major cargo theft ring involving baggage handlers at O'Hare Airport." Michael Sneed, "Tipsville," Chicago Sun-Times, 22 May 1992, at 2.
- "There are winter onions, Egyptian onions and a whole slough [read sl we] of other types grown only by onion aficionados."

Sometimes, too, it's wrongly made *slue (= an act of rotating or veering)—e.g.:

- "'GoldenEye' . . . has one insane villain, two beautiful women (one good, one bad) and a slue [read slew] of high-tech gadgets." Jonathan Tucker, "Brosnan's Bond Makes 'GoldenEye' a Hit," San Antonio Express-News, 9 Dec. 1995.
- "Many companies and organizations have decided having a slue [read slew] of managers or directors wasn't good enough and have handed out vice president titles like they were Ad Sheeets on a downtown street corner." "Government Needs Change," Iowa City Press-Citizen, 7 July 2005, at A7.

For still further confusions between these words, see slough & slew.

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1. slough misused for slew: Stage 1
Current ratio (whole slew vs. *whole slough): 89:1
2. sleuce misused for slew: Stage 1
Current ratio (a slue vs of. *a slue of): 256:1

slew, vb. See slay.

slied-back hair. That's the phrase, not *slied-back hair—e.g.: "Wearing slied-back [read slided-back] hair, a series of sleek evening outfits, and a raффish smile, he's more than a dancer." Frank Rich, Hot Seat 59 (1998).

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*slied-backed for slided-backed: Stage 1

slide > slid > slid. So inflected. A few older grammar books listed *slidden as an alternative or even a preferred past-participial form. See, e.g., O.M. Hanna & Joseph S. Taylor, 1600 Drill Exercises in Corrective English 71 (rev. ed. 1936) (listing *slidden before slid). Today most dictionaries don't even list *slidden, which occurred mostly in the 18th and 19th centuries, but never as commonly as the past-participial slid. It still occasionally appears, especially as a past-participial adjective (and most frequently in the adjective backslidden)—e.g.: "He's been a devout Pentecostal Christian and a back-slidden agnostic and suffered his share of chronic depression and nervous breakdowns." John La Briola, "Devil in the Details," Denver Westword, 26 July 2001. As a past-participial verb, the nonstandard *slidden is somewhat more common in BrE—e.g.: "I don't think there was physical space for the gun even to have slidden beneath the car." John Macleod, "The Death of Willie McRae," Herald (Glasgow), 28 Mar. 1995, at 10. It's not recommended in AmE.

The past-tense form *slided is standard only in the compound slip-slided—e.g.: "For most of the day, [Ruston] Boucher had slip-slided through other subdivisions and sauntered up to a retirement home." Tim Bryant & Stephen Deere, "No Street Slick Enough to Keep Florists from Getting Valentine's Flowers to You," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 14 Feb. 2007, at A1. In other constructions, it's erroneous—e.g.:

- "They helped Bezanson put on a life jacket after he crawled onto the truck's hood, then got him into a basket that was slided [read slid] across the ladder to land." "N.H. Divers Rescue Driver fromICY River," Seattle Times, 19 Apr. 2001, at A2.

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See irregular verbs.

**slang > slung > slung.** So inflected in AmE and BrE alike. As a past-tense form, slang is dialectal (see dialect). As a past participle meaning "placed in a sling," slinged can be convenient, but it can also be startlingly ambiguous—e.g.: "Pediatric experts such as Dr. William Sears claim slinged babies are more alert." Sue Gleiter, "Baby on Board: Sling Allows Moms to Enjoy Hands-Off Freedom," *Post-Standard* (Syracuse), 9 Sept. 2007, at I4. Outside that limited sense, the nonword *slinged* is an infrequent error—e.g.:

- "But [Ramon] Ortiz slinged [read slung] his way through eight innings and 92 pitches, holding the Yankees to that one run on seven hits." LaVelle E. Neal III, "Putting an End to the Party," *Star Trib.* (Minneapolis), 12 Apr. 2007, at C1.
- "Starting quarterback Anthony Morelli threw the game's only interception and was sacked twice, but he said it was no big deal. 'I just went out and slinged [read slung] it around a little bit,' he said." Bernard Fernandez, "Size Could Pay Off for Lions," *Phil. Daily News*, 23 Apr. 2007, Sports §, at 107.

See irregular verbs.

**slingshot > slingshot > slingshot.** Although the word is most often a noun, the corresponding verb is so inflected. The erroneous past-tense and past-participial form *slingshooted* sometimes appears—e.g.: "It also sling-shoted [read slingshot] Schreyer into this week's U.S. Open." Jim Benson, "Hot Puttter Fuels Big Comeback," *Pantagraph* (Bloomington, Ill.), 9 June 1997, at B1. See irregular verbs.

**slipshod extension.** Several entries in this dictionary refer to this type of misuse. "Slipshod extension" denotes the mistaken stretching of a word beyond its accepted meanings, the mistake lying in a misunderstanding of the true sense. It occurs most often, explained H.W. Fowler, "when some accident gives currency among the uneducated to words of learned origin, and the more if they are isolated or have few relatives in the vernacular" (*FMEU1* at 540). Today, one might rightly accuse not only the uneducated but also the educated of the linguistic distortion of *literally* and *protagonist*, to name but two of many possible examples. See *literally* & *protagonist*. For other examples, see *ad hoc*, *alibi*, *compound*, *dilemma*, *egoism*, *factor*, *hopefully*, *medicine*, *veracity*, *verbal*, *viable* & *vitiate*.

**slink > slunk > slunk.** So inflected. *Slink* and *slinked* are nonstandard variants in the past tense and past participle—e.g.:

- "The advent of the riders bruted by scurvid curs that howled wondedly and slank [read slunk] among the crumbling walls." Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, Or, The Evening Redness in the West* 97 (1992). (On the fragmentary nature of that sentence, see *incomplete sentences.*)

- "He rolled the flag into a ball and slinked [read slunk] off the track. His bronze medal was gone." [Wallace] Spearmon had been DQd for weaving off of his lane too many times." Mike Downey, "Runaway Reign," *Chicago Trib.*, 21 Aug. 2008, Sports §, at 1.

Meanwhile, the erroneous form *slinked* sometimes appears as a past-tense verb or participle—e.g.:


See irregular verbs.

**sliver.** See slither.

**slough.**

A. *Pronunciation.* Depending on the meaning, this word can rhyme with *through*, *bough*, or *rough*.

As a noun, *slough* /slәf/ = (1) a muddy bog; or (2) a place ridden with immorality. (*Slew* and *slue*, which are frequent misspellings of this word, are actually different words. See *slew* & *slue*.)

As a verb, *slough* is pronounced /slәf/ (see (b)).

The pronunciation /slow/ is a chiefly BrE variant in the noun senses.

B. *Misspelled sluff as a Verb.*** Slough off (= [1] to shed an outer skin; or [2] to cast off, discard) is sometimes incorrectly written *sluff off* (a phonetic spelling)—e.g.: “As he delves deeper into a lousy world in which people steal children for money, he expands, *sluffs* [read *sloughs*] off his lethargy and assumes the role of avenger.” Chris Meehan, “Child’s Kidnapping Role of Avenger.”

As a slang term, *sluff* means “to be lazy; shirk responsibilities” <Johnny, have you been sluffing off again?>. In this sense the phonetic spelling is passable.

As a noun, *slue* is more often used <Jaynie, have you been sluffing off again?>. In this sense the phonetic spelling is passable.

*sluff off*. In this sense the phonetic spelling is passable.

As a verb, *sluff* is pronounced /slәf/ (see (b)).

The pronunciation /slow/ is a chiefly BrE variant in the noun senses.

**sludge; slush; slurry.** These messy-sounding words, perhaps onomatopoeic, have pretty well-defined contours. But all could be sloshed around in. *Sludge* = (1) thick sediment or mud at the bottom of a liquid; (2) the solid matter that is left after industrial waste or sewage has been cleaned; or (3) thick dirty oil within an engine or similar machinery. *Slush* = (1) partly melted snow; (2) soft mud; a marshy mire; (3) greasy refuse left after frying; (4) trashy, pollyannish writing; or (5) unsolicited submissions for publication in a magazine. *Slurry* = a watery mixture of mud, coal, animal waste, plaster of Paris, or similar insoluble materials.

**slue.** vb. (= to swing or slide centrifugally), is the standard spelling. E.g.: “At one point we *slwed* so sharply toward the edge that I inadvertently clutched at the Nepali interloper sitting next to me.” Karen Swenson, “On the Road to Tibet,” *Wall Street J.*, 16 Sept. 1994, at A8. *Slew*, however, is a variant form particularly common in BrE. But especially because that term has other meanings, the language would be well served if everyone followed the majority of American dictionaries and stuck to *slue* for this sense. Cf. *slew* & *slough*.

**sluffy.** See slough (a).

**slumberous; *slumbrous*.** Although *slumbrous* is older, *slumberous* has become the standard form in both AmE and BrE. The shift occurred in the early 19th century. *Slumbrous* occurs mostly in BrE.

**slurry.** See sludge.

**slush.** See sludge.

**sly (= wily, cunning, sneaky) preferably makes slyer, slyest, and slyly—whether in AmE or BrE. Some writers misguidedly use the variant spellings *slier, sliest, and slyly*—e.g.:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Rejected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Widely shunned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Widespread but...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Ubiquitous but...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Fully accepted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
• “This is not a Michael Jordan-light-up-a-planet smile but something slier [read slyer], more subtle, the expression of a man who has a private joke.” Michael Farber, “Cat Quick,” Sports Illustrated, 2 June 1997, at 68.
• “Two years after his song ‘Accidental Racist’ sparked a firestorm he said was the result of being misunderstood, Paisley—one of Nashville’s slicest [read sliest], smartest songwriters—is taking extra care to present his positions clearly.” Mikael Wood, “Paisley Follows Simpler Pattern,” L.A. Times, 8 June 2015, Calendar §, at 1.

Cf. shy & spry.

Current ratio (slyest vs. *sliest): 8:1
Current ratio (slyly vs. *silyly): 12:1

smell > smelled > smelt. So inflected today in AmE and BrE alike. Smelt is now an exclusively BrE variant.

smite > smote > smitten. So inflected in AmE and BrE alike. This verb almost always appears in biblical allusions—almost never in purely secular contexts. So when it does appear in a secular setting, it can seem almost facetious—e.g., “American and British readiness to smite Iraq has forced Mr. Hussein to listen, and he is now beginning to negotiate some of the terms for opening up suspected weapons sites to United Nations inspection, senior American, French and British officials say.” “Putting Steel in Democracy to Scare the Iraqis,” N.Y. Times, 11 Feb. 1998, at A1, A6. See irregular verbs.

Smithsonian Institution. This is the name—not *Smithsonian Institute.

smokey, adj., is so spelled—not *smokey. But the lovable mascot’s name is Smokey Bear (or Smokey the Bear).

smolder; smoulder. Smolder (= to burn slowly without flame) is the standard spelling in AmE, smoulder in BrE. The shift in American spelling (from smoulder to smolder) occurred in the late 1930s.

smooth, vb.; *smoothen. The latter is a needless variant—e.g., “But eventually, Dr. Toaff insists, the knobs and bulges will smoothen [read smooth] out.” Natalie Angier, “One Woman’s Decision Against a Hysterectomy,” N.Y. Times, 18 Feb. 1997, at C1.

The verb is often misspelled *smoothe, doubtless on the analogy of soothe and teethe—e.g., “They are also using a polishing process that smoothies [read smooths] the metal that sits above the circuitry.” Benjamin Ford, “Another Dimension,” Forbes, 22 July 2002, at 173. This misspelling may also be influenced by the past-tense form: smoothed.

Language-Change Index
1. *smoothe for the verb smooth: Stage 1
   Current ratio (to smooth vs. *to smoothe): 151:1
2. *smoothen for the verb smooth: Stage 1
   Current ratio (smoothed vs. *smoothened): 81:1

smoother. See smolder.

snaky (= [1] teeming with snakes, or [2] resembling a snake) is the standard spelling in World English—*snakey being an uncommon variant.

Current ratio: 20:1

sneak > sneaked > sneaked. So inflected. See *snuck.

snivel, vb., makes sniveled and sniveling in AmE, snivelled and snivelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

snoothead: Stage 1
Current ratio (to snivel vs. *to snool): 112:1

snoothead. See sniveling.

snoothead. See sniveling.

snoothead. See sniveling.

snoothead. See sniveling.
in AmE and BrE alike for hundreds of years. The form *snuck sneaked into the language about 1915 and began spreading wildly about 1970. Surprisingly, *snuck appears almost as often as sneaked in modern print sources—e.g.:

- “They include all that weird wording snuck [read sneaked] into bills to assure that the gravy train stops at your station.” Steve Tidrick, “The Budget Inferno,” New Republic, 29 May 1995, at 17. (On the misuse of assure for ensure in that example, see assure.)
- “He says he snuck [read sneaked] to female friends’ homes to play with their dolls, since his mother, a Southern Baptist, answered with a big N-O to his request for a ‘Solo in the Spotlight’ Barbie, and his father ‘lipped out.’” Taylor Ward, “Ken—and His Barbies,” St. Petersburg Times, 6 Dec. 1996, Time Out §, at 4.
- “The next day, Gowdy and I snuck [read sneaked] off camera to a mesquite thicket where birds were flying thick and fast.” Bob Whitaker, “Fishy Stories of Wildlife Conquests; Comedy,” Ariz. Republic, 29 May 1997, Out There §, at 1.
- “I snuck [read sneaked] behind the scenes at yesterday’s party preparations and lived a day in the life of the A-list.” Julie Hannah, “Getting Ready for a Night on the Styles,” Daily Record (Glasgow), 4 Sept. 2015, at 22.

See dialect. See also irregular verbs (D).

For a similar word that in standard English is a regular verb (drag > dragged > dragged) but has a nonstandard past form (*drug), see drag.

One odd point about this dialectal past-tense form is that it couldn’t have been influenced by analogy from some other verb ending in -eak (-eek, -eek, leak, peek, reek, streak). Even the irregular verbs don’t end in -eak (-seek, -sought, break–broke–broken).

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*snuck for sneaked: Stage 4
Current ratio (sneaked vs. *snuck): 1:3:1

so. A. Beginning Sentences with. Like And and But, so is a good word for beginning a sentence (no comma following). Each of these three is the informal equivalent of a heavier and longer conjunctive adverb (Additionally, However, and Consequently or Therefore). Rhetoric, not grammar, is what counts here. The shorter word affords a brisker pace—e.g.:

- “After more than tripling the magazine’s newsstand sales, she was hired by Hearst Magazines to start the U.S. version of Marie Claire . . . . The 1994 start-up became the most successful in the company’s history. So she was picked to succeed Brown.” Jenny Scott, “New Cosmo Editor’s Life Is a Page Right Out of the Magazine,” San Diego Union-Trib., 1 June 1997, at D5.
- “The world they’ve been living in has been broken, says he. So they cling to football: an old ritual to get them through New Year’s Day.” William Green, “‘The Sky Was Falling,” Forbes, 2 June 1997, at 208.

See and (A) & but (A).

Of course, in standard English the sentence-starting so should follow from what has been said before. It should introduce a conclusion. If it’s a message-starting so—for example, the first word of an e-mail or text message—it’s nothing but a speech tic reduced to writing. And it’s a tic that will annoy readers who are traditionalists, especially those born before 1980 or so. The message-starting so is a bit of trendy, youthful slang.

B. For very. In traditional usage, so is a comparative adverb <so cold I could die> <so cumbersome that I don’t want it> <he’s not so tall as she is>. Gradually, speakers and writers began dropping the final part of the comparison <he’s so tall!> <she’s so smart> <it’s so cold>. Essentially, so became an intensifier without any necessary sense of comparison—much as that is now doing. (See that (E).) This use of so for very remains a casualism.

C. *So therefore. Coupling so with therefore typically results in a redundancy—e.g.:

- “So therefore [read Therefore], wise British businesses should carry on with the notion of sterling as a generally strong currency in the medium term.” Hamish McRae, “What Will Happen to the Pound Outside the Eurozone?” Independent, 23 Jan. 2003, at 22.
- “So, therefore, [read So] with all the opportunity for armchair psychoanalyzing, getting to know the real Mr. Archer should be a slam dunk, right?” Carol Herman, “Peer Disgraced but Managing to ‘Thrift, Still,’” Wash. Times, 2 Feb. 2003, at B6.

D. The Construction so . . . as. See as as as (A).

sobriquet; *soubriquet. Soubriquet (/soh-bre’kay/) is the standard spelling of this term for an assumed name, a nickname, or an epithet. *Sobriquet is a variant form that has never predominated and has been relatively uncommon since about 1900.

Current ratio: 6:1

social. A. And societal; *societary. Although the two main words overlap to some degree, they are distinguishable. Social = (1) living in companies or organized communities <man is a social animal>; (2) concerned with the mutual relations of (classes of) human beings <the social compact>; or (3) of or in or toward society <social intercourse> (COD).

Societal has replaced *societary (now merely a needless variant) in the sense “of, relating to, or dealing with society.” E.g.:

- “Teenagers are more likely to have unprotected sex when they have been drinking. And that can lead to other societal concerns.” Ralph Hingson, “Tough Laws, Enforcement Slow Teenage Drinking,” Boston Globe, 5 Oct. 1997, at E1.

B. And sociable. Sociable = ready for companionship; quick to unite with others; gregarious. Social = relating to people in society.
social media. Among the many changes ushered in by the use of social media is the tendency to treat media as a mass noun that takes a singular verb. In print sources worldwide, social media has much more commonly been treated as singular since the term really caught on in about 2003. See media.

sociopath. See psychopath.

sodomite; *sodomist. The first outnumber the second by a 20-to-1 ratio in modern print sources, so that *sodomist might be fairly classified as a need-less variant. Of course, either term is objectionable as an excessively hidebound and moralistic pejorative for "someone who engages in sodomy"—e.g.: "Loeb immediately took up the cause and has continued a campaign against the GSO [Gay Students Association] for two years, preferring to call the GSO 'sodomites' for headline purposes in the [Manchester, N.H.] Union Leader." Kevin Cash, Who the Hell Is William Loeb? 383 (1975). For "an inhabitant of Sodom," the word is capitalized: Sodomite.

sodomy. This ambiguous term can include almost any kind of "unnatural" sex, though it is most often confined to anal intercourse and bestiality. Sodomy was not a traditional common-law offense, though an early statute criminalizing it became a part of the common law of many American jurisdictions. These statutes have been nullified by Supreme Court decisions.

*software program. Avoid this redundancy. Either word will do, though software will usually be the better choice because it's the narrower term.

soi-disant = self-proclaimed. This French affectation is inferior both to the translation just given and to self-styled. E.g.: • "What it may need instead is an establishment with the nerve to tell the soi-disant [read self-proclaimed] victims: Stop kvetching." Michael S. Greve, "Remote Control Tuning for Speech," Wash. Times, 9 Nov. 1996, at D3.


Sometimes the gallecism is misused for so-called—e.g.: "When Paul Robeson sang the song in the London production of Show Boat in 1928, the biggest problem he had was wrapping his beautiful, impeccable vowels around the soi-disant [read so-called] dialect lyric." Mark Steyn, "Paint It Black," Am. Spectator, Mar. 1997, at 44, 46.

Sol. See earth.

solace/sahl-әs/ (= comfort in sorrow or trouble; relief from distress) should not be used merely as a synonym of comfort, without the circumstance of grief or distress being implied. The misuse occurs here: "Companies with the greatest market share often have a tendency to 'sit on a lead.' They will take solace [read undue pride?] in their numbers, become complacent, and lose their competitive edge." Mark H. McCormack, What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School 205–06 (1984).

sola topi (= a pith helmet, originating in India, made from the sola plant) is sometimes misspelled *solar topi (and has been since the 19th century)—e.g.: • "But she kept the English cricketing cap and the sola topi [read sola topi]," Joan Bridgman, "Mad Dogs, English-women and Nureyev," Contemp. Rev., 1 Apr. 1995, at 213.

• "The other common headgear, popular particularly among officers and commissars, was the casque colonial or solar topi [read sola topi], made of cork or pressed fibre covered with cloth." Martin Windrow, The Last Valley 157 (2004).

• "Most importantly for the health of Anglo-Indians was the solar topi [read sola topi], a sort of fetish that demonstrated British ability to overcome debilitating heat." Steven Patterson, The Cult of Honor in British India 112 (2009).

Once in a while the error is compounded into a malapropism—e.g.: "Imperialism is back in vogue. With global stability threatened by failed states (or near states) like Afghanistan and Palestine, the literature on international affairs is suddenly rife with articles whose authors seem to be channeling Rudyard Kipling. . . . All the President needs is a sola toupee [read sola topi] and a cut-glass English accent." Michael Elliott, "George W. Kipling," Time, 8 July 2002, at 35. See double bobbles.

It is pronounced /soh-la toh-pee/. *Sola topee is an alternative spelling.

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sola topi misspelled *solar topi: Stage 3
Current ratio: 2:1

sole (= the one and only; single) should not be used with a plural noun, as it sometimes is. Only is the better choice—e.g.:

• "Pakistan's soldiers seem to be the sole [read only] people in the country with a sense of duty and national responsibility." Eric Margolis, "Pakistan's Rid of Bhutto, but Other Woes Remain," Toronto Sun, 9 Feb. 1997, at C5.

• "The first [flawed premise] is that grade point average (GPA) and SAT scores are the sole [read only] criteria for ranking students." Letter of Mark L. Liquorman, "Quotas Still Needed," St. Petersburg Times, 30 Nov. 1997, at D2.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
sole followed by a plural noun: Stage 2

solecism. Generally, solecism (/sahl-ә-siz-әm/) refers to a grammatical or syntactic error, often a gross mistake. E.g.:


• "I once spoke French well enough to teach in a Marseille lycee—but that was 25 years ago and today I could hardly string two sentences together without committing some gross solecism." Michael Dirda, "The Lingo Kid," Wash. Post, 18 May 1997, Book World §, at 15.

A solecism can also be a social impropriety, especially in Br—e.g.: "'This [feeding fruitcake to the royal corgis] is always regarded as an unforgivable solecism at the Palace, where only the Queen is permitted to

Yet the word has been extended to figurative senses in AmE as well—e.g.: • “Yet in the end Siddiqui’s artistry overrides even the solicisms of the [musical] score.” Jenny Gilbert, “Delicate Hands, Feet of Artistry,” Independent, 23 Mar. 1997, at 15.

• “It is full of junk history, such as the rustic ideal of the country cottage, which he appears not to realize is an entirely modern idea; or the tiresome solicism, that everyone likes ‘Georgian’ architecture, but that ‘speculative development’ is necessarily bad.” Boaz Ben Manasseh, “Spirit and Place,” Architectural Rev., 1 Nov. 2002, at 96.

solely. Like only, this word is sometimes misplaced syntactically—e.g.: “Orick said that although the educational programs are sponsored by Purdue University, they are not solely related [read related solely] to preservation of agricultural farmlands.” Welton W. Harris II, “Land-Use Plan Sessions Scheduled,” Indianapolis News, 2 Dec. 1997, Metro N. §, at 1. See only.

Also, the word is fairly frequently misspelled solely—e.g.: “Since playing basketball as a freshman, Prentiss has concentrated solely [read solely] on softball.” John Hines, “Buffaloes Figure to Roam Farther,” San Antonio Express-News, 9 Feb. 1997, at C8. Cf. agilely & futilely. See adverbs (b).

solemnity is sometimes misspelled solemnness and has been since the early 19th century. E.g.: “Contrast solemnness [read solemnness] and spooky guitar noise with bright melodies and a flair for rocking.” Kieran Grant, “Love and Rockets Still Setting Off Fireworks,” Toronto Sun, 8 Apr. 1996, Entertainment §, at 36. Surprisingly, the OED lists the misspelling as a variant; it surely doesn’t warrant that standing, since it violates every sound principle of word formation. In any event, a far better choice is to use the familiar solemnity. Current ratio (solemnity vs. solemnness vs. *solemness): 680:1:1:1

solicit. A. For elicit. To solicit a response is to request it. To elicit a response is to get it. But some writers confuse the two, usually by misusing solicit for elicit—e.g.: “The way the question was worded didn’t solicit [read elicit] the type of response I think we were looking for,” Ekberg said.” Geordie Wilson, “Three Levies on One Ballot a Possibility for Voters,” Seattle Times, 15 Aug. 1991, at C3. The following example contains an ambiguity—is the core group to ask 4,000 people or to get 4,000 to cooperate? “Sentient representatives expect the core group to solicit [read elicit] responses from about 4,000 people.” Carolene Langie, “Buena Park to Ask About Goals, Issues,” Orange County Register, 28 June 1990, at 1.

B. And *solicitate. *Solicitante, a needless variant of solicit, is an erroneous back-formation from solicitation. Though it is old—having originated in the 18th century—it serves no purpose—e.g.: • “Among those Watson has solicited [read solicited] advice from was Roy Williams.” Steve Hershey, “Ryder Cup Caps Career for Watson,” USA Today, 24 Sept. 1993, at B1.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
solicit for solicit: Stage 1
Current ratio (solicited vs. *solicited): 9,248:1

solicitude = (1) protectiveness; or (2) anxiety. Because of these two quite different senses, the word is often ambiguous. But sense 1 is now more common—e.g.: “Afterward, in a show of solicitude rarely displayed during his five months at St. Stanislaus, he comforted parishioners distraught by the death of their beloved Father Willie.” Mark Gillispie, “An Unlikely Murder Suspect,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 12 Jan. 2003, at A1.

SOLIDUS. See punctuation (q).

solo. Pl. solos—preferably not soli. See plurals (b).

solon, jounalease for legislator, is derived from the name of Solon, an Athenian statesman, merchant, and poet (ca. 640–560 B.C.). In the early 6th century b.c., Solon achieved important political, commercial, and judicial reforms that greatly improved life in the city-state of Athens. He reversed the trend of converting impoverished Athenians into serfs at home or of selling them abroad as slaves. He also standardized Athenian coinage and its system of weights and measures, granted citizenship to immigrant craftsmen, and enhanced the prosperity and independence of Athenian farmers.

In modern times, his name has been used to denote either “a sage” or, used sarcastically or ironically, “a wise guy.” Today, the term “may be inescapable, and thus grudgingly admissible, in headlines, where legislator, senator, or representative will not fit, but in text it is to be avoided.” Roy Copperud, Webster’s Dictionary of Usage and Style 368–69 (1964).

soluble; solvable. Soluble is usually applied to dissolvable substances, whereas solvable is usually applied to problems. But soluble is also sometimes used in reference to problems; this usage is acceptable, though less and less common by the year. The phrase solvable problems overtook soluable problems in frequency of occurrence in print sources in the early 1970s, and the disparity is ever-increasing. Cf. resolvable.

somber; sombre. The first is AmE, the second BrE. See -er (b). Interestingly, somber became the predominant AmE form only as recently as 1940.
somebody; someone. The words are equally good; euphony should govern the choice. Someone is often better by that standard. Although both of these indefinite pronouns date from the 14th century in English, somebody predominated through the 18th and 19th centuries; only in the 1920s did someone surpass somebody in frequency of occurrence in print sources. That trend has continued ever since. Each is traditionally a singular noun that, for purposes of concord, is the antecedent of a singular pronoun. *Some body and *some one as two words are obsolete spellings.

On treating these terms as singular or plural, see Pronouns (D). Cf. anyone (b).

someday; some day. For the adverbial sense “at some unidentifiable time in the future, esp. the distant future” the one-word someday is standard <You’ll be a star someday.> <Someday you’ll be thankful we did this!>. When day retains its noun sense in reference to a discrete 24-hour period, the two-word some day is standard <Let’s agree on some day next week for the meeting.> <We’ll pick some day when we’re all in town.>.

someone. See somebody.

someplace for somewhere is out of place in formal prose. But it’s acceptable as a casualism in speech. This word first surged into popular use in the 1930s—and it has steadily increased ever since. Having originated in the late 19th century, it began seriously spreading in the mid-20th. Cf. *anyplace & *nopl ace.

Current ratio (some where vs. someplace): 19:1

somersault; *somer set; *summersault. Somersault is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike—preferred not only over the two listed, but also over *somers aut, *somers al t, *summers et, and other odd variations.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 22:1.3:1

-something. From the late 1980s, this term has combined with multiples of 10 (beginning with 20) to designate a cohort of people within an age group, especially so as to emphasize perceived similarities in lifestyle or mind-set. Normally hyphenated, the compounds provide a rough estimate of someone’s age, or else they allow people (especially older ones) to make generalizations about those of a certain age—e.g.: twenty-somethings, thirty-somethings, forty-somethings, fifty-somethings, and sixty-somethings. What’s the most common of these compounds in print sources? By far the favorite is twenty-somethings, followed by thirty-somethings. Octogenarians are rarely if ever referred to as eighty-somethings. A popular American television drama titled thirtysometh ing (one word, lowercase) premiered in September 1987 and ran for four seasons. It depicted the lives of a group of baby boomers in their thirties. The group’s bond stemmed from the similarities in their youthful lives—growing up in the culture of the 1960s—as contrasted with what they became: parents in middle-class America.

sometime. A. And some time. Sometime = at an indefinite or unspecified time; esp., at a time in the future <we’ll see each other sometime>. Some time = quite a while <they spent some time together>. The difference may be illustrated by contrasting the senses of these two sentences: (1) “It was not until sometime later that George quit.” (The precise time is unknown to the writer.) (2) “It was not until some time later that George quit.” (George waited quite a while before quitting.) Each is sometimes misused for the other, and has been for quite some time—e.g.:

- “I spent sometime [read some time] searching for new or pre-construction apartments that would work out to under 33 percent of what the average household makes in Miami,” Ricardo Mor, “Can an Average Joe Find a Place Around Here?” Miami Herald, 19 Aug. 2015, Opinion §.
- “They heard about a plan to have the district’s gifted program studied and evaluated by a nationally recognized educator sometime [read sometime] this school year.” Susan Snyder, “ASD Schools to Try Out Uniforms,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 4 Oct. 1996, at A1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. sometime misused for some time (= quite a while): Stage 1
   Current ratio (some time ago vs. *sometime ago): 18:1

2. some time misused for sometime (= at an indefinite future time): Stage 2
   Current ratio (call me sometime vs. *call me some time): 7:1

B. As an Adjective Meaning “former.” This is a slightly archaic sense of sometime <my sometime companion>. The word does not properly signify “on-again-off-again” or “occasional”—as it appears to in the following quotation (as suggested by the incorrect use of somet imes): ”Jack Kemp, the former Congressman and Housing Secretary and a sometime-supporter [read sometime supporter] of Mr. Dole, said in a television interview on Saturday that several Republican leaders, including Speaker Newt Gingrich, were planning such a meeting in two weeks.” Katharine Q. Seelye, “A G.O.P. Policy Meeting May Put Pressure on Dole,” N.Y. Times, 15 July 1996, at A8. See erstwhile.

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sometimes misused for sometime (= former): Stage 1

somewhat. The phrasing *somewhat of a has traditionally been considered poor because it treats somewhat—principally an adverb—as a pronoun. Instead of *somewhat of a lackluster performance, write either a somewhat lackluster performance or something of a lackluster performance. E.g.:

• “After all, the Jayhawks had six seniors on last season’s team . . . making this somewhat [read something] of a rebuilding season for Kansas,” Josh Barr, “Kansas Shows Its Staying Power,” Wash. Post, 5 Dec. 1997, at B4. The collocation something of a has a greatly predominated over *somewhat of a since the 17th century in print sources. The disparity became most pronounced during the 20th century. See of (b) & weasel words.

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*something of an expert for something of an expert: Stage 3
Current ratio (something of an expert vs. *somewhat of an expert): 5:1

dsophistic(al); sophical. These words have opposite connotations. The former (usually sophistical—though sophistic is gaining ground) means “quibbling, s\-pe\-cious, or captious in reasoning.” The latter (usually sophical) means “learned; intellectual.” Sophistical, the disparaging term, is the more common—e.g.:"His sophistical alibi that he has a duty and responsibility to bless the rest of the nation with his political genius has more the smell of naked ambition than selfless magnanimity.”

• "Wilson Can't Hide for Long," S.F. Chron., 27 Mar. 1995, at A18. (On the use of alibi in that sentence, see alibi (A).)

soprano. Pl. sopranos—preferably not *sopran(i). See PLURALS (b).

Current ratio: 29:1

*sorb. See absorb.

sort. For *these sort of, see *these kind of.

sortie (= [1] a raid, esp. an unexpected attack from a besieged position; [2] by extension, an excursion) is occasionally misspelled *sortee—e.g.:
• “NATO says it has flown 1,700 sortees [read sorties] as of Wednesday, a quarter of which were bombing runs.” Lance Gay, “The Daily Cost: Approximately $40 Million,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 1 Apr. 1999, at A4.
• “Perhaps it was the conversation I had the other day with one of the reporters who works with me covering news in Bar Harbor that provided the inspiration for a sortie [read sortie] last weekend to that tourist mecca.” Jeff Stout, “Cold Walk Brings Hot Tea to Boil,” Bangor Daily News, 10 Feb. 2007, at D6.

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sortie misspelled *sortee: Stage 1
Current ratio: 1,921:1

sort of, adv., a casualism that hedges what would otherwise be a direct statement, should be avoided in polished writing. Both the following sentences would be improved by dropping it:

See *these kind of & type of. Cf. kind of (A).

SOS. The signal for emergency help, especially at sea, is not an abbreviation (as folk etymology would have it) for “save our souls” or “save our ship.” (See etymology (d).) It was adopted by the International Radio Telegraph Convention in 1908 as a universal code because it is easy to remember, easy to send, and easy to recognize by light or sound: three short pulses, three long pulses, three short pulses. Because it was
never an abbreviation, there has never been a need to use periods. The plural form is SOSs.

• *so therefore. See so (c).

sotto voce (Ital., lit. "under the voice"), having been fully anglicized, is no longer italicized in English. It is pronounced /sot-oh voh-chee/.

• *soubriquet. See sobriquet.

soufflé /soo-flay or soo-flay/ takes the acute accent over the final -e. (See diacritical marks.) Yet because the word has been fully anglicized, it should not be italicized. (Cf. résumé.) Although in almost no conceivable context could the word be confounded with souffle—an archaic medical term (without the accent mark) denoting a heart murmur or some similar sound heard through a stethoscope—the very existence of that homograph counsels in favor of retaining the accent for the French dish.

sound bite (= a pithy, catchy comment or catchphrase), a term that sprang into popular use in the 1980s, is predominantly written as two words. Although the solid form soundbite seems intuitively right and even inevitable, it remains less common today by a 4-to-1 ratio.

The spelling *sound byte is an error—e.g.: "Although this was a fairly logical prediction to make, knowing the teams, their styles, and their media sound bytes [read bites] throughout the week, Kawakami hit the nail on the head." "For His Next Trick: Tonight's Winning Lottery Numbers," L.A. Times, 22 Mar. 1997, at C3. The metaphor is of a bite-sized quotation, especially on video. Byte, on the other hand, denotes a string of eight binary digits (bits) processed as a unit by a computer.

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sound bite misspelled *sound byte: Stage 1
Current ratio: 18:1

Sound of Prose. Every writer is occasionally guilty of having a tin ear. But the effective writer is self-trained not to write in a way that distracts with undue alliteration, unconscious puns, accidental rhyming, or unseemly images. These clunkers are sure to irritate some readers. And although clunkers are never entirely escapable, writers can learn to minimize them—most helpfully by acquiring the habit of reading their prose aloud.

A. Undue Alliteration or Rhyme. I.A. Richards, in a classic book, wrote: "But in most prose, and more than weordinarily suppose, the opening words have to wait for those that follow to settle what they shall mean." The Philosophy of Rhetoric 50 (1936). This type of wordplay—assuming that it is wordplay—should be undertaken cautiously because it declares that the writer is being wry or coy.

Intentional but ineffective alliteration is one thing. Thoughtless alliteration is quite another—e.g.:• “The Jaguars also signed wide receiver Jimmy Smith to a new contract, and came to terms to two other draft picks.”

• “Brackens, Jags Agree to Terms of Contract,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 29 May 1996, at C3. (There are too many tos and twos here, particularly because one comes to terms with someone, not to someone.)
• “That makes some sense, since [read sense, because] a child who has mouth-runs is going to have a hard time winning friends,” Saundra Smokes, “Breaking the Silence on the Tat-tletales Among Us,” Times Union (Albany), 5 Jan. 1997, at E5.

Other phrases susceptible to this problem include instead of a steady, tempted to attempt, net debt schedule, and need not know. See alliteration.

B. Awkward Repetition. Too much repeating of sounds can enfeeble your style, especially if two different forms of the same root appear close together—e.g.:• “The major role of legislative liaisons is to answer legislators’ [read lawmakers’] questions about the impact of proposed legislation [read bills] on various agencies.” Editor's Note to a letter to the editor, Chicago Sun-Times, 22 June 1992, at 18.
• “If you’re getting the impression [read idea] we weren’t impressed with our $20,000 test truck, you’re right.” Tom Incantalupo, “Pickup Was Hard Ride,” Newsday (N.Y.), 24 Feb. 1995, at C6.

soundtrack is so written (or sometimes sound track)—not *sound trac-t. The track in the phrase denotes the segment in a motion picture or videotape where sound, as opposed to visual camera work, is reproduced. But some writers err by writing tract—e.g.:• “Some of the sound tracts [read soundtracks] may have to be ‘bleeped.’” Bob Brister, “Sporting Clays All in Family Now,” Houston Chron., 16 June 1992, Sports §, at 7.
• “A superb example of this type of media cross-pollination appeared last week, when the official sound tract [read soundtrack] CD to the Fox series ‘Party of Five’ was released by Reprise Records.” David Bianculli, “Tune In to Series CDs,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 17 Nov. 1996, Show World §, at 5.

For other misuses, see track.

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*sound tract for soundtrack: Stage 1
Current ratio (soundtrack vs. *sound tract): 4,606:1

sour grapes is one of the most commonly misused idiomatic metaphors. It is not a mere synonym of envy or jealousy. Rather, as in AESOP’s fable about the fox who wanted the grapes he could not reach, sour grapes denotes the human tendency to disparage as undesirable what one really wants but can’t get (or hasn’t gotten). For example, a high-school boy who asks a girl
for a date and is turned down might then insult her in all sorts of pueller way. That’s a case of sour grapes.

But the traditional and correct use of the phrase seems to be on the wane. Some uses are downright incoherent—e.g.: “Great Britain’s reaction [in the Falklands War] was more a case of sour grapes and wounded pride than any genuine desire to right a terrible wrong.” Letter of Philip Naff, “Falklands Furor,” Time, 10 May 1982, at 5. (The British reaction couldn’t have been “sour grapes” because [1] Great Britain did not disparage the Falklands as undesirable—it wanted to keep them as a territory; and [2] Britain was successful in the effort.) The more typical misuse looks like this: “Is someone trying to jinx Good Will Hunting’s chances for a screenwriting Oscar? Perhaps a competitor’s sour grapes [read envy] over the film’s success?” Nick Madigan, “Bad Vibes Haunt ‘Good Will’ Nom,” Daily Variety, 16 Mar. 1998, at 36.

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*sour grapes* in the sense “envy”: Stage 3

**south; southward(s); southerly.** See directional words.

**sovereignty; *sovranty.** The first is the standard spelling. The second is an experimental shortening that some British writers tried in the 19th and 20th centuries—but it didn’t catch on.

Current ratio: 3,926:1

**sow, vb. A. Inflection: sow > sowed > sown.** In the past participle, sowed is a variant form. In modern print sources, sown predominates by a 4-to-1 ratio. See irregular verbs.

**B. Sowing wild oats.** To sow is to scatter seed. By extension, to sow one’s wild oats is to engage in youthful promiscuity or other excess. Some writers, though, mistake sow (/soh/) with its homophone sew (= to stitch with needle and thread)—e.g.:

- “‘Timber Rattlers manager Matt Erickson has been part leader, part instructor and part counselor, guiding an age group that otherwise might be sewing [read sowing] wild oats in college somewhere.” Tom Haudricourt, “Growing, Pitch by Pitch,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 6 June 2015, at B1.

Sometimes the metaphor appears to be misunderstood. A father, for example, cannot sow the son’s oats: “Snelling’s oats were sown [sic] early in big-time college basketball by his father, Ray Snelling, who played at Southwest Missouri State University in the late 1960s.” Kevin E. Boone, “Snelling Will Be Temp in Flat River,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 10 Aug. 1989, at 7. It’s hard to suggest a solution for that sentence, which reflects wooly thinking. But perhaps a better phrasing would be roots were planted.

Also, this is traditionally a male-only metaphor, since only males have the seed to sow. Only if you take the phrase as a dead metaphor does it work in reference to females. But many readers will find the following sentences hopelessly incongruous:

- “Are they women who are sowing their wild oats before they get married—or are they really married women who are afraid to tell the truth?” Abigail Van Buren, “Survey: Wives Are More Faithful,” Chicago Trib., 10 Sept. 1987, at C17.
- “Jamie, a salon owner, met him before she was out of her teens, but at 25, she wonders aloud whether she needs to sow her wild oats.” Joanne Weintraub, “Turning Another Page in Reality TV,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 13 June 2006, at E1.

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*sow wild oats for sow wild oats: Stage 1

**spacial.** See spatial.

**spade.** See spay.

**spaghetti and meatballs.** On the question whether this phrase takes a singular or plural verb, see subject-verb agreement (d).

**spartan; sparse.** Spartan is the antonym of luxurious, and sparse the antonym of luxuriant. (See luxurious.) But there the similarities end.

In ancient Greece, the people of Sparta were known as being stodical, frugal, simple, laconic, brave, disciplined, and indifferent to comfort or luxury. From them we get the adjective spartan, which describes someone with the qualities just listed <the spartan pioneers of the American West>. By extension, a person’s surroundings, diet, or lifestyle can be spartan when comforts or luxuries are few <a spartan life on the prairie>. E.g.: “He doesn’t like the idea of Elke entering his home and seeing how bare he keeps it, how spartan his life is.” Donna Jo Napoli & Richard Tchen, Spinners 85 (1999).

The word sparse means “not densely packed; scattered” <sparse trees on the plain> <a sparsely populated area>.

Undoubtedly through mistaken sound-association, people have begun misusing sparse for spartan—e.g.:

- “It is to be her retirement home, so she takes only a few of her worldly possessions and intends to live a sparse [read spartan] life.” Kay Rohrer, “ ‘Winter Solstice’ Exhibits Heartfelt Depth,” Sunday Patriot-News (Harrisburg), 8 Oct. 2000, at E3.
- “The cramped front hall remains pretty much as it was more than 100 years ago. Visitors instantly get a sense of


See word-swapping.

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sparsely misused for spartan: Stage 1

spasmodic; *spasmodical; *spasmatic; spastic. Spasmatic = (1) of, relating to, or characterized by a spasm; or (2) intermittent, sporadic, unsustained. *Spasmodical and *spasmatic are needless variants. *Spasmatic is labeled “rare or obsolete” by the SOED, but of those two labels only “rare” is accurate—e.g.:


- “After last week’s loss to the Flyers, though, Campbell has wondered aloud if, even with the great effort and input of his stars, the Rangers have enough talent to enjoy more than a spasmodic [read spasmatic] success.” Stu Hackel, “Campbell’s Soup: Can Anyone Coach the Rangers?” Village Voice, 11 Mar. 1997, at A1.

Spastic has literal, figurative, and slangy senses in AmE: (1) (lit.) “of, relating to, or characterized by a spasm” <spastic paralysis>; (2) (fig.) “highly excitable, agitated” <a spastic child>; and (3) (rude slang) “bumbbling, klutzy, incompetent” <the comedian’s signature sketch was acting like a spastic high-schooler on a date with the homecoming queen>. The Origin of Species (1859)—among the most important books ever published— Stage 1

spatial. So spelled in all varieties of English—not *spacial.

Current ratio: 355:1

spay (= to neuter by removing the ovaries from [a female animal]) is used so often in the past-tense and past-participial form (spayed) that it’s sometimes confused with spade—e.g.:


- “The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals found that the animals are fed well and are spade [read spayed] and neutered.” Krista Paul, “In Sea Cliff, 1 House, 70 Pets and a 911 Call,” Newsday (N.Y.), 8 July 1993, at 22.


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spade misused for spayed as past form of spay: Stage 2

speaking. This word is among the few “acceptable danglers” or “disguised conjunctions” when used as a sentence adverb—e.g.:

- “Speaking realistically, Ritchey still only hopes to ‘capture’ a small margin of the commuting population.” Thomas Hackett, “Riders Take Public Transportation for Diverse Reasons,” News & Observer (Raleigh), 2 Apr. 1996, at B1. (This might be a paraphrase of Ritchey, but the sentence barely has him speaking, if at all; the comment is the writer’s.)

- “Economically speaking, the ACC basketball tournament and the Greater Greensboro Chrysler Classic are the only other sporting events that pump more money into the local economy.” Craig T. Greenlee, “Soccer Tourney,” News & Record (Greensboro), 25 May 1997, at C7. (Any competent reader knows that the sporting events aren’t speaking; the writer is.)

- “Practically speaking, the proponents of government-funded health insurance for kids ignore the likeliest result of their plan.” “Siren Song for Kids,” Gaz. Telegraph (Colo. Springs), 26 May 1997, at 4. (Again, the reader knows that the proponents aren’t doing the speaking; the writer is.)

See danglers (B) & sentence adverbs.

spec = (1) specification <in accordance with your specs>; (2) speculation (in the sense of a business venture) <built on spec> <spec home>; or (3) pl., spectacles <Put on your specs>!

special. See especial.

speciality; specialty. Specialty has been the predominant form in AmE since the 18th century. In BrE, specialty predominated from the 1870s to the 1970s—but now specialty is once again on the rise. It appears that specialty is the standard term worldwide.

Current ratio: 8:1

species is both singular and plural. As a singular noun, it means “a group of similar plants or animals that can breed among themselves but not outside the group.” From that sense the word’s meaning has naturally been extended to “class” or “type” <a problem of this species is best left to the family to work out>. As a plural, species means “all the groups of similar plants or animals that can breed [etc.]” In the title of Charles Darwin’s great work, The Origin of Species (1859)—among the most important books ever published—species is plural. Unfortunately, many publications insert a spurious the before Species, as if Darwin had considered only the human species. Cf. series.

Some writers erroneously make specie a singular of species—e.g. “The shrub, also known as southern spicebush, was listed in 1986 as an endangered specie [read species] by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.” Ron Maxey, “Church to House Synergy Residents,” Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 23 Feb. 1996, at B3. (Specie, in its correct form, means “coined money.” As a mass noun, it has no plural, unless one means to refer to different types of coined money.)

And sometimes people mistake species for sex—e.g.:

- “And she was on the whole glad she didn’t have to play the scene in which her co-star, Patsy Kensit, is attacked by moths, which required her to have ‘rubber rings

- “In an annual ritual, pollen released by the males drifts through the air until it reaches the female species of tree [read female of this species or female trees],” Linda Weiford, “High Tree-Pollen Counts Hammer the Allergic,” Anchorage Daily News, 8 June 1997, at A1.

- “Beach volleyball has become one of the most popular Olympic sports, especially for the male-dominated TV audience. Some would crudely suggest that it’s the uniforms. I have a higher opinion of the male species [read men] than that.” Mark McCarter, “Sights, Sounds, Sand,” Huntsville Times (Ala.), 14 Aug. 2008, at D1.

The pronunciation is /spee-sheez/ or /spee-seez/. Cf. genus.

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1. specie as a false singular of species: Stage 2
   Current ratio (endangered species vs. *endangered specie): 833:1

2. species for sex in, e.g., “male species”: Stage 2

specious; spurious. The two words are related in sense but not at all in etymology (L. speciosus “beautiful, plausible”; L. spurius “bastard”). What is specious is seemingly true but actually false <spurious arguments>. What is spurious is illegitimately produced <spurious offspring>; sham, counterfeit, or forged <spurious bank drafts>; or else insincere <spurious praise>. While specious more often refers to reasoning and arguments, spurious more often refers to fake things or conditions. Although specious appeared more frequently than spurious in print throughout the 17th century to the early 19th, spurious has appeared somewhat more frequently than specious since about 1850.

specs. See spec.

spectator. So spelled—not *spectater.

specter; spectre. This word is preferably spelled -er in AmE, -re in BrE. Curiously, however, many Americans cling to the British spelling—perhaps because specter didn’t become standard in AmE till about 1940. (See -er (b).) The word is sometimes misspelled *spector—e.g.: “He also raises the spector [read specter] of a duplicate stone.” Irene Gardner Castleton, “Stone of Scone Belongs in Scotland, Not Ireland,” Times Union (Albany), 12 Jan. 1997, at E4.

spectrum. The plural spectra vastly predominates over spectrums in print sources and has consistently done so since the 18th century. See plurals (b).

Current ratio: 84:1

speculative; *speculatory. The first is standard; the second is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 2,780:1

speculator. So spelled—not *speculater.

speculum (= [1] a medical instrument inserted into the body for inspection, or [2] an astrological drawing or table) has predominantly formed the Latinate plural specula since the 17th century—not speculums.

Current ratio: 5:1

spechify = to deliver a speech. The word is used in a mocking or derogatory way. See prechify.

speed > sped > sped. The best past-tense and past-participial form is sped, not *speeded. It has been so since the 17th century. But there’s one exception: the phrasal verb speed up (= to accelerate) <she speeded up to 80 m.p.h.>. See irregular verbs. See rate of speed.

spell > spelt > spelled. So inflected in AmE (since 1850) and mostly in post-1980 BrE, though spelt is the more traditional past form in BrE.

Current ratio (World English): 4:1

SPELLING. A. Common Misspellings. Computerized spell-checkers have begun to eliminate many misspellings. But they don’t catch all misspellings if the word is actually a different word, as when not is mistyped now. And to the extent that the word lists in the spell-checkers aren’t sound, certain misspellings may become more widespread. For example, one spell-checker stops at restaurateur, recommending that it be replaced with the incorrect form *restaurante. All in all, though, spell-checkers are quite helpful.

Here are some of the most commonly misspelled words in the English language. Naturally, they’re spelled correctly here:

- aberration
- accommodate
- acknowledgment
- acoustic
- ad nauseam
- aficionado
- aggressive
- allotted
- anoint
- asinine
- assassination
- barbiturate
- bizarre
- cacophony
- camaraderie
- canister
- category
- cemetery
- committeee
- conniption
- consensus
- corroborate
- croupier
- definitely
- dependent
- desiccate
- disappoint
- ecstasy
- embarrass
- emperor
- espresso
- expedite
- friend
- gauge
- glamorous
- graffiti
- grammar
- harass
- hors d’oeuvre
- idiosyncrasy
- impostor
- impresario
- inadvertent
- independent
- innovate
- inoculate
- interrupt
- irresistible
- isosceles
- judgment
- kaleidoscope
- knowledge
- kowtow
- lackadasical
- liaison
- lieu
- liquefy
- loathsome
- lollipop
mayonnaise persevere pavilion sacrifice despoil but despoliation
dexeterous but ambidextrous dexterous but ambidextrous
doves but dwarfs
embarrass but harass
enforce but reinforce
enjoin but injunction
enumerate but remunerate
example but exemplary
express but espresso
face but artifice
fantasy but phantasm
femme fatale but feme sole
fire but fiery
fraction but anfraction
fungi but apparatuses (or L. apparatuses)
fusillade but fuselage
fusillade but fuselage
fusillade but fuselage
garden but kindergarten
gardener but kindergartner
Glasgow but Glaswegian
hammer but grammar
Herbert but sherbet
hoeves but roofs
idea but ideology
important but inadvertent
impressive but impresario
infectious but tempestuous
innocuous but inoculate
irreversible but iridescent
jam but doorjamb
juror but perjuror
literati but litterateur
load but mother lode
madam but mademoiselle
mellow but marshmellow
milennium but millenarian
millionaire but questionnaire
miniskirt but minuscule
moment but memento
muffle but duffel
munition but diminution
noblesse but largess
obelisk but odalisque
obligation but obbligato
paper but papier-mâché
pass but impasse
patriot but expatriate
personal but personnel
Philippines but Filipino
pizza but pizzeria
playwright but playwriting
plenty but plentitude
politically but impolitically
ponderous but wondrous
precede but supersede
pretentious but portentous
primacy but apostasy
proceed but precede
pruritis but tinnitus
publicly but plastically
religious but sacrilegious
repair but reparable
restaurant but restaurateur
salami but salama
scarify but rarely
Shaw but Shawian
spoil but spoliation
storm but maelstrom

Three contractions are also constantly being misspelled: it’s, they’re, and you’re. (See it, its, & your.) Among the less usual words that are difficult to spell are iridescent, kimono, naphtha, and syzygy.

Of course, English orthography is riddled with anomalies of various types—and for various reasons. Sometimes a word seems to be analogous to another in its formation but for etymological reasons isn’t (e.g., one word ends in -tuous, another -tious). Or related words may have been borrowed from a source language at different times (e.g., 13th-century feme sole but 20th-century feme fatale). Then again, it could be that two loanwords that seem to have similar properties aren’t at all analogous (e.g., the sing.–pl. Latin pairs fungus–fungi and apparatus–apparatus, the latter being a fourth-declension noun—and apparatuses being the preferred English plural). And perhaps most commonly, etymologically unrelated words sometimes have a coincidence of sound that misleadingly makes speakers think of them as analogues (democracy, idiosyncrasy). What follows are some of the marked irregularities in English spelling. Some of the words in this list appeared in the list above, but they’re included here to show the misleading analogy to another word.

acquiesce but acquiesce
affinity but aficiónado
airplane but aeronautics
air but air
angel but angel
ascendable but descendible
Belgium but Belgian
bombast but lambaste
bookstore but used-book store
Britain but Brittan
bumptious but presumptuous
clamor but glamour (yet glamorous)
comrade but camaraderie
coup de grace but foie gras
criticize but advertise
cumbrous but slumberous
de jure but du jour
democracy but idiosyncrasy
strategy but stratagem
sufferance but suffrage
summery but wintry
temple but templar
tendency but tendance
tendan but tendinitis
until but till (not 'till)
venom but antivenin
vinaigrette
violin but violoncello
wean but overweening
weasels but measles
wondrous but splendid

The British—American split is seen also in words such as jewel(l)er, pupil(l)age, tranquil(l)er, and travel(l)er, the British preferring -l- over the -l- used by Americans. But there are exceptions: British writers use the forms paralleled, paralling—just as Americans do—presumably to avoid the ungainly appearance of four -l-s in quick succession.

BrE doubles the final consonant after a fully pronounced vowel in words such as kidnapped, -ing and worshipped, -ing. (One exception is galloped, galloping.) In AmE, kidnapping and worshipping are preferred over *kidnaping (see *kidnapping (A)) as exceptional forms (as with formatted, formatting). The same is true of worshipped, worshipping. (See *worship.) Programmed and programming are the preferred spellings on both sides of the Atlantic, the single -m- spellings being secondary variants in AmE; for the probable reason underlying this American inconsistency, see *program(m)er.

There are a few other exceptions in AmE. Chagrined, combated, and coroneted are all exceptional because the final consonant isn’t doubled even though the final syllable of their uninflected forms is accented. But these forms are few. With the verb combat, the possibility of a miscue seems great enough that combatted and combattting ought to be preferred—despite what the dictionaries say.

Writers and editors should make themselves aware of these minor transatlantic differences in spelling and avoid inserting a bracketed sic when quoting a foreign text. See sic.

C. Words with -ie- or -ei-. The old rule—i before e, except after c, or when sounded as a, as in neighbor and weigh—generally holds. But there are many exceptions, such as counterfeit, either, feisty, forfeit, height, leisure, seize, their, and weird. Several words of foreign (especially German) derivation also violate the rule, such as Fahrenhein, meister, and zeitgeist—as well as words in which the -i- and -e- are both pronounced, such as deity, society, and spontaneity. The except-after-c proviso also has its exceptions, such as concierge and financier.

D. Compounds. The normal process in Modern English is for separate words used habitually to become hyphenated, and then fused into a single word (e.g., to day became to-day in the 19th century and then today in the 20th). Because the process is constantly at work, it’s difficult to be definite about the status of some terms. For example, database went rapidly from data base through data-base to database; and many writers simply skipped the intermediate step. The same tendency is now seen as people begin to write wordprocessing as a solid word. See word processing.

spew (= to gush or vomit) is sometimes misspelled *spue—e.g.—“The enemy must be loathed where it is not feared, and let the consequent emotions spue [read spew] where they may.” Hugo Young, “The Phobia That Lies Behind the Sneers,” Guardian, 11 Mar. 1997, at 15.

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sphinx. Pl. sphinxes. The alternative plural *sphinxes is obsolete in English.

spicy. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *spicey.

spiel is best pronounced /spel/, not in the mock- Yiddish fashion that has become so common (/shpeel/), which is jocular.

spill > spilled > spilled. So inflected in both AmE (from 1900) and BrE (from 1956). The archaic past form spilt still sometimes appears in metaphorical references to spilt milk ("Don't cry over spilt milk"), particularly in BrE. But spilt milk is more common in AmE.

spin > spun > spun. This irregular verb is so inflected in AmE and BrE alike. Spun is obsolete as an inflected form of spin, though some writers so use it (more commonly in BrE than in AmE)—e.g.:

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spiral, vb., makes spiraled and spiralling in AmE, spiraled and spiralling in BrE. See spelling (b).v

spirea (= a rosy shrub) has been predominantly so spelled in AmE since 1930. The spelling spiraea has predominated in BrE since the early 19th century.

spiritual; spiritualistic; spirituous; *spiritous; spiritu- disposing of, relating to, or involving spiritualism, i.e., the belief that departed spirits communicate with and show themselves to the living, esp. through mediums. Spirituous = alcoholic. E.g.: “The purveyors of spirituous liquors have lately taken to advertising on TV after years of voluntarily abstaining themselves.” Tom Teepen, "Purge the Vices, Ignore a Crisis," Austin Am.-Statesman, 7 Apr. 1997, at A11. *Spiritous is an archaism in the sense of "highly refined or dematerialized," and is also a needless variant of spirituous. Spirituelle (masculine) or spiri- tuelle (feminine) means "witty" or "of a highly refined character or nature, esp. in conjunction with liveliness or quickness of mind" (OED). Finally, spirited means "full of spirit; lively; energetic" <a spirited debate>.

spiritualism; *spiritism. The first has always been the predominant form since coming into frequent use in the early 19th century.

*spirt. See spurt.

spit (= to force out the contents of one's mouth) is inflected in three possible ways:

spit > spat > spat
spit > spat > spit
spit > spit > spit

Good authority can be found for the first two; the third finds less enthusiastic support. The recommendation here is to follow the first—e.g.:
- "The Conservatives said the strictly Orthodox Jews, known more commonly as the haredim, had spat on them and pelleted them with garbage and feces." "Mixed-Gender Prayer Assaulted in Jerusalem," Austin Am.-Statesman, 13 June 1997, at A6.
- "Then the man spat. Tobias was shocked and thought he had spat at him, but he did not feel anything." Bernard Dionne, I Can See 104 (2012).

Admittedly, however, the collocation had spit has historically predominated over had spat for most of the era since 1800 (the two forms having closely vied in print sources from 1915 to 1980). Yet has spat has predominated over has spit for most of the same period. Writers have wavered on how best to expectorate. See irregular verbs.

Avoid spit as the past-tense form. It has never been the predominant form in AmE or BrE, and it sounds dialectal—e.g.:
- "She had spit [read spat] the words at him venomously, in utter contempt, before she left, refusing to ever see him face-to-face again." Rick Hutchins, The RH Factor 87 (2005).
- "They were just lucky as hell that no one spit [read spat] in my face; it only landed on my clothes. I didn't care how small I was or how much anyone preached non-violence. If someone had spit [read spat] in my face, I was going to beat the living hell out of them or die trying." Freya Anderson Rivers, Swallowed Tears 214 (2012).
- "Once when a group of East End Jews had come to protest at one of his rallies, her father had spit [read spat] on one of the demonstrators." Laura L. Sullivan, Love by the Morning Star 150 (2014).

Spit (= to use a spit or skewer) makes spitted as the past tense and past participle—e.g.:
spite of, in. See despite.

spitting image. A. Etymology. Spitting image (= the exact likeness; an identical duplicate) is actually a corruption of spit and image, from the notion of God’s using spit and dust to form the clay to make Adam in his image. As far back as the early 1800s, the phrase the very spit of was used in this sense <the child is the very spit of his grandfather>. By the mid- to late 1800s, spit was coupled with image (or fetch or picture) to form spit and image. But around the turn of the 20th century, spitting image (or spittin’ image) appeared. It became the more common form in AmE and BrE at about the same time in the late 1950s. Though originally an error, it’s so common today—some 23 times as common in print as spit and image—that most dictionaries fully countenance it without recording spit and image. E.g.:

- “He remains the father of two children—a son who is growing into his spitting image and a daughter who has no memory of him.” Mike McAndrew, "Slain Officer’s Legacy Lingers," Post-Standard (Syracuse), 30 Oct. 1995, at A5.

A contrarian view comes from WNWCD, which records only spit and image. It’s a much rarer form—e.g.:

- “Bobby Mauch, who played the pauper (or was it the prince?) in the rambunctious 1937 film of Mark Twain’s Prince and the Pauper opposite his spitt-and-image twin brother, Billy, who portrayed the prince (or was it the other way around?), died Oct. 15 near his home in Santa Rosa, Calif.” "Bobby Mauch" (obit.), Dallas Morning News, 29 Oct. 2007, at B5.

B. And *spitting image. This odd variant, another chip off the old spit and image block, usually appears as a pun. But occasionally (and sadly), a sober-sided writer will err with it—e.g.:

- “But these pumped-up fans . . . were already bubbly, chatty and, in many cases, the spitting images [read spitting image] of the star singers.” Lisa Jones Townsel, "Star-Inspired Duds," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 12 July 2003, Lifestyle §, at 26.

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*splitting image for spitting image: Stage 1 Current ratio (spitting image vs. splitting image): 30:1

**Splendid; splendidous; splendidous; splendidous.** Splendid is the ordinary choice of these words meaning “distinguished, illustrious, out-of-the-ordinary” <a splendid achievement>. Splendiferous is usually a comic or colloquial equivalent <the show featured dazzling dancers and splendiferous special effects>. Splendorous, meaning “brilliant, magnificent, glorious,” is a seriously enthusiastic word <the Republicans celebrated by throwing a splendidous inaugural ball>. *Splendidous is a variant of splendidous.

split > split > split. So inflected. But some wayward writers have split from the age-old idiom—e.g.：“Fabri-Centers of America (Hudson, OH), a fabric and craft retailer, has splitted [read split] its stock to increase shares’ liquidity.” “Fabri-Centers Splits Stock to Pursue Strategy,” Akron Beacon J., 3 Aug. 1995, at B2. See irregular verbs.

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*split for past-tense split: Stage 1 Current ratio (has split vs. has splitted): 834:1

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**SPLIT INFINITIVES. A. Generally.** H.W. Fowler divided the English-speaking world into five classes:

1. those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is;
2. those who do not know, but care very much;
3. those who know and condemn;
4. those who know and approve; and
5. those who know and distinguish (FMEU1 at 558). It is this last class to which, if we have a good ear, we should aspire.

An infinitive is the tenseless form of a verb preceded by to, such as to dismiss or to modify. Splitting the infinitive is placing one or more words between to and the verb, such as to summarily dismiss or to unwisely modify. For the infinitive to be truly split, the intervening word or words must follow to directly <to satisfactorily have finished>. E.g.: “Supporters of defense projects and opponents of how the president used his new line-item veto power joined forces yesterday to decisively reject President Clinton’s line-item veto of military construction programs.” “Congress Votes to Undo Clinton Veto,” San Diego Union-Trib., 9 Nov. 1997, at A7. If the adverb follows any other part of the infinitive, there’s no split <to have satisfactorily finished>.

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*splitting image for splitting image: Stage 5 Current ratio (spitting image vs. splitting image): 23:1
Although few armchair grammarians seem to know it, some split infinitives are regarded as perfectly proper:

- “The evidence in favor of the judiciously split infinitive is sufficiently clear to make it obvious that teachers who condemn it arbitrarily are wasting their time and that of their pupils.” Sterling A. Leonard, Current English Usage 124 (1932).

- “Sometimes it is necessary to split an infinitive or to cast the sentence in another mould. In the sentence beginning, ‘I want to inform you clearly . . . ’ there is no justification for splitting, but what about this one: ‘It compelled the principal to at least review the case under discussion? If you change that for either ‘It compelled the principal at least to review the case under discussion’ or ‘It compelled the principal to review at least the case under discussion,’ you have changed the meaning.” W.P. Jowett, Chatting About English 185 (1945).

- “The split infinitive is in full accord with the spirit of modern English and is now widely used by our best writers.” George O. Curme, English Grammar § 70 B, at 148 (1947).

- “[The English language gives us] the inestimable advantage of being able to put adverbs where they will be most effective, coloring the verbs to which they apply and becoming practically part of them. . . . If you think a verb cannot be split in two, just call the adverb a part of the verb and the difficulty will be solved.” Joseph Lee, A Defense of the Split Infinitive, 37 Mass. L.Q. 65, 66 (1952).

- “To deliberately split an infinitive, puristic teaching to the contrary notwithstanding, is correct and acceptable English.” Norman Lewis, Better English 287 (rev. ed. 1961).

- “Splitting an infinitive is preferable both to jamming an adverb between two verbs, where everyone must puzzle out which verb it modifies (‘They refused boldly to go so far away’), and to ‘correcting’ a split in a way that gives an artificial result (‘They wanted to shorten greatly the length of the trip’). Sometimes those are the only choices we have, except for rewriting the sentence, and my point is that we needn’t rewrite.” Barbara Wallraf, Word Court 99 (2000).

See superstitions (b).

### Split Infinitives

**B. Splits to Be Avoided.** If a split is easily fixed by putting the adverb at the end of the phrase and the meaning remains the same, then avoiding the split is the best course:

- **Split:** “It is not necessary to here enlarge upon those points.”

- **Unsplit:** “It is not necessary to enlarge upon those points here.”

Such capriciously split infinitives only jar the reader. Similar examples turn up frequently—e.g.:

- “Maybe the intense distrust many voters feel toward their government institutions have led them to almost automatically vote [read to vote almost automatically] against anything the Legislature supports.” Marty Latz, “Democrats Take Ideas Straight to Voters for ‘Wins,’” Ariz. Republic/Phoenix Gaz., 30 May 1995, at B7. (Notice also the subject–verb disagreement: distrust is the subject, and the verb should be has.)

- “Last year three-time Doral champion Raymond Floyd revamped the course, adding, among other things, 18 bunkers to, he says, ‘put [read in order, he says, to put] the teeth back in the monster.’” Doral-Ryder Open, Sports Illustrated, 10 Mar. 1997, at 6.

Wide splits are generally to be avoided, especially with piled-on adverbs—e.g.: “We encourage both spouses to utilize the best efforts to understandingly, sympathetically, and professionally try to work out a compromise.” (A possible revision: We encourage both spouses to try to work out a compromise understandingly, sympathetically, and professionally.) But sometimes—for effect—they may be justified: “If there is no other way to make our point, we ought to boldly go ahead and split. We should also be willing to sometimes so completely, in order to gain a particular effect, split the infinitive as to practically but quite consciously run the risk of leaving the to as far behind as the last runner in the London Marathon. Grammar is made for man, not man for grammar.” “To Split or Not to Split,” Times (London), 1 Aug. 1995, at 15.

With correlative conjunctions, a split infinitive simply displays carelessness—e.g.: “There are already enough problems with trying to get all parents to either make sure their children are in car seats or in seat belts.” Sharon K. Woulfe, “Most Should Keep Air Bags On,” Pantagraph (Bloomington, Ill.), 19 Nov. 1997, at A12. (A possible revision: There are already enough problems with trying to get all parents to make sure their children are protected by either car seats or seat belts.) See parallelism.

### C. Justified Splits.

A number of infinitives are best split. Perhaps the most famous is from the 1960s television series Star Trek, in which the opening voice-over included this phrase: to boldly go where no man (or, in the revival of the 1980s and 1990s, where no one) has gone before. The phrase sounds inevitable partly because it is so familiar, but also because the adverb most naturally bears the emphasis, not the verb go.

And that example is not a rarity. Consider: She expects to more than double her profits next year. We cannot merely move the adverbial phrase in that sentence—to “fix” the split, we would have to eliminate the infinitive, as by writing She expects that her profits will more than double next year, thereby giving the sentence a different nuance. (The woman seems less responsible for the increase.)

Again, though, knowing when to split an infinitive requires a good ear and a keen eye. Otherwise, the ability to distinguish—the ability Fowler mentioned—is not attainable. To flatly state, for example, suggests something different from to state flatly. In the sentences that follow, unsplitting the infinitive would either create an awkwardness or change the sense:

- “White House officials said they hope Wellstone and Moseley-Braun can be persuaded to quietly drop their objections and allow the bill to pass when the Senate returns from its vacation.” Pam Louwagie, “Wellstone Continues to Put Pressure on Administration over Budget Cuts,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 7 July 1995, at A15.

- “With no ready templates available—the only other ‘nearby’ track, in Vancouver, was judged too dark, static and simplistic—the two had to pretty well make up Speed

• “Issues that most feminists support, such as abortion rights and equal treatment for gays and lesbians, seem to directly contradict Christian teachings.” Cristina Smith, “Women of the Cloth,” News & Observer (Raleigh), 3 Oct. 1997, at E1.

• “Some in the audience said they were unhappy that the council could not honor a previous council’s agreement allowing homeowners to voluntarily connect to the public sewer for $750 each.” Kelly Ryan, “Keller Considers Sewer Hookups,” Dallas Morning News, 5 Oct. 1997, at S1.

Distinguishing these examples from those under (b) may not be easy for all readers. Those who find it difficult might advantageously avoid all splits.

D. Awkwardness Caused by Avoiding Splits. Occasionally, sticking to the old “rule” about split infinitives leads to gross phrasing. The following sentences illustrate clumsy attempts to avoid splitting the infinitive. In the first example, the adverb may be placed more naturally than it is without splitting the infinitive; in the second and third examples, a split is called for:

• “Linda Dishman . . . said Monday that Mahony was attempting unfairly to defect attention away from what she said was illegal demolition of a city-protected landmark.” Larry Gordon, “Battle over Cathedral’s Fate Intensifies,” L.A. Times, 4 June 1996, at A1. (What was unfair: the attempting or the deflecting? Read either unfairly attempting to deflect or was attempting to unfairly deflect.)


• “The ordinance is not expected immediately to solve [read expected to immediately solve] problems with the throbbing, low-frequency bass notes from a local club in the Cromwell Square Shopping Center.” Stacy Wong, “In Cromwell, Votes on Noise, Large-Pet Laws,” Hartford Courant, 15 May 1997, at B1.

E. Ambiguities. When the first of several infinitives is split and the initial to is the only one, an ambiguity results—e.g.: “The legislation would make it a federal crime to physically block access to clinics, damage their property or injure or intimidate patients and staff.” “Congress OKs Protections for Abortion Clinics,” Dallas Morning News, 13 May 1994, at A1. There’s a problem in interpretation: does physically modify the verbs damage, injure, and intimidate, as well as block? One hopes that the problem is merely with the journalist’s paraphrase and not with the legislation itself.

*splitting image. See splitting image (n).

splutter; sputter. These words are largely synonymous. But splutter is the newer word: it probably formed as a blend of splash and sputter. (See portmanteau words.) Though the words were about equally common from 1800 to 1950, since then sputter has greatly predominated.

spoil > spoiled > spoiled. So inflected in AmE and BrE alike. Spoilt, a common variant of the past-tense spelling especially in BrE, has never predominated even in that variety of English.

Current ratio (spoiled vs. spoil): 4:1

spoil, n.; spoils. The plural form is standard in set phrases <the spoils of war> <to the victor belong the spoils> and in similar uses when multiple objects are referred to <the looters carried off their spoils>—e.g.:

• “The spoils of unmanned space exploration are clear—conveniences of modern life such as mobile phones and satellite television would not function without the vast fleets of satellites that orbit the Earth.” Anjana Ahuja, “Why Man Will Always Reach for the Stars,” Times (London), 3 Feb. 2003, at 4.

• “Now, China is crossing the sea in the other direction, bringing home spoils from Japan.” Peter S. Goodman & Akiko Kashiwagi, “Imperial Irony Building in Japan,” Wash. Post, 6 Feb. 2003, at E1.

The singular form is very rare, but occasionally seen: “We, the sales professionals steeped in knowledge and cunning, [are] ever testing each other, encouraging each other, ever eager for chase, and no more ashamed to be called by our proper name, and to take our fair share of the spoil.” Mark Borkowski, “Electronics Sales People and Hunters,” Canadian Electronics, 1 Nov. 2002, at 4.

spoliation; despoliation; *despoilment. A learned word, spoliation /spoh-lee-ay-shan/ means the act of ruining, destroying, or spoiling something. In the hands and mouths of the less-than-learned, it’s often misspelled and mispronounced *spolation (an example of metathesis). The difference between the form of the verb and of the noun arises from different paths by which the words came into English: in the 14th century, spoil was borrowed from Old French (espoille), whereas in the 15th century spoliation was borrowed from Latin (spoliatio).

Despoliation (= pillaging, plundering) is often misspelled *despoliation—a blunder that can spoil otherwise highly literate writing—e.g.:”


• “‘Environment’ has become a narrow, bitterly focused word turning exclusively on hurts or despoliations [read despoliations] of nature.” Rex Murphy, “A Triumph for the

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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
sponge


Oddly, though, the corresponding verb is despoil. Why the discrepancy in spelling? The answer again lies in the vagaries of linguistic history. English borrowed the verb in the 13th century from Old French (despoilier) but the noun in the 17th century from Latin (despoliatio). And those two forms—for centuries, at any rate—stuck. The Frenchified noun coined in the early 19th century, *despoilment*, never rose above being a needless variant.

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1. *spoliation* misspelled *spoliation*: Stage 1
   Current ratio: 66:1

2. *despoliation* misspelled *despoliation*: Stage 1
   Current ratio: 26:1

*sponge*, vb., makes spongeable (not *spongeable*) but sponging (not *spong ing*). *Sponge* n., makes the corresponding adjective spongy (not *spongy*). Please absorb all that.

*spoonfuls; *spoonsful. The former is standard. See plurals (G).

Current ratio: 16:1

*sports car*—not *sport car*—is the standard term. But *sport coat* and *sport shirt* are standard phrases that predominate over *sports coat* and *sports shirt*.

**sport utility vehicle; *sports utility vehicle.** The first is standard in AmE and BrE alike. The second is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 2:1

*spouse*. Whenever you know that you’re referring to a husband or wife, use one of those terms. *Spouse*, which carries a legalistic flavor, should appear only when the context is not sex-specific. *Married spouse* is an infrequent redundancy.

**sprain > sprained > sprained.** So inflected. An erroneous *sprang* sometimes springs up—e.g.:

- “A Web site has been created on the Internet for people to send quick get-well wishes to Kerri Strug, who *sprang* her ankle Tuesday night.” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 25 Jul 1996, at A1 (photo caption).

Of course, *sprang* is the correct past-tense form of the verb *spring*. See spring.

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*spring* misspelled *spritely*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 33:1

*spring > sprang > sprung*. So inflected. But *sprung* is correct when the sense is “equipped with springs” <a sprung mattress> <sprung hinges> or “to spend the season of spring” <they sprung in Europe>. (The latter usage will strike many readers as more than a little odd.)

The real challenge with these words is to get the past-tense and past-participial forms in their proper places. Some writers spring an erroneous *sprang* on their readers—e.g.:

- “Teachers can obtain study guides that describe the history of the dances and the cultures from which they *sprang* [read sprang],” “School Notes,” S.F. Chron., 19 Dec. 1997, at 2.

The opposite misuse—sprang for *spring*—is less common:
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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

• “Some of these trade-terms may have originally sprung [read have originally sprung] up as slang,” Otto Jespersen, *Mankind, Nation, and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View* 147 (1946).

• “Bob Horne . . . said that there are more than 300 truckers’ ministries that have sprung [read have sprung] from the original, the Ministry of Transport, founded by Canadian chaplain Jim Keys in 1951.” Sue Anne Pressley, “Truck-Stop Ministry Offers Comfort in the Odd Hours,” *Wash. Post*, 3 Nov. 1996, at A3.


See irregular verbs.

For a misuse of sprung for sprained, see sprain.

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1. sprung misused for simple-past spring: Stage 4
   Current ratio (vessel sprung a leak vs. *vessel sprung a leak): 1.3:1

2. sprang misused for past-participle sprung: Stage 1
   Current ratio (have sprung vs. *have sprang): 105:1

*sprightly. See sprightly.

spry (= active and nimble despite advancing age) makes spryer and spryst—preferably not *sprier and *spriest. Cf. shy & sly.

*spue. See spew.

spumoni; spumone. The Italian term for this ice-cream dessert is *spumone* (/spoo-moh-nee/). Although that used to be the preferred spelling in English as well, dictionaries are now almost equally divided. In English print sources, *spumoni* appears about 16 times as often as *spumone*. *Spumone* has predominated in English since the 1920s.

spurious. *spritic. Most AmE dictionaries list *spirit merely as a variant of sprit. In 1926 H.W. Fowler suggested a differentiation: use *spirit* in the sense “gush, jet, flow” <a spirit of blood> <oil spirts up from the ground>, and reserve *spurt* for “sprint, burst, hustle” <work done in spurt> <Bailey spurted past>. But this distinction never took hold.

Current ratio (spurted vs. *spirted): 25:1

sputter. See slobber.

squalor /skwәr-/ is so spelled in BrE and AmE alike—not *squalour. See -or; -our. Cf. glamour.

Current ratio: 136:1

**SQUARE BRACKETS.** See punctuation (p).

squash; quash, vb. *Squash* (= to flatten or soften [something] by forceful crushing or squeezing) is not a substitute for *quash* (= to overturn or make legally invalid; to suppress, as a rebellion). Many writers err on this point—e.g.:

• “The Alabama story ends for the moment with criminal indictments, and with Windom not only installed as lieutenant governor but also successfully seeing through the tort-reform legislation his opponents had tried to squash [read quash].” Arianna Huffington, “Happy Ending No Savior in Political Horror Story,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 1 Sept. 1999, at 45.


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squash misused for quash: Stage 3

Current ratio (quash the rebellion vs. *squash the rebellion*): 3:1

squeezed. So inflected. *Squoze* is a dialectal past-tense form dating from the early 19th century. E.g.: “As we lifted it to our lips, the onions, bell peppers, yellow squash and smoked gouda cheese, all melted and gooey, *squoze* [read squeezed] out from their roasted bread blankets onto the paper wrapping we used as a plate.” “Truckin’ at Green Cuisine,” *Arkansas Times*, 8 Dec. 2010.

Current ratio (squeezed vs. *squoze): 2,276:1

squelch. See *qublch.

squirearchy (= the class of landed gentry or country proprietors) is predominantly so spelled in all varieties of English—not *squirarchy.

Current ratio: 17:1

squirrel, vb., makes *squirreling and squirrelled in AmE, squirrelling and squirrelled in BrE. See spelling (b).

Sr. See names (b).

Sri Lankan; *Ceylonese. A citizen of Sri Lanka (known as Ceylon until 1972) is today known as a Sri Lankan, not a *Ceylonese. See denizen labels.

Current ratio: 9:1

stabilize; *stabilify; *stabilitate. The first has been standard since it was coined in the mid-19th century. The second and third are needlead variants.

stadium. Although dictionaries traditionally gave priority to *stadia* as the plural, *stadiums* is the more natural and now the more usual form. *Stadiums* has been the predominant form in English print sources since the mid-1980s—e.g.:

staff. In most senses, the plural is staffs. But in music (as well as some archaic senses), the preferred plural is staves—though staffs occasionally appears even in musical contexts. See plurals (c).

stained glass, not *stain glass, is the standard form—e.g.: "One of the most prominent features will be a round stain glass [read stained-glass] window above the altar." Elizabeth Crooker, "It Took Seven Years, but They Finally Have Church," Union Leader (Manchester, N.H.), 21 Mar. 1997, at A5. (On the reason for the hyphen in that correction, see phrasal adjectives.) Cf. fine-toothed comb, iced tea & skim milk.

stalactite; stalagmite. They’re both deposits of calcium carbonate found in caves and caverns. The difference is that a stalactite hangs from the ceiling, while a stalagmite rises from the floor. Writers sometimes fall into error by using stalagmite for stalactite—e.g.:

• “Walking into a slip house [i.e., part of a ceramics plant] and seeing stalagmites [read stalactites] of clay hanging from the ceiling caused an earlier line break indicates a lack of interest in cleanliness.” Paul Kiesow, "Cleanliness: A Component of Quality Often Overlooked," Ceramic Indus., 1 Feb. 1996, at 32.

But stalactite for stalagmite is hardly unknown—e.g.:


A mnemonic device popular among schoolchildren holds that the -c- in stalactite stands for ceiling, while the -g- in stalagmite stands for ground. Another useful one is “hang tight.”

In AmE, the accent for both words falls on the second syllable. In BrE, the first syllable is stressed in both words.

stamen (= the pollen-producing male part of a flower) forms the plural stamens. The classical plural stamina has an entirely different sense in English—a strong sense that shows no signs of flagging.

stamping ground. See stomping ground.

stanch. See staunch.

STANDARD ENGLISH. This is a troublesome term: we all think we know what it is, but a definition proves elusive. Broadly speaking, it is the English used by educated people. Some Britons contend that it is the English used by educated Britons, and that whatever is used by educated people in the United States is Standard American English. Some Americans refer to Standard British English, to differentiate it from American English. Among commentators, some believe that there is a Standard English that subsumes both AmE and BrE. Still others suggest that each English-speaking nation has its own standard: whatever happens to be the most prestigious dialect within that nation.

Although no comprehensive universal definition exists for the whole of Standard English, there is a range of normally accepted linguistic behavior within a given country. As long as deviations from that range are few and insignificant, the standard is maintained.

One major purpose of this book is to detail what is and is not Standard English. In some instances that means Standard Written English (some commentators dislike the capitals because they make the phenomenon seem too monolithic and institutionalized, but capitals are widely used among linguistic commentators). In other instances that means Standard Colloquial English. Since this book is principally about English in its written form, it is easy enough to exclude accent (as many linguists prefer to do) in discussing the linguistic standard. Mostly, the differences between Standard English and dialect have to do with grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation (though undeniably also the pronunciation of certain words, such as can’t, for which /kant/ is standard and /kaynt/ is nonstandard).

Throughout the 20th century, commentators noted (sometimes in strong terms) the social disapproval that attaches to nonstandard English. Mostly this is put in negative terms. If you don’t speak Standard English, you’re at a social and professional disadvantage—e.g.:

• “The intelligent people of America use reasonably pure English. If the speaker falls below this level he simply disgusts.” John P. Altgeld, Oratory: Its Requirements and Its Rewards 9 (1901).
• “Anyone who cannot use the language habits in which the major affairs of the country are conducted, the language habits of the socially acceptable of most of our communities, would have a serious handicap.” Charles Carpenter Fries, American English Grammar 14 (1940).
• “Talking the Standard Language . . . is to [people’s] advantage, not merely materially, because they can more easily obtain positions in society which now—whether one approves of it or not in the abstract—are given by
preference to people whose speech is free from dialect, but also because they thus escape being looked down on on account of their speech and are therefore saved from many unpleasant humiliations. Apart from all this, merely by reason of their way of speaking they have a better chance of coming in contact with others and getting a fuller interchange of ideas." Otto Jespersen, Mankind, Nation, and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View 70–71 (1946).

• “A standard has the advantages of uniformity, general utility, and presentability. Whoever writes it knows two things: he will be understood; he will not be regarded with condescension, amusement, or contempt.” A.P. Rossiter, Our Living Language 75 (1953).

• “Native deviators from standard English—ours—are suspected of being vulgar, uneducated, or simply rustic.” Graham Wilson, A Linguistics Reader 86 (Graham Wilson ed., 1967).

• “People, whether male or female, who use a substandard or less prestigious form of speech often pay a social penalty for doing so.” Peter Farb, Word Play 57 (1974).

• “Deviations from standard English, or what people take to be deviations, are more likely to arouse fury, pity, or scorn than admiration for the deviator’s individuality.” Barbara Wallraf, Word Court 9 (2000).

So there’s the neatly compiled answer to why Standard English is worth trying to attain: without it, you won’t be taken seriously. Many people, especially educated people, will regard you with condescension, amusement, and contempt; they’ll consider you vulgar, uneducated, rustic, and possibly even disgusting; you might well arouse fury, pity, or scorn.

Although some linguists are fond of saying that a standard language is preferred not for any linguistic reason but merely for social reasons, the social factors that affect language users can’t readily be—and shouldn’t be—divorced from linguistics. That is one of the tenets underlying the field known as sociolinguistics. Social pressures are inextricably intertwined with language.

And so what began as one of many 14th-century dialects has risen, by a series of historical events, to become the literary language of the English-speaking world. This dialect wasn’t inherently superior to the other dialects; it was the language used by the people with social and political influence. It became the medium of exchange in politics, diplomacy, law, medicine, technology, and other fields involving intellectual discipline. This rise coincided with literary cultivation and enhanced stability.

Despite the tone that commentators have occasionally taken, encouraging people to use Standard English is not a matter of snobbery. It is a matter of (1) cultural cohesion, (2) continuity with a great literary tradition, and (3) equal opportunity. Learning it does not mean rejecting one’s origins; rather, it is (to some speakers) the equivalent of learning another language—becoming essentially bidialectal. “Its virtue,” as the writer and linguist Anthony Burgess put it, “lies in its neutrality, its lack of purely local associations, its transparency, its clarity, its suitability for intellectual discourses or dispassionate government pronouncements.” A Mouthful of Air 22 (1992).

For related discussions, see CLASS DISTINCTIONS & DIACET.

standby. Pl. standbys—not *standbies.

*standee. See -ee.

stand in line; stand on line. While both phrases must be accepted as standard, stand in line predominates throughout the English-speaking world. The regionalism stand on line prevails in the New York City area and elsewhere in the Northeast, and it is heard (and read) elsewhere too often to be dismissed as a needless variant. Yet it does smack of dialect. Cf. wait in line.

standpoint. See viewpoint.

Star-Spangled Banner. Keep the hyphen. See PHRASAL ADJECTIVES.

start. See begin (b) & commence.

stable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *stateable. See MUTE E. Current ratio: 4:1

state, n. See people (b).

state, vb. See say.

*stateable. See stable.

stated otherwise, when used at the very beginning of a sentence, is a pompous version of in other words. The phrase emerged in the late 19th century and became widespread during the 20th. It shows no signs of waning—e.g.:

• “Stated otherwise [read In other words], while conservatives contend UDI by Quebec after a victorious Yes vote would be revolutionary and seditious, pragmatists claim Ottawa’s refusal to heed the clearly expressed wishes of a majority in the province would be dictatorial.” Louis-Philippe Rochon, “Two Federalist Solitudes,” Montreal Gaz., 16 Oct. 1996, at B3.

• “Stated otherwise [read In other words], if the largest S&L in the United States cannot attract new investment capital with which to lend and grow, the industry cannot survive.” Elliot B. Smith, “S&Ls Want Bank Market,” Orange County Register, 19 Feb. 1997, at C1.

But toward the end of a sentence, the phrase is often quite natural (in the sense “disagreed”)—e.g.:

• “The FAA, airport management and controllers say the airport is safe, and that the flying public has little to worry about, though union representatives stated otherwise less than two weeks ago.” Cheryl Meyer, “Trouble in the Tower,” Lancaster New Era, 3 Mar. 1997, at A1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i–iii.)

Stage 1: Rejected. Stage 2: Widely shunned. Stage 3: Widespread but ... Stage 4: Ubiquitous but ... Stage 5: Fully accepted.

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

Cf. in other words.

statelily. See adverbs (b).

state of the art, n.; state-of-the-art, adj. These vogue words illustrate the interests of a fast-changing society with rapidly effected technological innovations <state-of-the-art products>. For the moment, they are tainted by association with salesmen’s jargon.

*stati. See status.

stationary; stationery. The first is the adjective (= remaining in one place, immobile), the second the noun (= writing materials, esp. paper with envelopes). For a mnemonic device, think of the -er in paper.

On stationary as a noncomparable adjective, see adjectives (b).

statistic (= a single term or datum in a statistical compilation) is a back-formation from statistics dating from the late 19th century. Today its correctness is beyond challenge. E.g.:

“This statistic is a dramatic turnaround from surveys done as recently as five years ago.” Vince Vawter, “Snapshot Shows City Growing in Multiple Ways,” Evansville Courier, 5 Oct. 1997, at A20.


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one statistic: Stage 5

statistics = (1) the mathematics of collecting and analyzing numerical data; or (2) numerical data. Sense 1 is singular <statistics is an exacting discipline>. Sense 2 is plural <the statistics aren’t yet in>.

status (/stā-sēs/ or /stā-tēs/) forms the plural statuses (or, in Latin, statusi), not *stati. See hypercorrection (a) & plurals (b).

status quo; status quo ante; *status in quo. Status quo means “the state of affairs at present”; hence *current status quo is a redundancy. Status quo ante (= the state of affairs at a previous time) is generally confined to legal contexts. (So are the adverbial latinisms in status quo and in status quo ante, both meaning “in the same state of affairs as existed earlier.”) *Status in quo is an archaic variant of status quo.

statutory; *statutorial. Statutory = (1) of, relating to, or involving legislation <statutory construction>; or (2) legislatively created <the law of patents is purely statutory>.

*Statutorial is a needless variant not recognized in the dictionaries. But it sometimes appears in print—e.g.:


“Now if you think this statutorial [read statutory] change is something that would cause heavy breathing only among communications lawyers, consider the fact that it will open competition.” Robert Haught, “Potomac Junction,” Daily Oklahoman, 8 Aug. 1996, at 4.


The adverb statutorily is sometimes wrongly written *statutorially or *statutorally—e.g.:

“At an interest rate statutorily [read statutorily] set at 10 percent, Detroit Diesel would have two to five years to repay the loan, said Nelson.” Lara Jones, “Engine Manufacturer Could Create 450 New Utah Jobs,” Enterprise (Salt Lake City), 8 July 1996, at 1.


statutory rape (= sexual intercourse with a female below the age of consent, regardless of whether it occurs against her will) is an Americanism that originated in the 19th century. Originally, statutory-rape laws applied only to female victims, but today the great majority of American states have sex-neutral legislation dealing with this offense. Statutory rape is a popular term, not (ironically) a statutory one.

staunch; stanch. Staunch is predominant both as the adjective (“trustworthy, loyal”) and as the verb (“to restrain the flow of [usu. blood]”). As verbs, both headwords were common from about 1830—about equally so. But since about 1960, staunching the flow has for the most part overtaken stanching the flow in AmE and BrE alike—e.g.:


“Selman stumbled off to try and staunch the flow from a severed artery while Outlaw staggered into Utah Street and collapsed.” J. Lee Butts, Texas Bad Girls 32 (2001). (For more on try and in this quotation, see try and.)

“He did not know what he felt as he saw Snape’s white face, and the fingers trying to staunch the bloody wound at his neck.” J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows 657 (1st Am. ed., 2007).
Although there is no sound objection to that wording, *stanching* the flow has predominated in AmE since about 1990.

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Current ratio (*stanching the flow* vs. *stanching the flow* in World English): 1:1

**stave** > **stave** > **staved**. So inflected. Avoid the variant past form *stove*.

**steadfast**, adj., has been the standard spelling since the early 19th century. *Stedfast* is a variant that predominated during the 17th and 18th centuries.

**steal.** See *embezzle*.

**steamroll; *steamroller, v.t.*** Although *steamroller* was once considered the standard verb, *steamroll* surpassed it in the early 1990s: it's now twice as common in print. E.g.: “From there, Levens steamrolled on three runs and a reception, scoring from the 3′.” Don Pier son, "Packers 27, Vikings 11," *Chicago Trib.*, 2 Dec. 1997, Sports §, at 1.

Current ratio (*steamrolled* vs. *steamrollered*): 2:1

**stemma** (= [1] a family tree, or [2] a diagram showing the relationships among literary works) predominately forms the plural *stemmata*—not *stemmas*.

Current ratio: 2:1

**stencil, vb., makes stenciled and stenciling in AmE, stencilled and stencilling in BrE.** See spelling (b).

**stereotypical; stereotypic.** The longer form is standard in figurative senses—e.g.: “Despite the wide variety of women who adhere to feminism, the stereotypical thinking that feminists are radicals lives on.” Martha Ezzard, “South Can Use Fonda’s Brand of Activism,” *News & Record* (Greensboro), 30 Nov. 1997, at F2. Stereotypic is standard for the narrow sense “of or produced by stereotypy (the process of printing from stereotype plates).”

**sterility.** See *impotence* (A).

**sternum.** Surely if this word were in common use, English speakers would say and write the plural form *sternums*. But because it invariably appears in medical and technical writing, the Latinate plural *sterna* has consistently predominated since the 17th century.

**stewardess.** In standard usage, this term was overtaken by *flight attendant* in AmE in the mid-1990s. The feminine suffix made it politically incorrect (see *sexism* (b)—and more and more men now have this occupation. So a hypernym was needed, and *flight attendant* was coined in the 1940s to fill the void. It did not surge into widespread use in AmE till the 1970s. In BrE, however, *flight attendant* still doesn’t seriously rival *stewardess* in frequency of use in print sources. See political correctness.

**stick > stuck > stuck.** So inflected. The exception occurs in hockey and other sports, in which *sticked* (= [1] hit with a stick, or [2] having used a stick) is ubiquitous—e.g.:


**stick to; stick with.** Both phrases are acceptable in figurative senses <stick with it!> <stick to it!>. *Stick to* predominates in both AmE and BrE. *Stick with* is a chiefly AmE variant.

Current ratio: 2:1

**stigma. A.** Plural: *Stigma* (/stig- ma/) can be pluralized in two ways: *stigmas* and *stigmata* (/stig- mah-ta/). The English plural (*-mas*) is preferable in most contexts. But *stigmata* carries the specialized sense “bodily marks resembling the crucifixion wounds of Jesus Christ.” In this sense the word is sometimes pronounced */stig- ma-ta/, after the Greek and Latin. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (*stigmata* vs. *stigmas*): 1:4:1

**B. And stigmatism.** Stigmatism (= [1] the absence of astigmatism, or [2] the condition of being afflicted with unhealthy spots on the skin, esp. spots that bleed) is frequently confounded with *stigma* (= a mark of disgrace)—e.g.:

- “Millions of men and women who opened the closet door, ‘came out,’ risked social stigmatism [read stigma], as well as the loss of their jobs and careers.” “We’ve Come a Long Way,” *S.F. Chron.*, 16 Oct. 2001, at A16.
- “A possible reason for this may be to avoid the stigmatism [read stigma] that accompanies such a label ['agression'] being applied to a State.” Dan Sarooshi, “The Peace and Justice Paradox,” in *The Permanent International Criminal Court* 95, 113 (Dominic McGoldrick et al. eds., 2004).

For further misuse of *stigmatism*, see *astigmatism*.

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*stigmatism* misused for *astigmatism*: Stage 1

**stiletto.** Pl. *stilettos*. See plurals (d).

**still life.** Although the usual plural of *life* is *lives*, the art phrase *still life* makes the plural *still lifes*. See plurals (c).

Current ratio (*painted still lifes* vs. *painted still lives*): 28:1
stimulus. Pl. stimuli. This word has not traditionally made a native-English plural, but a few writers have nevertheless experimented with *stimuluses—e.g.:
- “The octopus is meant not to symbolize industry or productivity, but as an example of the visual stimuli [read stimuli] that America is producing.” Robert W. Duffy, “Ceos’ Tentacles Embrace Arts,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 28 July 1996, at C4.

See plurals (b).

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*stimulates for stimuli: Stage 1
Current ratio (stimuli vs. *stimulates): 36,863:1

sting > stung > stung. So inflected. See irregular verbs.

stink > stank > stunk. So inflected. *Stinked is a dialectal past tense and past participle (see dialect). Stunk often appears erroneously as a simple-past form, especially in figurative uses—e.g.:
- “When I coached, the calls stunk [read stank] then and the calls stink now.” Howard Manly, “Patriots, Ch. 4 Winners,” Boston Globe, 8 Dec. 1998, at E5.

See irregular verbs.

Language-Change Index
1. *stinked as past tense of stink: Stage 1
   Current ratio (stank vs. stunk vs. *stinked): 603:198:1
2. stunk for simple-past stank: Stage 4
   Current ratio (they stank vs. *they stunk): 3:1

*styrofoam; *strofoam. See Styrofoam.

stochastic. See aleatory.

stock; shares. Stock = (1) the capital or principal fund raised by a corporation through subscribers’ contributions or the sale of shares; (2) the proportional part of this capital credited to an individual shareholder and represented by the number of units owned; or (3) the goods that a merchant has on hand.

Whereas stock is a mass noun, shares is a count noun closely related to sense 2 of stock. Shares = the units of capital that represent an ownership interest in a corporation or in its equity. See count nouns and mass nouns.

stockholder. See shareholder.

stogie (= a long, thin cigar) has been the standard spelling in BrE since the 1920s and in AmE since the 1940s. *Stogy (predominant in AmE till about 1940) and *stogey are variants.

Current ratio (stogie vs. *stogy vs. *stogey): 59:11:1

stoic, adj.; *stoical. H.W. Fowler argued in 1926 that stoical appears more often as a predicate adjective <his behavior was stoical>, while stoic is better used attributively <stoic indifference> (FMEU1 at 565). No such distinction is maintained today, and the historical evidence is against Fowler. What can safely be said today is that stoic predominates over *stoical in all uses in AmE and BrE alike. The longer form appears to be moribund. Unless specifically referring to the ancient Greek school of philosophy, stoic should not be capitalized. See -ic.

Current ratio: 3:1

stomping ground; stamping ground. The traditional phrase is stamping ground, first used in the late 18th century and still predominant in BrE. Stomping ground, a 19th-century Americanism, spread in AmE throughout the 20th century and achieved predominance in the early 1990s. Today it outnumbers its more traditional rival by a 2-to-1 ratio in AmE print sources. When the first edition of this book appeared in 1998, only one major American dictionary listed stomping ground. Now almost all dictionaries have it, and about half give it priority over stamping ground. It’s perfectly idiomatic to say either stomping ground or stamping grounds—e.g.:

Language-Change Index
1. stomping ground for stamping ground: Stage 5
2. stamping grounds for stamping ground: Stage 5

stony. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *stoney. See mute e.

Current ratio: 90:1

storey. See story.

story; storey. For the floor or level of a building, story is AmE and storey BrE. Surprisingly, the BrE preference for storey did not take hold until the late 1940s. The plural forms are stories and storeys. See plurals (e).

straight. As an antonym of gay, straight dates from the early 1940s as AmE slang. It moved from slang into Standard Written English in the 1990s. (See gay.) The more formal antonyms, of course, are heterosexual and homosexual.

straight and narrow; *strait and narrow. The King James Version of the Bible contains this sentence: “Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that finde it.” Matthew 7:14. Although the phrase *strait and narrow predominated in English-language print sources throughout the 18th century, by 1850—doubtless through folk etymology (see etymology
(d)—straight and narrow became the vastly preponderant form. It is now unquestionably the standard phrase.

straightaway. See straightway.

straighten; straiten. These two verbs have different meanings. Straighten = to make or become straight. Straiten = (1) to make narrow, confine; or (2) to put into distress, esp. financial hardship. Because straiten is the rarer word, it is sometimes wrongly displaced by straighten—e.g.:

- “While most farmers were in straightened [read straitened] circumstances and too old-fashioned to want machinery, he believed Gridley Gerhardt to be forward-looking and prosperous.” John Gould, “Phil Sugg’s Struggle with a Mighty Machine,” Christian Science Monitor, 13 Sept. 1996, at 17.
- “So it has fallen to Villas-Boas to manage the transition in comparatively straightened [read straitened] circumstances while handling egos that rub against each other like tectonic plates.” Oliver Holt, “Lamps Has Put AVB in a Whole New Light,” Mirror (U.K.), 13 Dec. 2011, Sport §, at 56.

Language-Change Index
straighten misused for straiten: Stage 2
Current ratio (straitened circumstances vs. *straightened circumstances): 9:1

straight-faced. So spelled—not *strait-faced. Perhaps by false analogy to straitlaced, some writers get it wrong—e.g.: “The splendour of the frocks and hats would shock this straight-faced [read straight-faced] economist.” “Paying the High Price for Conspicuous Consumption,” Canberra Times, 6 Nov. 2007, at 17.

straightway; straightaway. Straightway was first used in the 15th century as an adverb meaning either “directly” <the ball rolled straightway into the cup> or “immediately” <che went straightway to the King>. The word has stayed mostly adverbial, though it occasionally functions as an adjective <a straightway valve>.

In the 17th century—perhaps through ephemeris combined with the influence of away—the variant form straightway emerged, first as an adverb <she straightway ran to the church>, then in the 19th century as an adjective <a straightway track> and as a noun (esp. as part of a racecourse) <caught up with the competition in the straightaway>. Straightaway, in short, has proved to be a versatile word.

In both AmE and BrE, straightway has consistently occurred with greater frequency in print sources—apart from a brief period from about 1980 to about 2005, when straightaway overtook it first in BrE and then in AmE. Since 2005, though, straightway, the more formal word, has once again been predominant. The word straightway has the feel of a CASUALISM. The rivalry between the words is not yet at an end—or even in the final stretch.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 2:1

*strait and narrow. See straight and narrow.

straiten. See straighten.

straightjacket. The strait in this word means “close-fitting.” *Straightjacket is a common but mistaken variant that has lingered (and even swelled a little) since the mid-19th century. E.g.: “Teachers of the subject assigned editorials by rhetorical types until it was realized that such straightjacketing [read straight-jacketing] of students was destructive of talent, not a developer of it.” Curtis D. MacDougall, Principles of Editorial Writing 81–82 (1973).

As with many other compound nouns, this term has been spelled as two words, as a hyphenated compound, and as a single word. Today the single word is by far the most common form and should be accepted as standard—e.g.:

- “A white-coated psychiatrist flips his notebook, as The Woman, in a straight-jacket [read straightjacket], hallucinates her way through a therapy session.” Janelle Gelfand, “Enthralling Performances, Design Double Operas’ Intensity.” Cincinnat Times Enquirer, 1 July 2001, at E2.
- “Skip the wrap shirt, an invention that feels more like a straight jacket [read straightjacket] than a garment of leisure.” Jill Radsken, “Dive In to End-of-Season Sales Racks,” Boston Herald, 12 July 2001, at 50.

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*straightjacket for straightjacket: Stage 3
Current ratio (straightjacket vs. *straightjacket): 3:1

straitlaced (= rigidly narrow in moral matters; prudish) referred originally, in the 16th century, to a tightly laced corset—strait meaning “narrow” or “closely fitting.” Over time, writers have forgotten the etymology (or they never learned it in the first place) and have confused strait with straight. Hence the erroneous form *straitlaced—e.g.:


Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
Once hyphenated in AmE, the term has been solid since the late 1970s. In BrE, the term is still predominantly hyphenated <strait-laced>.

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*straightlaced* for *straitlaced*: Stage 3

Current ratio (straitlaced vs. *straightlaced*): 4:1

strangely. See sentence adverbs.

strata. See stratum.

**stratagem.** So spelled—though the mistaken form *strategem*, on the analogy of *strategy*, appears about 20% as often as the correct spelling. Though the words *stratagem* and *strategy* are etymologically related, they came into English by different routes, and their spellings diverged merely as a matter of long-standing convention. What happened is that the Latin *strategema* became *stratagem* in Romance languages such as French. *(The Century Dictionary calls the Romance spelling “erroneous.”)* *Stratagem* came into English in the 15th century, through French. But it wasn’t until the early 19th century that English and American writers borrowed *strategy* (originally a Greek term) from Latin. Hence our incongruous spellings today. See spelling (A).

Current ratio (stratagem vs. *strategem*): 31:1

**strategic** (= [1] done as part of a plan, esp. in a particular situation, [2] useful or right for a specific purpose, or [3] of, relating to, or involving warfare) is the standard term. *Strategical* is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 185:1

**stratum.** Pl. strata. (See plurals (b).) Although strata is not a singular, it is sometimes misused that way—e.g.: “By contrast with the atmosphere of, say, Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*, in which an afternoon call or the *strew* of papers on the desk*. W3 defines it as “a number of things scattered about; a disorderly mess.” Because it is so rare, a good replacement might be the better-known, similar-sounding *slew*—e.g.: “Ordinary people could be heard earnestly offering a *strew* of views that, at their most human turning, veered toward the confessional.” Francis X. Clines, “At $50 a Pop, Specialists Listen to the Vox Pop,” *N.Y. Times*, 2 Mar. 1996, at 8.

**stricken. A. Generally.** Though *stricken* often appears as a past participle, grammatical authorities have long considered it inferior to *struck*, which in any event has always been the predominant past participle. It’s an archaism except when used as an adjective <a stricken community>. The past-participial use is ill-advised—e.g.: “A noncompete agreement that bans a person from ever setting up a competing company in the same geographical location will be *stricken* [read *struck*] down by the courts as too restrictive.” Joseph T. Leone, “Family Businesses Need to Play It Safe,” *Wis. State J.*, 16 Feb. 1997, at E4. Cf. proved & shrink.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*stricken* for past-participial *struck*: Stage 3

Current ratio (will be struck vs. *will be stricken*): 9:1

**strickened.** The past participial usage has given rise to the mistaken use of *stricken* for *strike*, and therefore to the double bobble *strickened* (attested from the early 19th century on)—e.g.:

- “He was *strickened* [read stricken] Friday night while doing what he loved—watching the Attleboro High football team play.” “City & Town Report,” *Providence J.-Ball.*, 26 Oct. 1994, at D2.

See strike & irregular verbs.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*stricken* for *stricken*: Stage 1

Current ratio (stricken vs. *stricken*): 1,999:1

stride > strode > strode. So inflected. The variant past participle *stridden* (attested in the *OED* from 1576 to 1790) rarely appears today. Another past-participial form, *strid*, was current before 1800 but is now obsolete.

The form *strode* serves as both the simple past and the past participle. Hence there is no full
correspondence with the seemingly analogous ride > rode > ridden. E.g.:

- “It was 12:15, a mere 15 minutes after McQueen had strode into the chamber.” Jim Adams, “The Death Penalty in Kentucky,” Courier-J. (Louisville), 2 July 1997, at A1.
- “Let’s call Kevin Downtown Brown, because that’s where Michael Tucker took him with two men on in the eighth, mere minutes after Brown, Atlanta’s uber-nemesis of late, had strode heroically in from the bullpen.” Dale Robertson, “Padres Still Trying to Keep the Faith,” Houston Chron., 13 Oct. 1998, at 1.

Some writers erroneously treat stride as a weak verb and use the misbegotten form *strided—e.g.:


Language-Change Index

1. strode as a past participle: Stage 5
   Current ratio (had strode vs. *had stridden): 3:1
2. *strided for strode: Stage 1
   Current ratio (strode vs. *strided): 262:1

strike > struck > struck. So inflected. The form *striked is erroneous—e.g.:

- “Oke from Muskogee’ was for his father, he said, as the band struck [read struck] it up” Chris Vitas, “Merrier Merle’s Mere Hour Better than ‘97 Show,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 2 Oct. 1998, at E2.

See irregular verbs & stricken.

Language-Change Index

*stricken for strick: Stage 1
Current ratio (struck vs. *stricken): 1.3:1

string > strung > strung. The verb is so inflected. (See irregular verbs.) But the past-participial adjective for fiddles, violas, cellos, etc. is strung <stringed instruments>.

strive > strove > striven. So inflected. The form *strived is erroneous both as the simple past and as the past participle—e.g.: “Negotiators strived [read strove] to get South African power-sharing talks back on track.” Wall Street J., 20 May 1991, at A1. See irregular verbs.

Although *had strove was fairly common in the 18th century, since 1820 or so had striven has greatly predominated in print sources. *Had strived is another variant form that has barely been used in print.

Language-Change Index

*strived for strove or striven: Stage 3
Current ratio (we strove vs. *we strived): 5:1
Current ratio (have striven vs. *have strived): 6:1

strode. Some writers erroneously treat strode as a weak verb and use the misbegotten form *stridden—e.g.: “A man in a tie strode up.” Chris Varias, “Merrier Mere Hour Better than ‘97 Show,” Enquirer, 1997, at 32. See irregular verbs.

stratum (a sedimentary rock layer; esp., a bed) > strata. The term has predominated in AmE and BrE alike—e.g.: “strata” for “layers.” Current ratio: 7:3:1

strychnine (a poisonous alkaloid used in small doses for medicinal purposes) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike—not *strychnin. Current ratio: 33:1

stucco. Since 1900 or so, the plural stuccoes has been predominant in AmE and BrE alike—not *stuccos. See plurals (d). Current ratio: 1.3:1

stultify formerly meant “to attempt to prove mental incapacity.” By mild extension, it came to mean either “to make or cause to appear foolish” or “to put in a stupor.” E.g.:


Then, by slipshod extension, it took on the sense “to make useless or futile; to undermine; to negate or retard.” Avoid this loose usage—e.g.:

- “Finally, many fear the political chaos will stultify [read undermine] peace talks with the Palestinians.” Israeli

The word is sometimes misunderstood in two ways. First, it’s sometimes (by still further extension) misused for *squelch* or *stile—e.g.: “These labels in all areas of our political life *stultify* [read *squelch* or *stile*] discussion . . . as well as fostering intolerance throughout the political spectrum.” Gary Clayton, “Cultures Must Be Respected,” *Wis. State J.*, 8 May 1993, at A7. Second, it’s sometimes misused for *disgrace* or *dis-honor* (or perhaps *stupefy*)—e.g.: “‘Nonconformity’ is Algren’s last great cry against injustice, a howl against all that would *stultify* [read *stifle*] the human spirit.” Tom Grimes, “‘Nonconformity’ a Last Cry for Society’s Injustices,” *Austin Am.-Statesman*, 1 Dec. 1996, at E6.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

stufify. So spelled today, as it has been since the mid-19th century. The archaic spelling *stupify* is now regarded as a misspelling—e.g.:”


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

stupify misspelled *stupify*: Stage 2

Current ratio: 6:1

**stupid.** See ignorant.

**St. Valentine’s Day.** See Valentine’s Day.

*st* (= an inflammation on the eyelid) is the standard spelling. (*Stye* is a variant form.) The plural is *sties*. See plurals (b).

Another word spelled *sty* (= a pen for pigs) also has the plural *sties*.

**stylish; stylistic.** *Stylish* = in style, in vogue <a* stylish hat*. *Stylistic* = (1) having to do with style (of general application) <stylistic criticisms that were off the mark>; or (2) in the appropriate style (of music) <his stylistic flourishies were typical of the baroque period>.

**stymie; *stymy.*** This term, a Scotticism from golf, is best spelled *stymie*. It can function as a noun <a serious *stymie*>, but more commonly it’s a verb—e.g.:”

- “Danielle Odom brings quiet pathos to the damaged little girl—though the tongue-twisting lines she’s handed once she arrives in heaven would *stymie* virtually any child actor.” Everett Evans, “‘Slabs!’ Has Some Peaks but Falls Short of ‘Angels,’” *Houston Chron.* 15 Sept. 1995, Houston §, at 1.

The verb is inflected *stymie* > *stymied* > *stymieing*.

Current ratio (*stymie* vs. *stymy*): 165:1

**Styrofoam**, a trademark, is sometimes misspelled *styrofoam* or *stirefoam*. If you’re not referring to the trademarked product (which should have a capital S), *plastic foam* is a better choice.

**subject.** n. See *citizen* (b).

**SUBJECT–COMPLEMENT DISAGREEMENT.** See concord (c).

**subject matter** is two words as a noun phrase and is hyphenated as a phrasal adjective. Formerly, even the noun uses were hyphenated, but the phrase lost its hyphen in AmE during the 1920s and in BrE during the 1960s.

**SUBJECT–VERB AGREEMENT. A. General Rule.** The simple rule is to use a plural verb with a plural subject, a singular verb with a singular subject. But there are complications. If a sentence has two or more singular subjects connected by and, use a plural verb. Yet if the subjects really amount to a single person or thing, use a singular verb <the apple of his eye and the source of his inspiration is Heather>. And if the sentence has two singular subjects connected by or, either . . . or, or neither . . . nor, use a singular verb <let me know if you or your client has any questions>. See concord (A). See also either (d) & neither . . . nor (b).

**B. False Attraction to Noun Intervening Between Subject and Verb.** This subheading denotes a mistake in number usually resulting when a plural noun intervenes between a singular subject and the verb. The writer’s eye is thrown off course by the plural noun that appears nearest the verb—e.g.:”

- “The stalled barges and the towboats that push them along are costing the industry as much as $500,000 a day, but the ripple effect of these disruptions are [read is] incalculable.” Michael deCourcy Hinds, “River Shippers Squirm as Profits Wash Away,” *N.Y. Times*, 7 July 1993, at A7.

This error sometimes occurs when two nouns, seeming to create a plural, intervene between the subject and the verb—e.g.: “Barefaced defiance of morals and law were [read was, because the subject is defiance] illegal.” Lawrence M. Friedman, *Crime and Punishment in American History* 131 (1993). See *synesis.*
The reverse error, plural to singular, also occurs—e.g.: “While the types of illness covered varies [read vary] from one insurer to another, most pay out for heart disease, certain types of cancer and strokes.” Digby Larner, “For Parents, Just One Word: Insurance,” Int’l Herald Trib., 1–2 July 1995, at 17.

C. False Attraction to Predicate Noun. Occasion-ally a writer incorrectly looks to the predicate rather than to the subject for the noun that will govern the verb. The “correct” way of phrasing the sentence is often awkward, so the writer is well advised to find another way of stating the idea—e.g.:

• “You can use live or artificial bait to catch these fish. My favorite are top-water plugs, plastic jigs and live green backs or shrimp.” Mike Manning, “Captain’s Corner,” St. Petersburg Times, 30 July 1997, at C2. (Read: My favorites are or My favorite bait is . . . .)

• “It has been placed in the grave on top of old bones which presumably is the skeleton of Declan.” Peter Tremayne, “Corpse on a Holy Day,” in And the Dying Is Easy 291, 295 (2001). (Because which takes its number from its antecedent bones, the verb should be are. Also, a comma should precede the which. [See that (A).] Hence, old bones, which are presumably the skeleton of Declan.)

D. Compound Subjects Joined Conjunctively. If two or more subjects joined by and are different and separable, they take a plural verb—e.g.:

• “At the same time, the democratic process and the personal participation of the citizen in his government is [read are] not all we want.” Charles P. Curtis Jr., Lions Under the Throne 49 (1947). (The democratic process and personal participation are different things.)

• “Few golfers appreciate the time, money and technical know-how that goes [read go] into making a golf product.” John Steinbreder, “Perfection Takes Time for Clubs, Balls,” Golfweek, 25 Jan. 2003, at 36. (Time, money, and know-how are different things.)

But sometimes the two subjects joined by and express a single idea, and hence should take a singular verb <their confusion and uncertainty is understandable>. This is the case with spaghetti and meatballs, which denotes a single dish and therefore takes a singular verb. The third writer below recognized this, but the other two didn’t:


See bread and butter.

E. Misleading Connectives. The phrases accompanied by, added to, along with, as well as, coupled with, and together with do not affect the grammatical number of the nouns preceding or following them. When such a phrase joins two singular nouns, the singular verb is called for—e.g.:

• “For example, he says, America’s declining ability to compete in the global sale of automobiles and other manufactured products, as well as its status as the world’s leading debtor nation, are [read is] partly the result of the declining cognitive abilities of workers and administrators.” Malcolm W. Browne, “What Is Intelligence, and Who Has It?” N.Y. Times, 16 Oct. 1994, § 3, at 5, 41.

• “The absence of crude petroleum and iron ore, coupled with limited indigenous supplies of coal and natural gas, ensures that Japanese industry must import to survive.” Roger Buckley, Japan Today 67 (2d ed. 1990).

Similarly, a phrase introduced by the preposition like, after a singular subject, does not make the number plural. The following example of misusage in a major airline’s publication may well qualify as one of the worst 11-word sentences ever written. “The room, like he and I [sic], are [read is] a work in progress.” Jim Shahin, “Wired for Weirdness,” Am. Way, 1 Feb. 2003, at 46, 47. A possible revision: The room is a work in progress, like him and me. For the reason why the object of the preposition like should be objective and not nominative, see like (A).

F. Plural Units Denoting Amounts. In AmE, a plural noun denoting a small unit by which a larger amount is measured generally takes a singular verb—e.g.:

• “Five hours are [read is] enough time.”

• “Fifteen minutes pass [read passes] more quickly than you might think.”

See collective nouns & synesis.

G. One and one (is) (are). Both forms are correct. It’s possible to treat one and one as a single mathematical idea, so that the appropriate verb is is. Or it’s possible to treat the two ones separately—hence are. Since the 18th century, the plural has predominated.

The same is true of multiplication: both four times four is sixteen and four times four are sixteen are correct. But here the singular is much more common and more natural in modern usage.

H. Thing after thing (is) (are). This construction takes a singular verb—e.g.:


• “Study after study has shown that in heterosexual couples, perpetrators are overwhelmingly men and victims are overwhelmingly women.” Kathleen Waits, “Domestic Violence,” in The Oxford Companion to American Law 222 (2002).

I. More than one is; *more than one are. The phrase more than one generally takes a singular verb, not a plural one <more than one was there>—even though the sense is undeniably plural. If the noun is supplied before the verb, the construction is necessarily
singular <more than one woman was there>. But without the noun, the construction becomes a little trickier. H.W. Fowler insisted on the singular (FMEU1 at 363), and most professional writers use it—e.g.: “Each ticket costs 50 cents and more than one is usually necessary.” Tom Bayles, “Seafood Fest Rolls Four Events into One,” Sarasota Herald-Trib., 11 Apr. 1999, at B1.

“‘The variable for parental age represents the age of the oldest parent, if more than one is alive.’” Kenneth A. Couch, “Time? Money? Both? The Allocation of Resources to Older Parents,” Demography, 1 May 1999, at 219.

The only exception is a narrow one: it occurs in a more or less pedagogical context when the phrase denotes the plural form of a word, as opposed to the singular—e.g.: “Sondra Katzen of the Brookfield Zoo said platypuses (more than one are also called platypii) are not found at zoos in the U.S. because the animal cannot breed in captivity.” J. Hope Babowice, “Kids Warm Up to Mammals, Learn What Sets Them Apart,” Daily Herald (Chicago), 21 May 1998, at 1.

“One gladiolus is a gladiolus . . . . More than one are gladioluses or gladioli.” Cass Petersen, “Spike Your Garden with Striking Glads,” San Diego Union-Trib., 14 Feb. 1999, at H25. (On whether gladiola is an acceptable singular, see gladiolus.)

“Remember that one animal is an animal, but more than one are animaux, ending in aux.” Vince Passaro, “Unlikely Stories,” Harper’s Mag., 1 Aug. 1999, at 80.

Apart from that one situation—or when the number given is greater than one <more than four golfers were in the group>—a plural verb should not follow. To say *more than one are present is unidiomatic at best—e.g.:

“This column looks at the job description of the personal representative or representatives if more than one are [read is] named.” Julie Tripp, “How to Administer an Estate,” Oregonian (Portland), 27 Jan. 1997, at B12.

“The charge is $40 for the first policy illustration and $30 after that, if more than one are [read is] analyzed at the same time.” William Giese, “Insurance You Can Do Without,” Kiplinger’s Personal Fin. Mag., 1 Feb. 1997, at 71.

“Some of the emotional elements affecting a decision may be: What sort of mood is the person in at the time; the relationship between the individuals when more than one are [read is] involved in the decision.” David Crook, “Why Do People Buy?” Glass Age, 1 May 1997, at 16.

J. Plural Subject Intended to Denote Area or Statistic. Some writers fall into the habit of implicitly prefacing plural nouns with understood words such as the idea of, the field of, or even the fact of. To be sure, some of these wordings are perfectly idiomatic <mathematics is where my talent lies>.

But the habit should not extend beyond the reach of idiomatic comfort. Consider the following title, over an article by Ray and Tom Magliozzi: “Duplicate Cars Means Customer Pays More for Name,” Amarillo Daily News, 21 Aug. 1993, at B5. In that title, there is an implied subject—something like the fact of having . . . means. But the phrasing looks sloppy.

As in the example just cited, this mistaken idiom seems to occur most frequently with the verb mean—e.g.: “There, all-scarlet clothes means [read mean] disease in the house.” Tamora Pierce, Circle of Magic: Sandry’s Book 141 (1997). If the writer really wants a singular means, then the subject should be a gerund (as in someone’s wearing scarlet clothes means . . . ).

Sometimes a plural noun is intended as a singular statistic, but the grammar is mangled—e.g.: “Amid controversy over numbers, 37 million Hispanic people is just shy of 37.7 million black citizens in new Census Bureau estimates.” “Hispanics Close to Outnumbering Blacks,” USA Today, 22 Jan. 2003, at A3. This isn’t a problem involving a singular people as opposed to plural peoples. It’s a problem of comparing one singular numerical amount with another. A possible revision: Amid controversy over numbers, the Hispanic population (37 million) is just shy of the black population (37.7 million) in new Census Bureau estimates.

K. One in five; one of every five. When the first number is one, this construction takes a singular: one in three is not admitted, one of every five achieves a perfect score, etc. See one in [number] is.


M. An Unusual Plural. By convention—and through the principle of synesis—a singular abstract noun may take a plural verb if it’s modified by two or more adjectives referring to different varieties of things denoted by that noun. E.g.:

“Eastern and Western art differ in many fundamental ways.”

“Classical and modern philosophy are not radically different fields of study.”

One way of analyzing those sentences is to say that the first adjective has an implied noun after it. See understood words.

N. Nouns of Multitude. See synesis.

O. A number of people (is) (are). See number of & synesis.

P. One of those who (is) (are). See one of the [+ pl. n.] who (or that).

Q. Each as Subject. See each (A).

R. What as Subject. See what.

S. Inversion. See inversion & there is.

T. Alternatives. See either (d) & neither . . . nor (A).

subject–verb separation. The core words in a sentence are the subject and the verb. They are related both in sense and in grammar. And related words should go together. If you separate them too much, the sentence goes asunder—e.g.:

“Jurors’ need to hear that testimony again just minutes before reaching a verdict puzzled experts.” Haya El Nasser & Sally Ann Stewart, “Verdict Revealed Today,” USA
Today, 3 Oct. 1995, at A1. (A possible revision: When jurors said they needed to hear that testimony again, and just minutes later reached a verdict, the experts were puzzled. Or: The experts were puzzled when jurors said they needed to hear that testimony again, and just minutes later reached a verdict.)

- “Plans unveiled Wednesday for a pair of looping reliever roads connecting vast tracts of land south of Forest Drive have been roundly panned by many residents.” Jeff Nelson, “Many Skeptical of Forest Drive Plans,” Capital (Annapolis), 28 July 1996, at D1. (A possible revision: Many residents have criticized plans unveiled Wednesday for a pair of looping reliever roads connecting vast tracts of land south of Forest Drive.)

**SUBJUNCTIVES.** In modern English, the subjunctive mood of the verb appears primarily in six contexts:

1. conditions contrary to fact <if I were king> (where the indicative would be *am*);
2. suppositions <if I were to go, I wouldn’t be able to finish this project> (where the indicative would be *was*);
3. wishes <I wish that I were able to play piano> (where the indicative would be *were*);
4. demands and commands <I insisted that he go> (where the indicative would be *would be*);
5. suggestions and proposals <I suggest that she think about it a little longer> (where the indicative would be *thinks*);
6. statements of necessity <it’s necessary that they be there> (where the indicative would be *are*).

Although subjunctives are less common in English than they once were, they survive in those six contexts. While suppositions and wishes are the most common than they once were, they survive in those six contexts. While suppositions and wishes are the most common

**Counterfactual conditions:**

- “But the truth is, if it wasn’t [read hadn’t been] for a last-minute infusion of cash by an out-of-state lobbying group, the initiative would not have even garnered enough signatures to qualify for the ballot.” Jack Fischer, “Populist Rhetoric Masks Measure Aimed at Congress,” San Jose Mercury News, 21 Oct. 1992, at A1.

- “I felt as though I was [read were] using an alias, a well-used and permanent one as the years went by, but an alias nevertheless.” Mary Willis, “How I Gave Up My Alias,” N.Y. Times, 16 Oct. 1994, § 6, at 32. (The writer is talking about giving up her married name—thus it’s contrary to fact.)

- “Even if he was to [read were to or does] endorse another candidate, he actually has little in the way of a political operation to pass on.” Bill Turque, “A Pilgrimage to Perot,” Newsweek, 7 Aug. 1995, at 32.

**Demands and commands:**

- “Britain’s farmers are worried that consumers and more supermarkets are going to start demanding that all British beef comes [read come] from herds free from confirmed cases of BSE.” R. Palmer & I. Birrell, “Vets Question the Safety of UK Sausages,” Sunday Times (London), 10 June 1990, § 1, at 3.


**Suggestions and proposals:**


**Statements of necessity:**

- “It will be necessary that he or she have a solid understanding of school finances.” Alyssa Roggie, “Candidates Target Budget, Openness,” Intelligencer J. (Lancaster, Pa.), 30 Oct. 1997, at B1.

- “When the position potentially involves exercising the power of life or death over citizens, it is essential that screening procedures are [read be] in place to keep from hiring people who are temperamentally unsuited for the work.” “Is Screening Sufficient?” Herald (Rock Hill, S.C.), 15 Dec. 1997, at A9.

Formerly, writers used subjunctives with every type of condition, whether contrary to fact or not. Today most of these sound like not-so-quaint archaisms—e.g.:

- “Its very existence is, therefore, a bulwark against oppression and tyranny, no matter who be the potential oppressor or tyrant.” Leslie Scarman, English Law—The New Dimension 6 (1974).

- “The word processor is a marvelous machine, and no sensible writer, if such there be, should scorn it.” Stephen White, The Written Word 74 (1984).

Subjunctives also persist in a few idiomatic phrases, such as Long live the Queen, as it were, be that as it may, far be it from me, and the literary would (that) it were. Another example is be they—e.g.: “In social situations, a conversation with Justice Brennan is likely as not to focus on the interests of those with whom he is speaking, be they judges, politicians and journalists, or waitresses, secretaries and gardeners.” Martin Tolchin, “Brennan Described as Self-Effacing, Sociable Irish Pol,” Dallas Morning News, 22 July 1990, at A12. They also endure in statements of fear or anxiety with the word lest. See lest (b). See also tenses (a).
**sublimate; sublime**, vb. These verbs overlap, but only in their secondary senses; they’re best kept separate. The primary sense of *sublimate*, the more common word, is “to transmute (an instinct) from one form to another, esp. to a more socially acceptable form”—e.g.: “The current popular outrage about corporate governance is mostly *sublimated* concern about declining stock prices.” Michael Kinsley, “Bulls, Bears and Chickens,” *Wash. Post*, 26 July 2002, at A33. Most often, the instinct that gets changed relates to sex—e.g.:  

- “Many clergy do keep their vow of celibacy. But a blocked instinct has to go somewhere, and not everyone succeeds at *sublimating*.” Letter of Sylvia Sturgis, “Fathers’ Fall from Grace,” *Boston Globe*, 24 Feb. 2002, at E8. (In this example, the object of sublimating—namely, it—seems to be implied.)
- “Nathan (Tim Robbins) was a boy raised by parents so strict that his entire sexual drive was *sublimated* into the desire to train others as mercilessly as he was trained.” Roger Ebert, “‘Human Nature’ Takes Comic Look at Sexuality,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 12 Apr. 2002, Weekend §, at 27.
- “Some patrons may, indeed, be offended, concerned that nudity, even when *sublimated* in art, may generate some kind of libidinous charge.” Owen McNally, “Stark, Naked,” *Hartford Courant*, 5 May 2002, at 61.

Sometimes the word suggests that what is *sublimated* is suppressed—e.g.: “There’s an erotic spark between them, but it remains *sublimated*.” Todd Loterry, “A Good ‘Read,’” *News & Observer* (Raleigh), 23 Aug. 2002, What’s Up §, at 23. If the sense is merely to suppress without transforming, then *suppress* is the better choice.

**Sublime** = (1) to change or be changed from a solid to a vapor (and possibly back to solid again); (2) to purify; (3) to make sublime; to raise in dignity; or (4) to enhance the worth of. Most of these senses are rather rare, *sublime* being far more common as an adjective meaning “uplifted; exalted; lofty; supreme.” Sense 1 is most usual in technical contexts—e.g.:  

- “Once *sublimed* into the vapor state, the titanium is allowed to condense on the internal array or on a portion of the inner surface of the chamber.” Phil Danielson, “How to Use Getters and Getter Pumps,” *R&D*, 1 Feb. 2001, at 53.

Although *sublimate* can be used in this sense, *sublime* is preferable (to encourage differentiation)—e.g.: “The ice ‘*sublimated*’ [read ‘*sublimed*’]—turned to gas and escaped into space—prematurely.” Frank D. Roylance, “Hubble Camera Finding Baby Stars,” *Baltimore Sun*, 6 June 2002, at A4. Many dictionary definitions suggest that the vapor gets changed back to a solid again (see *OED*, *W11*, etc.).

Sometimes the sense of *sublime* as a verb isn’t easy to decipher. In the purple prose that follows, it seems to bear sense 4 (“to enhance the worth of”), but one can hardly be sure what the sentence means at all: “This is a manifesto . . . for language bluntly simple and hideously complex, as mandarin as oranges *sublimed* in cans and clean as a paper cut, for effusive language that soaks itself in the spume of its words.” Vanessa Place, “The Radical Romantic,” *L.A. Weekly*, 31 Aug. 2001, at 41. Indeed, that passage seems soaked in that very way.

**submersible; *submergible; *submergeable.** Though the second might seem simpler (cf. *persuadable* and *persuasible*), the first has always been more common in both AmE and BrE. *Submergeable* is a needlessly variant. See -able (A).

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 1,491:19:1

**submissible; *submissable; *submittable.** Though labeled “rare” in the *OED*, *submissible* occurs with some frequency in AmE and BrE alike. *Submissible* and *submittable* are needlessly variants.

Current ratio (submissible vs. *submittable* in World English): 5:1

**submission; *submittal.** *Submission* (= [1] the act of submitting; or [2] something submitted) is the standard word. *Submittal* is a needlessly variant of *submission*—e.g.: “Town code requires members to act on applications within 180 days of submittal [read submission or their being submitted].” Jonathan McNeill, “New Rite Aid Plans Rejected in Henniker,” *Union Leader* (Manchester, N.H.), 1 May 1997, at A5.

Current ratio: 118:1

*submittal. See submissive.

**Subordination and Coordination.** People like being coordinated; they dislike being subordinated. So the terminology in this entry is a little counterintuitive because in writing subordination is good, and coordination often less so.

An elementary point of composition—one that really could be called “advanced,” given how many writers overlook it—is the importance of using subordinate sentence structures as opposed to coordinate ones. Coordination involves creating compound sentences: two independent clauses of equal importance joined by a conjunction such as *and*. E.g.:  

> We needed to send our letter first, and we sent it last week.  
>(Poor)

Subordination involves making one of the clauses dependent. That is, it couldn’t stand on its own as a complete sentence. It’s less important. A subordinate clause normally begins with a subordinating conjunction such as *although* or *because*. (See *although & because*,*)

E.g.:  

> Because we needed to send our letter first, we sent it last week.  
>(Better)

Competent editors frequently insert subordinating conjunctions at crucial points in a piece of writing. For nonfiction writers, perhaps the handiest subordinate conjunctions are *although* (for addressing counterpoints) and *because* (for stating your own reasons). The word *although*, which is especially useful at the
outset of a sentence, ensures that your undercutting of a contrary point will appear in the main clause. In a sentence of under 30 words, that structure is normally more effective than but positioned between independent clauses. Consider:

The deadline passed last Thursday, but Johnson was never told about it. (Mediocre)

vs.

Although the deadline passed last Thursday, Johnson was never told about it. (Better)

vs.

Although Johnson was never told about it, the deadline passed last Thursday. (Better)

With subordination, the phrasing immediately shows that one clause is more important than the other. You're amplifying the one and diminishing the other. The prose starts flowing better almost immediately.

When the more important idea is put into a subordinate clause, the result is what composition teachers call "upside-down subordination":

The deadline passed last Thursday, although Johnson was never told about it. (Poor)

That sentence is poorly phrased. In fact, most sentences with although tacked on the end (as opposed to the beginning) have been poorly constructed. The writer's point is weakened, and the reader may be misdirected.

Some otherwise advanced writers have problems with overcoordinating their clauses. Take for example a British professor who teaches college courses in rhetoric and critical thinking. The opening paragraph of his book The Logic of Real Arguments consists of eight sentences, five of which are compound (all without the requisite comma before the conjunction in the compound sentence). Here's the opening line of his book:

We learn most of what we know from teachers and experts of one kind and another and this is not surprising in a highly specialised modern society. [Alec Fisher, The Logic of Real Arguments 1 (2d ed. 2004).]

This sentence has several faults. First, it contains three ands. Second, it has no internal punctuation—which makes it more difficult to tell which one of the three ands connects clauses as opposed to noun elements. Third, without subordination, it's hard to say precisely what the main point of the sentence is, especially given how it ends.

Let's try using subordination with the sentence, casting it three different ways:

- Given the highly specialized society in which we live, it's hardly surprising that we learn most of what we know from teachers and experts.
- We learn most of what we know from teachers and experts—hardly surprising given how highly specialized modern society has become.
- It can hardly come as a surprise that we learn most of what we know from teachers and experts. After all, we live in a highly specialized society.

Each of those versions has a slightly different emphasis based on the words at the beginnings and ends of the sentences. The end, of course, is of paramount importance. (See sentence ends.) The third revision creates two sentence ends and therefore two points of emphasis. Doing that also improves the average sentence length. (See sentence length.)

In the second sentence of our author's book, the flaw of overcoordinating surfaces again:

However, it is possible to rely too heavily on experts and this approach to learning and knowledge tends to encourage passivity and receptiveness rather than inventiveness and imagination. [Alec Fisher, The Logic of Real Arguments 1 (2d ed. 2004).]

This sentence, containing four ands, begins with the clunky However. (See but (a).) Once again, someone wanting to use subordination instead of coordination could devise three more appealing versions:

- Yet if we rely too heavily on experts for our learning and knowledge, we tend to become passive and receptive rather than inventive and imaginative.
- But this heavy reliance on others to learn may encourage passivity and receptiveness rather than inventiveness and imagination.
- Yet when it comes to learning and knowledge, an overreliance on experts can encourage passivity and receptiveness rather than inventiveness and imagination.

Note once again that the revisions are shorter. Subordination typically promotes economy with words. It also makes the syntax more interesting because there's more variety. The prose is more than a series of compound sentences with undifferentiated main clauses linked by conjunctions.

Now let's look at the final two sentences of our author's first paragraph, once again mispunctuated:

Confidence in one's own judgement is another key to understanding and a secondary objective of this book is to give the reader such confidence. It's like learning to ride a bicycle—you will have some falls on the way but once you can do it you'll realise you can do a great deal on your own. [Alec Fisher, The Logic of Real Arguments 1 (2d ed. 2004).]

With five of the eight sentences in the paragraph constructed this way—coordinating conjunctions linking independent clauses—the reader, subconsciously if not consciously, begins to sense monotony ahead. Figuring out what's a main thought and what's an ancillary one will take up the reader's time and energy. Once again, the passage can be revised for enhanced readability and clarity:

Another purpose of this book is to give you confidence in your own judgment—always a key to understanding. It's like learning to ride a bicycle: although you'll have
some falls on the way, once you can do it you’ll feel more self-sufficient.

Something similar might be said of subordination. It’s always a key to good writing. It’s like learning to ride a bike: although you’ll occasionally produce less-than-pellucid sentences, once you’ve learned the technique of subordination, you’ll write better more and more automatically.

**subordination of perjury.** This legal phrase refers to the crime of trying to persuade another person to commit perjury. In the press (and, embarrassingly enough, even in judicial opinions), it is occasionally rendered *subordination of perjury, a persistent malapropism* that can be traced back to the 18th century. E.g.:

- “The Parliament noted that when nothing was in writing, contract terms were ‘commonly endeavored to be upheld by perjury and subordination of perjury [read subornation of perjury].’” John Roska, “Oral Contract to Buy House Requires Proof of Basic Issues,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1 Apr. 2004, St. Clair–Monroe §, at 2.
- “Based on the State’s delay in notifying defense counsel of its subordination of perjury [read subornation of perjury] allegations, Mora claims the prosecution ‘deliberately interfered with [his] constitutional right to the effective assistance of counsel.’” Mora v. Williams, 111 Fed. App’x. 537, 548 (10th Cir. 2004) (O’Brien, J.).

**Language-Change Index**

*subordination of perjury for subornation of perjury: Stage 1*

Current ratio (subordination of perjury vs. *subordination of perjury): 25:1

**subpar.** This *vogue* word has a curious double meaning. In ordinary contexts, of course, it means “below average, not measuring up to normal standards” <a child’s subpar report card>. But in golf, the term means “below par for a hole, round, or match” — par being the standard number of strokes for a hole or course <three subpar rounds in his last four tournaments>. Oddly enough, then, it’s desirable to be sub-par in golf but not in other aspects of life.

**subpoena. A. Sense.** W3 lists *subpoena* as an adverb meaning “under penalty” (or “under pain”). This, of course, is its etymological sense. Yet it virtually never appears in modern writing with this meaning, and it should be considered obsolete in that sense.

The modern use is as a noun. Even in medieval English practice, *subpoena* served as a noun denoting the writ that commenced civil proceedings by ordering the defendant to attend under pain of a monetary penalty. Today, its meaning is “a court order commanding the presence of a witness or production of things, such as documents, under a penalty for noncompliance.”

**B. Spelling.** *Subpoena* appears in any number of federal statutes because that was, until 1986, the spelling recommended by the *Government Printing Office Style Manual*. Yet *subpoena* is by far the more common spelling and for that reason alone is to be preferred. The form with the digraph *e* (*subpoena* is pedantic at best in modern writing.

**C. Plural.** Although *subpoena* is a singular English noun dating from the early 17th century, it was never a Latin noun. Rather, the English word *subpoena* derived from the Latin phrase *sub poena*, meaning “under penalty” or “under pain.” The plural *subpoenas* appeared in English law as early as 1509 in the title of a statute “for Subpoenas and Privy Seals.” That was the only plural until the early 19th century, when *subpoenae* first appeared — in a misquotation from Coke’s Institutes (Coke actually wrote *sub poena*). So the false Latin plural *subpoenae* is a hypercorrection and, in fact, not a Latin word at all. But because the -ae does show up in the correct past-tense verb form *subpoenaed*, the confusion may have been compounded.

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*subpoenae for subpoenas: Stage 1*

Current ratio (subpoenas vs. *subpoenae*): 447:1

**D. Subpoena, v.t.** The inflected forms of this verb, which dates from the early 17th century, are *subpoenaed* and *subpoenaing*. The miscast forms *subpoened* and *subpoening* have appeared sporadically since the 19th century. The mistaken form *subpoenaining* is a 20th-century American error. *Subpoenaid* is an old BrE past-tense variant that was never as common as the standard form *subpoenae*.

**E. Pronunciation.** The word is pronounced /sap-e-na/ as both noun and verb.

**subscribe.** For the misuse of *ascribe for subscribe*, see *ascribe*.

**subsequently. A. For later.** Using the four-syllable word in place of the two-syllable word is rarely, if ever, a good stylistic choice.

**B. And consequently.** Though both words contain the sense “following” or “occurring later,” *consequently* has primarily a causal nuance: “occurring because of.” Frequently *subsequently* (which has no connotation of causation) is misused for *consequently*—e.g.: “My taste tends to be masculine to begin with. Chintz is not on my radar screen. *Subsequently* [read *Consequently*] I don’t attract frou frou clients.” Peter Marino, in “Peter Marino, Architect,” *Celebrated Living*, Fall 2008, at 88, 89 (interview). See *consequent*.

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*subsequently misused for consequently: Stage 1*

*subsequent to* is a pomposity for *after* or *later*, just as *prior to* is for *before*. E.g.:

A Negotiating Tactic, "Newsweek"-fyoozh/. is pronounced /subterfuge>. else <the recipe allows you to replace chicken with chicken>, but you else <the recipe allows you to substitute tofu for changeable. You substitute something substantive for a year, L.A. is hard pressed to meet the cops' demands (read substantive rights>). Some writers misuse substantive (in which it serves as the adjective corresponding to substantive). B. For substantive. Substantial is the more general word, meaning "of considerable size, quantity, or importance; real; ample." Substantive is more specialized, appearing most often in old-fashioned grammars (in which substantive means "noun") and in law (in which it serves as the adjective corresponding to substance and as the antonym of procedural <substantive rights>). Some writers misuse substantive for substantial—e.g.: "Facing a $290 million deficit this year, L.A. is hard pressed to meet the cops' demands for a substantive [read substantial] raise." "Mayhem as a Negotiating Tactic," Newsweek, 28 Mar. 1994, at 7.

Language-Change Index substantive mispronounced with four syllables: Stage 2

substantiate. So spelled—not *substantuate.

Substantive. A. Pronunciation. Substantive—a commonly mispronounced word—has three, not four, syllables: /sәb-stә-nә-tiv/. The common error in AmE is to insert what is technically known as an epenthetic -e after the second syllable: /sәb-stә-nә-tiv/. Still another blunder is to accent the second syllable: /sәb-stan-tiv/. See pronunciation (b).

Language-Change Index substantive mispronounced: Stage 1

Substitute, vb.; replace. These verbs are hardly interchangeable. You substitute something for something else <the recipe allows you to substitute tofu for chicken>, but you replace something with something else <the recipe allows you to replace chicken with tofu>.

Subterfuge is pronounced /sәb-tәr-fyooj/, not /-fyoozh/.

Stylistic. Substative. The former is standard in AmE and BrE alike. The latter is an archaism and needless variant that has steadily waned since about 1780. Current ratio: 68:1

Subtly. So spelled, not *subtley—e.g.: "The disparity can give retail brokers an incentive to subtly [read subtly] dissuade a customer from selling IPO shares right after an offering." Kathleen Day, "NASD to Toughen Penalties," Wash. Post, 29 July 2002, at A8.

succinct. The first -c- has a /k/ sound: /sәk-sinkt/. Cf. accessory (b) & flaccid.

succubus. See incubus.

Such. A. As a Demonstrative Adjective. Such is properly used as an adjective when reference has previously been made to a category of people or things: hence such means "of that kind" <such a person> <such people>. It isn't properly equivalent to this, that, these, or those.

With this word two points should be kept in mind. First, when used as a demonstrative adjective to modify a singular noun, such typifies legalese. And contrary to what some think, such isn't any more precise than the, that, or those. Second, such is a pointing word that must refer to a clear antecedent. In the following sentence, such is used once vaguely (without an antecedent), once clearly: "The Association agreed to compile data on all conventions that will occur in cities where there are interested Gray Line members and to forward such report to such members." The first such (along with forward) would best have been omitted; no reports have been referred to—only the compilation of data, which is not necessarily the same as a report. The second such, less objectionable because it refers to the members previously mentioned, would read better as those. Cf. said.

B. As a Pronoun. Although the pronoun use of such has ancient history on its side—it dates from the 9th century—today it is best regarded as an archaism except in a few phrases on the model of such is life. E.g.: "Mr. Richler's main business as a novelist has been puncturing pretension; and such is the rich pretentiousness of contemporary culture . . . that he need never worry about being out of work." Joseph Epstein, "The Pleasures of Nastiness," Wall Street J., 19 Dec. 1997, at A16. Except in that type of idiom, such as a pronoun is barbarous-sounding <we never received such>. Indeed, Krapp called it a "crude low colloquialism." George P. Krapp, A Comprehensive Guide to Good English 568 (1927). Cf. same (A).

Suchlike. Born in the 15th century and common by the 16th, this pronoun waned in the 18th century and declined even more in the 19th. Today it is found mostly in dialect, not in standard English.

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Sudan, Sudanese; *Soudan, *Soudanese. The spellings Sudan and Sudanese are standard. The longer forms predominated until about 1905, but they are now all but obsolete. See denizen labels.

sudden, all of a. See all of a sudden.

suffer. To suffer from is to have (an affliction). To suffer with is to feel pain as a result of (an affliction).

suffrance. So spelled. *Suffrance is an infrequent misspelling.

suffice it to say is the subjunctive form of it suffices to say. It has been in common use since the mid-18th century, usually at the beginning of a sentence but not always—e.g.: • “Suffice it to say that the plotters, once their plan has been set into motion, aren’t content to leave well enough alone.” Janet Maslin, “ ‘Deathtrap’ with Michael Caine,” N.Y. Times, 19 Mar. 1982, at C8.

• “When her students were asked how they liked working with her, suffice it to say that they gushed.” Natalie Angier, “Scientist at Work,” N.Y. Times, 30 May 1995, at C1.

• “Suffice it to say that the film concerns a British-born inspirational speaker named Michael Stone.” Steven Zeitchik, “Leaders of the Pack,” L.A. Times, 4 Sept. 2015, Calendar §, at 1.

See subjunctives.

The phrase is sometimes wrongly metamorphosed into *suffice to say, without the it—e.g.: “In a following chapter we shall have much to say about reasoning and inference, but for now suffice to say [read suffice it to say] that it is easier to argue a case after it has been adequately elaborated and illustrated.” V.A. Howard & J.H. Barton, Thinking on Paper 59 (1986). Maybe the writers were concerned with the number of its already in the sentence—a valid concern. But they could have fixed the problem in some other way. (A possible revision: Later, we’ll have something to say about reasoning and inference. But for now, suffice it to say that you can more easily argue a case after adequately elaborating and illustrating your points.)

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*suffice to say for suffice it to say: Stage 4
Current ratio (suffice it to say vs. *suffice to say): 2:1

sufficiency; *sufficience. The former has always been standard in AmE and BrE alike. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 1,726:1

sufficient. See adequate (A) & enough.

sufficiently . . . as to can usually be simplified to enough to—e.g.: • “He sees little evidence of Asian economies being sufficiently supple as to [read supple enough to] be able to change direction quickly,” Peter Aspden, “Life in the Old Tortoise Yet,” Fin. Times, 30 Sept. 1997, Survey §, at 1.

• “His recommendations, while satisfactory, are not sufficiently notable as to [read notable enough to or so notable as to] make a lasting impression.” Vaughn A. Carney, “Where Does the Nation Go from Here?” Chicago Trib., 30 Nov. 1997, at 19.

*sufficient number of, a. Although this phrase is certainly old, dating back to the 17th century, it is also certainly verbose for enough—e.g.: • “As might be expected, he found a sufficient number of [read enough] legislators receptive to the state’s crying need to legalize betting.” O.K. Carter, “ ‘Races’ Old Patron Would Be Proud,” Ft. Worth Star-Telegram, 17 Apr. 1997, at 1.

• “But the 1996 farm law requires the department to transfer sales to the private sector if a sufficient number of [read enough] agents were available in each state.” Farm Law Passed in 1996 Required Change,” Chicago Trib., 25 May 1997, at 2. (Note also the poor tense-shifting: were [five words from the end] should be arc.)

suffrage (= [1] the right to vote, or [2] a short prayer) is occasionally misspelled *suffrage—e.g.: • “[C]lass formation in the cultural and political sense—as well as in the sense of economic identification—entails, among other things, the determined struggle of nascent working-class factions for suffrage [read suffrage].” Stanley Aronowitz, The Politics of Identity 132 (1992).


Current ratio: 995:1

suffragist; suffragette. The broad term for a person who believes that a disenfranchised class of people should have the right to vote is suffragist. That term dates back to the early 19th century. In AmE, it extends especially to women’s suffrage. Suffragette (referring specifically to any woman who participated in the movement to give women the right to vote) is not recorded before the first years of the 20th century. The diminutive suffix -ette was adopted by two groups that made strange bedfellows: the movement’s most scornful opponents and its most radical proponents.

Today, many people object to the term suffragette as sexist—e.g.: “ ‘My mother was a suffragette,’ she said in the opening line of Ken Burns’ documentary on the suffragists . . . . Her choice of words was surprising, said her daughter, Penelope Carter, of Rochester. ‘The word suffragette reminded her of the Rockettes,’ Ms. Carter said. ‘She was a suffragist.’” Douglas Martin, “Ruth Dyk, Champion of Women’s Suffrage, Dies at 99,” N.Y. Times, 26 Nov. 2000, § 1, at 57.

Nevertheless, suffragette remains about twice as common in popular usage as suffragist. The terms are often used interchangeably (sometimes, as in the first example below, for INELEGANT VARIATION)—e.g.:

• “Anti-suffragists feared voting rights would escort in the destruction of the American family, and many
Southernners were suspicious of the Northernners who arrived to sway legislators. American suffragettes tended to be well-educated, well-heeled women of social stature, although the underprivileged and working classes actually gained the most by ratification.” Lisa A. DuBois, “The Perfect 36,” Variety, 13 May 1996, at 79.

• “Sojourner Truth . . . was at a meeting with her sister suffragettes when a man wandered in and began taunting the women about their desire to vote.” Judy Wells, “EVE Awards Presented to 3 Winners,” Fla. Times Union, 9 June 2001, at B1.

• “Youngsters will . . . have an opportunity to learn about suffragists such as Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony and Anna Howard Shaw.” “Camp Features Lessons on Prominent Women,” Lansing State J., 9 July 2002, at 4.

Despite popular usage, however, suffragist has overtaken suffragette in English-language print sources published since the early 1970s. The votes seem to be in—at least for scholarly writing.

*suffrage. See suffrance.

suggest. See allude (c).

suggestible. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *suggestable. See -ABLE (A).

Current ratio: 288:1

suicide. A. And self-killing; self-murder; self-slaughter; felo-de-se. The five terms are generally synonymous, though self-murder and self-slaughter are charged with extremely negative connotations. Suicide and self-killing are broad terms that include every instance in which a person intentionally causes his or her own death. Suicide used to be included within the definition of homicide (= the killing of a human being by a human being), but the modern trend has been to distinguish the one from the other by defining homicide as “the killing of a human being by another human being.” The Latin phrase felo-de-se is a euphemism either for a person who commits suicide or for the act of suicide. See -cide.

B. As an Agent Noun. In the early 18th century, suicide took on the secondary sense of “someone who dies by his or her own hand,” and the word has been steadily used in this meaning ever since—e.g.: “Both the elder of Anne’s sisters, Jane, and an aunt, Frances, were suicides.” John Simon, “Connoisseur of Madness, Addict of Suicide,” New Criterion, Dec. 1991, at 58, 59. Earlier synonyms, now less frequently employed, include self-destructor, self-killer, self-murderer, self-slayer, and felo-de-se.

C. As a Verb. The verb has been used intransitively <he suicided>, reflexively and redundantly <he suicided himself>, and transitively and ridiculously <he suicided her (i.e., drove her to suicide)>. In the intransitive and reflexive uses, the senses are self-evident. The most common use is the intransitive one—e.g.: • “He called his homeland the new Nazareth, and suicided at the age of 30 in 1925.” Paul Greenberg, “As Boris Yeltsin Ascends, So Do the Hopes of His Nation,” Chicago Trib., 21 June 1991, at C23.


• “Not long afterwards, my good friend Grand Chief Stan Beardy asked me to accompany him to the Wunnumin Lake First Nation to do what we could to comfort the families of three young people who had suicided.” James K. Bartleman, “Creating Hope,” Nat’l Post (Can.), 29 Mar. 2010, at A14.

But all these verb uses sound trendy and semiliterate.

*suicide victim, a seeming oxymoron, is a phrase that suggests a dogmatic stand on the issue whether suicide is ever justifiable. The phrase became popular in the mid-20th century. The less doctrinaire equivalent, suicide (n.), is probably more suitable in most contexts. E.g.:

• “The series responded with a moving episode in which Crosetti’s body was found, an obvious suicide victim [read suicide].” Steve Hall, “Warthog Watching,” Indianapolis Star, 28 May 1995, TV Week §, at 1.


sui generis; sui juris. Sui generis /soo-ee jen-ә-rәs/ (= of its own kind; individual; like only to itself) is an acceptable Latinism because of its familiarity. An arty equivalent of unique, it first came into frequent use in the late 18th century. The phrase is singular only, and it should not be used with plural nouns. E.g.:

• “The Third Reich was a sui generis horror: a state resting on systematic mass murder as a central goal.” Dangerous Dreams,” Village Voice, 16 Apr. 1996, at 24.


• “Opened this summer, the museum adeptly tells the sui generis neighbourhood’s story through multimedia exhibits about its past and walking tours through its present.” Alec Scott, “Medium Rare,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 1 Sept. 2015, at L1.

Sui juris /soo-ee juur-әs/ = (1) of full age and capacity; or (2) having full social and civil rights. The term is pretty much confined to legal contexts. But even there, the Latinism is often better translated into ordinary English.

suite. In the phrase bedroom suite, the standard pronunciation of suite is /suwt/; in dialect, the word becomes /soot/ (like suit). Occasionally, the dialectal
pronunciation affects the printed word (*bedroom suit)—e.g.: "When I was in Denver, Colorado, in the ’60s, I bought quite a bit of furniture, a bedroom suit [read suite] and a dining room suit [read suite]."


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*bedroom suit for bedroom suite: Stage 1

sulfur; sulphur. The first has been standard AmE since about 1940. Although the second has been standard BrE since the 18th century, the -f- spelling is making strong headway there. In World English, sulfur has predominated since about 1950. Professional chemists worldwide use only the -f- form, as in sulfide, sulfate, and sulfurous. Both terms are sometimes misspelled *sulfer or *sulpher, even in technical sources—e.g.:

- “The sulpher [read sulphur] dioxide gas released was completely absorbed in an excess of dilute aqueous sodium hydroxide (Step 2).” E.N. Rasmussen, Calculations for A-Level Chemistry 98 (1995).
- “Potassium bicarbonate or wettable sulfer [read sulfur] may cause damage to some plants. Spray foliage of plants once every one to two weeks after first signs of disease are discovered.” Nancy Robitaille & Eugenie Robitaille, Insects, Pests, and Diseases of the African Violet Family 175 (2005).

Current ratio (sulfur vs. sulphur): 1:4:1

sumac (= a plant of the cashew family) is predominantly so spelled—in AmE from 1910 and in BrE from 1950. *Sumach is a variant form. The word is pronounced /soo-mak/ or /soo-mak/.

*summersault. See somersault.


superlatives. 

Superlatives. See comparatives and superlatives.

sundry (= various) is, in AmE, a quaint term with literary associations. The redundant expression various and sundry, dating from the 19th century, ought to be avoided even in the most casual contexts. Sundries (= miscellaneous small items) has been in common use since the 18th century.

sunk. See sink.

*supercede. See supersede (A).

supererogatory has two almost opposite sets of connotations, some positive and others negative. The core sense is “going beyond what is required.” On the one hand, the word may connote “superfluous,” and it is often used in this way—e.g.: “The best opera directors accept this primacy of music in creating theatrical illusion; the worst ones swamp it with overblown stage effects [that] make the music, as it were, supererogatory.” Terry Teachout, “Words, Music, Opera,” Commentary, Dec. 1995, at 57. On the other hand, it may mean “performing more than duty or circumstances require; doing more than is minimally needed”—e.g.: “She believed that . . . Christian morality . . . requires supererogatory acts toward one’s neighbor, even the neighbor who is an enemy.” Vigen Guroian, “The New Nationalism & the Gospel Witness,” Commonweal, 14 July 1995, at 11.

superior, adj., takes to—not than.

Superlatives. See comparatives and superlatives.

supernumerary is a fancy adjective meaning (1) “extra”; (2) (of an employee) “engaged only in case of special need” or (3) “superfluous.” The word is sometimes wrongly written *supernumery—e.g.: “He was . . . a former supernumery [read supernumerary] police officer in East Windsor and had also served with the U.S. Navy.” “John F. Corbett” (obit.), Hartford Courant, 7 May 1997, at B10.

The same error occurs in the noun use, in which supernumerary means “an extra person or thing”—e.g.:


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supernumerary misspelled *supernumery: Stage 1

Current ratio: 176:1
supersede. A. Spelling. This word—from the Latin root *-sed-* "to sit," not *-ced-* "to move"—is properly spelled with an internal *-s-, not a *-c-. But so many other English words end in *-cede* or *-ceed* that many writers unconsciously distort the spelling of *supersede*. The misspelling has persistently occurred since the 17th century, though quite infrequently in comparison with the correct spelling. The error appears in some surprising places—e.g.:”

- "For example, a federal statute may *supercede* [read supersede] or ‘preempt’ a similar state statute, and a state statute may *supercede* [read supersede] or ‘preempt’ a similar county or city ordinance." William A. Kaplin & Barbara A. Lee, *The Law of Higher Education* 673 (2011).

See spelling (A).

B. Corresponding Noun. *Supersession* is the standard noun form, meaning either "the act of superseding" or "the state of being superseded." E.g.: "School Board 12 is the sixth community school board that has had part of its operations superseded by Mr. Fernandez and his aides. *Supersession* is a more lenient step than suspension." Joseph Berger, "School District Stripped of Fiscal Power," *N.Y. Times*, 7 Dec. 1991, at 27. As with the verb, the internal *-s-* is sometimes incorrectly made *-c-.*


Current ratio (*supersession* vs. *supersede*): 16:1

C. Misused for *surpass* or *beat*. Sportswriters have begun using this word as a synonym of *beat*: hence one team is said to "supersede" another when it wins a game. E.g.: Tim Cowlishaw, "Cowboys *Superseded* [read Beaten] by Redskins: Dallas Defense Overpowered in 35–16 Loss," *Dallas Morning News*, 7 Sept. 1993, at B1. And other writers have misused the word for *surpass*: e.g.: "Arguably, Russia *supersedes* [read surpasses] even England in the publication of Shakespeare’s works and the staging of his plays." Melor Sturua, "O.J. Through Russian Eyes," *Wall Street J.*, 21 Sept. 1994, at A14.

Superstitions. In 1926, H.W. Fowler used the term *superstitions* to describe, in the field of writing, "unintelligent applications of an unintelligent dogma" (*FMEU1* at 586). Experts in usage have long railed against them as arrant nonsense, yet they retain a firm grip—if not a stranglehold—on the average person’s mind when it comes to putting words on paper. Indeed, these superstitions are bred in the classrooms in which children and adolescents learn to write.

Most of these superstitions are treated elsewhere in this book, in the entry to which the reader is referred at the end of each subentry. For additional perspectives on these points, see the brief statements by respected authorities on style, grammar, and usage that are collected below.

A. The False Notion That You Should Never End a Sentence with a Preposition.

- "The origin of the misguided rule is not hard to ascertain. To begin with, there is the meaning of the word ‘preposition’ itself: stand before. The meaning derives from Latin, and in the Latin language prepositions do usually stand before the words they govern. But Latin is not English. In English prepositions have been used as terminal words in a sentence since the days of Chaucer, and in that position they are completely idiomatic." Theodore M. Bernstein, *Miss Thistlebottom’s Hobgoblins: The Careful Writer’s Guide to the Taboos, Bugbears, and Outmoded Rules of English Usage* 177 (1971).

See prepositions (B).

B. The False Notion That You Should Never Split an Infinitive.

- "There is a busybody on your staff who devotes a lot of his time to chasing split infinitives. Every good literary craftsman splits his infinitives when the sense demands it. I call for the immediate dismissal of this pedant. It is of no consequence whether he decides to go quickly or slowly; he will go or to quickly go. The important thing is that he should go at once." George Bernard Shaw, Letter to *The Times* (19th c.) (as quoted in *Best Advice on How to Write* 259–60 (Gorham Munson ed., 1952)).
- "Anybody who doesn’t wish to see too wide a division between the spoken and the written speech will not be too severe against the split infinitive. A man may write ‘to tell really’ or ‘really to tell,’ but he will probably say ‘to really tell.’ It seems to us that there are phrases in which the split infinitive is the more direct and instinctive form." "The Split Infinitive" (1898), in *Casual Essays of the Sun* 238, 240 (1905).
• “The practice of inserting an adverb between the infinitive sign [to] and the infinitive has steadily increased during the last hundred years, and goes on increasing still. Even a slight examination of the best and the worst contemporary production, in both England and America, will make clear that the universal adoption of this usage is as certain as anything in the future well can be.” Thomas R. Lounsbury, The Standard of Usage in English 259 (1908).

• “The notion that it is a grammatical mistake to place a word between to and the simple form of a verb, as in to quietly walk away, is responsible for a great deal of bad writing by people who are trying to write well. Actually the rule against ‘splitting an infinitive’ contradicts the principles of English grammar and the practice of our best writers.” DCAU at 469.

• “There is no point in rearranging a sentence just to avoid splitting an infinitive unless it is an awkward one.” Porter G. Perrin, Writer’s Guide and Index to English 828 (4th ed. 1965).

See split infinitives (a).

C. The False Notion That You Should Never Split a Verb Phrase.

• “In a compound verb (have seen) with an adverb, that adverb comes between the auxiliary and the participle (‘I have never seen her’); or, if there are two or more auxiliaries, immediately after the first auxiliary (‘I have always been intending to go to Paris’); that order is changed only to obtain emphasis, as in ‘I never have seen her’ (with stress on ‘have’). . . . There is, however, a tendency to move an adverb from its rightful and natural position for inadequate reasons, as in ‘Oxford must heartily be congratulated.’” Eric Partridge, U&E-A at 224.

• “Because of their misconception as to what a split infinitive really is, some have reached the erroneous conclusion that an adverbial modifier must never be placed between parts of a compound verb phrase, with the result that they write in such an eccentric style as ‘I greatly have been disappointed’ instead of writing naturally ‘I have been greatly disappointed.’” R.W. Pence & D.W. Emery, A Grammar of Present-Day English 320 n.69 (1963).

• “With a compound verb—that is, one made with an auxiliary and a main verb—the adverb comes between auxiliary and main verb (He will probably telephone before starting / I have often had that thought myself / The clock is consistently losing five minutes a day).” Wilson Follett, MAU at 53.

See adverbs (a).

D. The False Notion That You Should Never Begin a Sentence with And or But.

• “Next to the groundless notion that it is incorrect to end an English sentence with a preposition, perhaps the most wide-spread of many false beliefs about the use of our language is the equally groundless notion that it is incorrect to begin one with ‘but’ or ‘and.’ As in the case of the superstition about the prepositional ending, no textbook supports it, but apparently about half of our teachers of English go out of their way to handicap their pupils by inculcating it. One cannot help wondering whether those who teach such a monstrous doctrine ever read any English themselves.” Charles Allen Lloyd, We Who Speak English 19 (1938).


• “There is a persistent belief that it is improper to begin a sentence with And, but this prohibition has been cheerfully ignored by standard authors from Anglo-Saxon times onwards.” R.W. Burchfield, Points of View 109 (1992).

• “Many of us were taught that no sentence should begin with ‘but.’ If that’s what you learned, unlearn it—there’s no stronger word at the start.” William Zinsser, On Writing Well 74 (6th ed. 1998).

See and (a) & but (a).

E. The False Notion That You Should Never Write a One-Sentence Paragraph.

• “A paragraph may contain but one sentence . . . [or] two sentences; but usually it contains more than two.” Adams S. Hill, The Foundations of Rhetoric 23–24 (1896).

• “To interpose a one-sentence paragraph at intervals—at longish intervals—is prudent. Such a device helps the eye and enables the reader (especially if ‘the going is heavy’) to regain his breath between one impressive or weighty or abstruse paragraph and the next.” Eric Partridge, Writing with Style 92–93 (2d ed. 2000).

F. The False Notion That You Should Never Begin a Sentence with Because. So novel and absurd is this superstition that few authorities on writing have countered it in print. But here’s one: “This proscription [‘Never begin a sentence with because’] appears in no handbook of usage I know of, but the belief seems to have a popular currency among many students.” Joseph M. Williams, Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace 168 (1981). It appears to result from concern about fragments—e.g.: “Then the group broke for lunch. Because we were hungry.” Of course, the second “sentence” is merely a fragment, not a complete sentence. (See INCOMPLETE SENTENCES (A).) But problems of that kind simply cannot give rise to a general prohibition against starting a sentence with because. Good writers do so frequently—e.g.:

• “Because of the war the situation in hospitals is, of course, serious.” E.B. White, “A Weekend with the Angels,” in The Second Tree from the Corner 3, 6 (1954).

• “Because the relationship between remarks is often vague in this passage, we could not rewrite it with certainty without knowing the facts.” Donald Hall, Writing Well 104 (1973).

See because (e).

G. The False Notion That You Should Never Use since to Mean because.

• “There is a groundless notion current both in the lower schools and in the world of affairs that since has an exclusive reference to time and therefore cannot be used as a causal conjunction. . . . No warrant exists for avoiding this usage, which goes back, beyond Chaucer, to Anglo-Saxon.” Wilson Follett, MAU at 305.

• “It is a delusion that since may be used only as an adverb in a temporal sense (‘We have been here since ten o’clock’).
It is also a causal conjunction meaning for or because:

"Since it is raining, we had better take an umbrella."—Roy
H. Copperud, American Usage and Style: The Consensus
349 (1980).

See as (A).

H. The False Notion That You Should Never Use
between with More than Two Objects. "When Miss
Thistlebottom taught you in grammar school that
between applies only to two things and among to more
than two, she was for the most part correct. Between
does essentially apply to only two, but sometimes the
two relationship is present when more than two ele-
ments are involved. For example, it would be proper to
say that 'The President was trying to start negotiations
between Israel, Egypt, Syria and Jordan' if what was
contemplated was not a round-table conference but
separate talks involving Israel and each of the other
three nations." Theodore M. Bernstein, Dos, Don'ts &

I. The False Notion That You Should Never Use
the First-Person Pronouns I and me. "If you want
to write like a professional just about the first thing
you have to do is get used to the first person singular.
Just plunge in and write 'I' whenever 'I' seems to be
the word that is called for. Never mind the supersti-
tious notion that it's immodest to do so. It just isn't so."
See first person.

J. The False Notion That You Should Never Use
Contractions. "Your style will obviously be warmer
and truer to your personality if you use contractions
like 'I'll' and 'won't' when they fit comfortably into
what you're writing. 'I'll be glad to see them if they
don't get mad.' There's no rule against
and truer to your personality if you use contractions
Contractions.

supervise is occasionally misspelled *supervize—
e.g.: "And when any out-of-state parolee is under New
Hampshire's jurisdiction, it is the Granite State's parole
board [that] supervizes [read supervises] parole." Pat
Grosssmith, 'Humphrey's Criminal Record Wasn't
Shared Between Region's States,' Union Leader (Man-

Current ratio: 1,294:1

supervisory; supervorial. Supervisory = of, relating
to, or involving supervision. Supervorial = of, relating
to, or involving a supervisor.

supine. Because the word means "lying on one's back,"
the phrase *supine on (one's) back is a REDUNDANCY.

It cropped up in the 19th century and still occasion-
ally appears—e.g.: "Evans was to be laid supine on his
back [read supine] as all four limbs were strapped with
leather binds to a bed." Joe Domanick, "How Califor-
Mag. §, at 10. See prone.

supply. adv. (= in a supple manner), is better than
supply, which causes a MISCUE by suggesting the noun
or verb spelled that way. E.g.: "Her three-occatve voice,
supplyly roaming from a lower register to breathy
soprano, blasted through a pounding eight-man
combo." Jan Stuart, "Basia's Siren Songs," Newsday
(N.Y.), 16 Nov. 1994, at B9. The word has been infre-
quently used since the 19th century. Cf. subtly.

supplement, n.; complement, n. A supplement is
simply something added <a dietary supplement>.

A complement is a wholly adequate supplement; it's
something added to complete or perfect a whole <that
scarf is a perfect complement to your outfit>.

For misuses of complement for complement, see
compliment.

supplementary; supplemental; suppletory; *suple-
tive. Supplementary has been the standard term since
about 1800. The other forms have the same meaning,
namely, "of the nature of, forming, or serving as a
remedy for the deficiencies of something." Outside the
law—which uses special phrases such as supplemental
pleading and suppletory oath—the terms supplemental,
suppletory, and *suppletive are NEEDLESS VARIANTS.

supplicant; suppliant. Supplicant is the standard
noun meaning "someone who earnestly beseeches; a
humble petitioner"—e.g.: "Upstairs in a darkened room of the Edina home in
which he was staying, Sakya Trizin, supreme head of one
of Tibetan Buddhism's four branches, received a constant
stream of supplicants." Kay Miller, "Buddhism from Tibet
Pursues Energy of West," Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 8 July

"Yeltsin has been cut out of some crucial discussions and
sometimes treated as a needy supplicant."

Cragg Hines.

• “It’s true that Priebus came to Trump Tower for a pledge-signing ceremony, as if the party were a suppliant and Trump the grantor of favors.” Eugene Robinson, “He Pledged. Now What?” Wash. Post, 4 Sept. 2015, at A21.

As a noun, suppliant is a needless variant because it occurs much less frequently and because it less closely matches the corresponding verb, suplicate. But as an adjective meaning "humbly beseeching" or "earnestly entreating," suppliant is standard. In use, suppliant as a noun and suppliant as an adjective.

supposable; suppositious; supposititious; suppositional; *suppositive. Supposable = capable of being supposed; presumable. E.g.: “He learns more about himself and the supposable dimension of man’s future.” Dick Richmond, “A Sequel to ‘The Celestine Prophecy,’” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 16 May 1996, at G7.

Suppositious and supposititious sometimes cause confusion. Although some modern dictionaries list these as variants, some differentiation is both possible and desirable. Suppositious should be used to mean “hypothetical; theoretical; assumed.” E.g.:

• “House Speaker Thomas Foley . . . said: ‘I never answer questions like that. They are what are called suppositious questions.’” Michael Karnich, “Clinton Receives a High Court List,” Boston Globe, 16 Apr. 1994, at 1.

• “It is exactly here that I think the roots of Charles’s tragic-comedy lie, and not in the wholly suppositious notion of ‘parricide’ advanced by the Robert Redford movie ‘Quiz Show’.” Jeffrey Hart, “‘Van Doren’ and ‘Redford,’” New Republic, 7 Nov. 1994, at 78.

Supposititious (the most frequently occurring of all the headwords in this entry) should be confined to its usual sense: “illegitimate; spurious; counterfeit.” E.g.:

“His supposititious mortal mind, not God, is the parent of all oppression and abuse, individual and collective.” “The Circle of Love,” Christian Science Monitor, 11 Sept. 1996, at 17. Interestingly, one user of the word has complained that not everyone grasps its precise meaning: “People who write about musical manuscripts find it difficult if not impossible to get the word supposititious into print (‘fraudulently substituted in the place of another thing; not genuine, spurious’) without someone suggesting it should be suppositious (‘based on supposition’).” Fritz Spiegl, “Usage and Abusage,” Daily Telegraph, 8 July 1995, at 32.

Sometimes suppositious appears to be misused for its longer sibling—e.g.: “Lo finally has her baby by the side of a stream, with Elaine assisting. (The tidily achieved birth is the script’s one suppositious [read supposititious] touch.)” Stanley Kauffman, “Manny and Lo,” New Republic, 12 Aug. 1996, at 26.

Suppositional = conjectural, hypothetical. It has much the same sense as suppositious, and is perhaps generally the clearer word. And it’s a little more common—e.g.: “Most of the play takes place in a tent, where Hale and Montresor argue their opposing world views, hopes and passions—a highly suppositional but dramatically irresistible approach, Ford admitted.” Paul Hodgins, “Short Memory an Asset for ‘Nathan Hale,’” Orange County Register, 3 Nov. 1995, at 29.

*Suppositive is a needless variant of suppositious and suppositional.

*supposably. See suppositiously.

supposal; *suppose, n. See supposition.

supposedly (= as is assumed to be true; presumably) is the proper adverb corresponding to supposed—not *supposably (which, properly, means something like arguably). The form *supposably is becoming quite common in speech, but fortunately it’s still rare in print. See -edly.

Current ratio: 1,130:1

supposed to (= expected to) wrongly made *suppose to has been a fairly common error since the 1940s—e.g.:


• “He was suppose [read supposed] to be a lawyer, in fact was in his second year of law school at Florida State University, when he had an epiphany. “Artistic Tribute to 4-Legged Victims,” Atlanta J.-Const., 26 May 2001, Features §, at C2.

Cf. used to.

In constructions in which suppose means “to assume,” an infinitive may follow the verb <I suppose this to be your answer>.

Language-Change Index

*is suppose to for is supposed to: Stage 1 Current ratio (is supposed to vs. *is suppose to): 181:1

supposition; supposal; *suppose, n. Supposition is the ordinary word; the others are needless variants. But supposal is sometimes used by logicians.

suppositious; supposititious; suppositional; *suppositive. See supposable.

suppressible. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *suppressable. See -able (a).

Current ratio: 42:1

suppressor. So spelled—not *supresser.

surcense. See death.

Surinamese; *Surinamer. For a citizen of Suriname, the first is standard; the second is a needless variant. See denizen labels.

Current ratio: 172:1

surily. See adverbs (b).

surmise. A. Spelling. As noun and verb, the word is so spelled—not *surmize. E.g.: “Other officials even

B. And *surmiscal*. The word *surmiscal* has long been a needless variant of the noun *surmise*—e.g.:• "On Long Island, the vacuum of knowledge is filled with assumptions and *surmiscal* [read surmise]", the latest being that Iran may have been involved in the bomb explosion aboard TWA 800—that is, if it was a bomb explosion." Daniel Schorr, "Tripping over Terrorism," *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 Aug. 1996, at 19.

• "Just 32 months away from 12 years in office, Democratic Colorado Gov. Roy Romer recently offered a rather ironic *surmiscal* [read surprise] of his cumulative effect on our state's Republican Legislature." "Put It to a Vote," *Gaz. Telegraph* (Colo. Springs), 13 May 1997, at 6.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*surmiscal* for *surmise*: Stage 1

Current ratio (the *surmise* vs. *the surmiscal*): 300:1

surname; Christian name; forename; given name. The surname (or family name) denotes (wholly or partly) one's kinship. In many cases it was derived from physical characteristics, occupations, or locations and later transmitted to descendants (e.g., Smith); in other cases it indicated paternity (e.g., Davidson). Such names came to be called *surnames*. The modern custom is that a woman who marries may, but need not, add her husband's surname to her own (e.g., Hillary Rodham Clinton). In medieval England the *Christian name* was the baptismal name and was the only name that many people bore. Surnames were given later to differentiate (e.g., Robert the Younger).

The personal name of a non-Christian (and perhaps of anyone) is better called a *forename* (if it comes first) or a *given name*—or simply *personal name*. E.g.: "Suraphel is the *personal name* [or forename or given name] and Apaiwongse the family name [or surname] of my friend in Bangkok." The phrases *first name* and *last name* can be misleading because of the naming practices of different cultures. See *names* (d).

**surprise**, n. & vb., is surprisingly often misspelled *surprize*. True, that was a variant spelling through the mid-19th century, but today it can justifiably be regarded as an error—e.g.: "There are other benefits that come from engaging an investment counselor who is paid for service: . . . fewer surprizes [read surpries] from volatile returns." Jonathan Chevreau, "Define Your Goals Before Investing," *Fin. Post*, 25 Nov. 1995, at 73. The misspelling *suprise* is also common—e.g.: "A pair of high school sweethearts winds up with a surprise [read surprise] pregnancy in a small town in South Dakota." Morain Michael, "Hollywood Hits Iowa's Red Carpet," *Des Moines Register*, 30 Dec. 2008, at E1.

Current ratio: 243:1

**surrounding circumstances.** See *circumstances* (b).

**surveil; *surveille*.** *Surveil* is a relatively new, and decidedly useful, verb corresponding to the noun *surveilance*. It is, in fact, a back-formation from the noun. The participial and past-tense forms are *surveilling* and *surveilled*. E.g.: "Instead, Young has spent a fair amount of time since 1979 surveilling Clifford Antone for the Organized Crime Control Task Force." Robert Draper, "Clifford's Blues," *Texas Monthly*, Oct. 1997, at 140. *W11* gives 1914 as the year of its first recorded use. It was in fairly widespread use in AmE by the 1970s and in BrE by the 1990s. The spelling *surveille* is a variant form.

Current ratio: 6:1

**surveyor.** So spelled—not *surveyor.*

Current ratio: 1,113:1

**survivor.** So spelled—not *surviver.*

Current ratio: 2,455:1

**susceptible**—properly sounded /sa-sep-t-bal/—is sometimes mispronounced, even by educated speakers, /sak-sep-t-bal/.

**suspect, n.** A *suspect* is someone suspected of committing a crime. The person who commits the crime is a criminal (or a robber, thief, murderer, or the like). But in police reports it is common for writers (and, more commonly, broadcast reporters) to describe how "the suspect" committed the crime. Not only is this often absurd (if there is no suspect at that time), it is also potentially false and libelous (if there is a suspect but the suspect is not guilty). Unfortunately, the slack usage seems to be an infection that some writers catch from hanging around police jargon too long—e.g.:• "When confronted, the other man punched him in the eye. The *suspect* [read assailant] fled on foot, leaving the lawnmower." Jeremy Jarrell, "Woman Reports She Saw Man," *Herald-Dispatch* (Huntington, W. Va.), 31 May 2002, at C3.

• "On Friday officers watched as two *suspects* [read men] stole hand tools from the bait vehicle and another vehicle, DuBusk said. The *suspects* [read suspected thieves] fled when marked police units got in behind them, DuBusk said." Jim Balloch, "1 Arrested, Another Sought in Construction Site Theft," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 June 2002, at B5. (Perhaps the writer should have used a different verb, such as took, instead of stole. The suspects took tools, but did they steal them? Only a judge or a jury can decide. Neutral, balanced writing in crime reports is very difficult.)

• "After being given an undisclosed amount of cash, the *suspect* [read robber] fled north on foot." "For the Record," *Salt Lake Trib.*, 1 June 2002, at B2.

**suspect, adj.; suspiculous.** These adjectives have always overlapped a good deal. *Suspect* = (1) not likely to be completely true <some highly suspect evidence;> (2) not likely to be completely forthright or honest <a suspect character;> (3) likely to have or to cause
problems <as we investigated the leak, we concluded that the second-floor door threshold is quite suspect>; or (4) likely to be involved in criminal activity <a suspect SUV>.

Suspicious = (1) having serious doubts about whether someone is behaving properly or honestly <we became suspicious of his conduct>; (2) feeling distrust of someone or something <suspicious of people generally> <suspicious of big government>; or (3) arousing thoughts that something bad or illegal is occurring <suspicious circumstances> <alert the authorities if you see anything suspicious>.

The convergence in meaning occurs especially with sense 4 of suspect and sense 3 of suspicious. So, for example, the collocation suspect van occurs just as frequently in print sources as suspicious van, e.g.:

• Tests may include . . . bone density when osteoporosis is suspected [read suspected] or a woman is at risk for osteoporosis. Ron Surowitz, “Hormone Treatment May be an Option for Menopause,” Jupiter Courier (Fla.), 12 Mar. 1997, at A10.

suspicious adj. See suspect, adj.

sustained injuries is officially for was injured. Dating from the late 18th century, it became frequent over the course of the 20th century—e.g.: “Also since the series, parents have filed lawsuits alleging two area children sustained injuries [read were injured] at unsafe play areas.” Rosa Salter, “L.V. Dad Envisions Playground Safety Network,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 25 Nov. 1996, A.M. Mag. §, at D1. Why prefer an edit that introduces the passive voice? This edit illustrates the principle that passive voice is usually preferable to a ZOMBIE NOUN (injuries).

To sustain injuries to (a body part) is usually verbose for injure—e.g.:


• “Kennard, in her mid-30s, sustained injuries to her jaw, neck and shoulder [read injured her jaw, neck, and shoulder], and has severe headaches, Collins said.” Ted Cilwick, “ Jury Awards Woman Who Slipped in Mall Half-Million Dollars,” Salt Lake Trib., 26 Nov. 1996, at B4.

To argue that those edits make the victim sound responsible for his or her injuries is to ignore an age-old English idiom. A football player might hurt his arm in a game—might even break his arm—and no one would be led to think that it was a self-inflicted wound.

swab (= [1] a mop; or [2] a cotton wad or cloth used for cleaning) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Swob is a variant.

swale (= a depression in the land) is sometimes misspelled *swail—e.g.: “Mickelson . . . played it safe at 13 and banked his tee shot off the right fringe. ’It caught the right swail [read swale] and caught the bottom of the cup,’ Mickelson said.” Melanie Hauser, “TPC Leaves Players Amazed at High Scores,” Houston Post, 25 Mar. 1995, at B5.

swapping Horses while crossing the stream is H.W. Fowler’s term for vacillating between two constructions (FMEU1 at 589). Thus someone writes that the rate of divorce is almost as high in Continental Europe, other things being equal, than it is in the United States. The first as needs a second one in answer, but instead is ill greeted by than. See as . . . as (e).

Examples don’t exactly abound in modern prose, but they’re not rare either—e.g.:

• “He has given the Tilden, Simonsen, Hugo Muller and Pedler lectureships [read lectures] of the Royal Society of
sweat > sweated > sweated. Although sweat is a variant past tense and past participle, sweated has been the standard form since the early 20th century in AmE and BrE alike—e.g.:
- “His hands sweated if he found himself on the way to a new place on his own, a place that was to mean something to him, a place where he had to prove himself. They had sweated last autumn in the train to Gommern, they were sweating again today.” Julia Franck, Back to Back 217 (2013).

Before 1910, sweat was an irregular verb (sweat > sweat > sweat); since that time, it has become regular in AmE and BrE alike.

In quasi-figurative phrases <we really sweated over that one!> <they sweated it out>, the only possible past forms are sweated—e.g.:
- “Inside, you’ll find . . . a celebration of the valedictorians, who have sweated out straight As and are finishing high school at the top of their respective classes.” “97 Graduation,” Spokesman-Rev. (Spokane), 5 June 1997, at V1.
- “The result of this was she wanted to meet my parents. I really sweated that one out. I sweated out what my parents would say.” Clyde A. Weber, Church in the Wildwood 68 (2013).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
sweat as past form in place of sweated
< *he sweat heavily>: Stage 3
Current ratio (he sweated vs. *he sweat): 4:1

sweep > swept > swept. So inflected. Yet the weak form *sweeped has erroneously swept into print—e.g.:

See irregular verbs.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
swept for swept: Stage 1
Current ratio (swept vs. *sweeped): 5,683:1
sweetbrier; sweetbriar. The rosy-pink European rose is sweetbrier in AmE (predominantly since 1850) and sweetbriar in BrE (consistently since the late 18th century).

swell. A. Inflection: swell > swelled > swelled. So inflected in AmE. The form swollen—quite correct as an adjective <swollen ankles>—is a variant past participle in AmE. But in BrE swollen is the normal past participle <her ankles had swollen to twice their ordinary size>.

In 1936, two British usage critics (preferring swollen) said that "'swelled head' is the only phrase which has the weak form of the participle." H.A. Treble & G.H. Vallins, *An A.B.C. of English Usage* 173 (1936). E.g.: "After two Oscar wins, several nominations and many blockbuster hits, beloved actor Tom Hanks has developed a swelled head." Jennie Punter, "Apollo 13, Globe & Mail (Toronto), 21 Sept. 2002, at R19 (referring comically to computer enlargement). In fact, we've developed the slang noun swellhead to denote an egotist. Swollen head (a fine distinction in AmE) tends to refer to a diseased or injured one.

Despite Treble and Vallins's singular exception, modern writers tend to use the past-participial swelled whenever the sense is "grown in number"—e.g.:• "The region's Arab-American population had swelled to an estimated 70,000 people." Robert L. Smith, "When Terror Hits Home," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 11 Sept. 2002, at S5.

• "The number of patients in his Framingham practice had swelled to 4,000." Rhonda Stewart, "Doctors Take a Large Dose of Change," *Boston Globe*, 15 Sept. 2002, Globe West §, at 1.

This usage is about five times as common in print as the metaphorical use of swollen in similar contexts. And judge for yourself, but swollen feels unnatural here: "By the time the group reached Times Square, the number of marchers had swelled [read swollen] into the hundreds." Crocker Stephenson, "Observers Step in Line as Bands Head to Ground Zero," *Milwaukee J. Sentinel*, 12 Sept. 2002, at A15.

And in AmE, the more usual past participle is swelled in other senses as well—e.g.: "Tests showed his brain had swelled [or swollen], a condition that can be fatal." Ed White, "West Nile Sidelines Kids' Radio Bible Voice," *Grand Rapids Press*, 15 Sept. 2002, at A21. See irregular verbs (b).

B. Dialectal Variants. The term *swoll* is a dialectal form sometimes encountered, usually in recorded speech—e.g.:• "Tackle Steve Wallace explained: 'New Orleans swoll up on the goal line. And they stopped us. And we swoll up after. It was a theme all week. They would swell up and we had to swoll up bigger.'" Don Pierson, "49ers Aren't Well But They're Looking Swell," *Chicago Trib.*, 3 Dec. 1991, at C8.

• "Up to the time I started to get all swoll up like a pizened pup, it had been a fairly remarkable weekend." Herb Caen, "The Rambling Wreck," *S.F. Chron.*, 24 Nov. 1992, at B1.

*Swole* is a variant spelling of this word, both in AmE dialect and in BrE—e.g.:• "We heard an unprecedented number of Dan Ratherisms, including every single colorful Texas simile except, 'Swole up like an old mule’s prostate.'" Bob Garfield, "MCI Fails to Connect with Melodramatic Ad," *Advertising Age*, 16 Nov. 1992, at 46.


See irregular verbs (d).
See dialect.

The weak form *swinged is also an infrequent error—e.g.: "The game swung [read swung] on an outstanding rebounding charge led by Pete Corzine and Cody Fallace." Suzanne Mapes, "Lakers Use Defense to Propel Offense in Win," Orange County Register, 19 Dec. 1996, at 16. Actually, swung/swinned/swinjd/ is the correct past-tense form of swinge (= to beat or chastise). See irregular verbs.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *swang for swung* Stage 1
   Current ratio (swung vs. *swang*): 790:1
2. *swinged for swing* Stage 1
   Current ratio (swung vs. *swinged*): 2,212:1

swivel, vb., makes swiveled and swiveling in AmE, swivelled and swivelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

*swoob. See swab.

*swooll; *swoole. See swell (b).

swollen. See swell (A).

swoon, vb., means either (1) "to faint" or (2) "to be overjoyed or enraptured"—e.g.:

• "Like a latter-day St. Theresa swooning in ecstasy, her visage is simultaneously lost in a spiritual trance and abandoned in carnal reverie." Christopher Knight, "Branching Out: Victor Estrada's Work at Santa Monica Museum Is Both Inventive, Grim," L.A. Times, 28 Oct. 1995, at F1.

• "I am of an age to have swooned over Elvis when he caused such havoc amongst teenagers." Lois Reagan Thomas, "Writing Them Write to Pass Exam," Advocate (Baton Rouge), 8 Aug. 1996, at B8.

But swoon does not mean "to slump or fade," as some writers think, and the word should not ordinarily be used to describe the actions of inanimate things—e.g.:

• "Whether the legal profession is suffering from a lack of respect or just a lack of good jobs, applications to law schools have swooned [read slumped or declined] in the nation in recent years, down to 78,000 this year, from a peak of 94,000 in 1991." "Law School Is Losing Its Luster," S.F. Chron., 22 Sept. 1995, at A18.


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*sympatico. See simpatico.

**symposium.** Pl. symposia (standard from the 18th century)—not symposia. The latter is defensible—though it appears less often in English-language print sources by a 5-to-1 ratio. See plurals (b).

**synagogue.** n. is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Synagog is a variant. See -AGOG(UE).

Current ratio: 852:1

**sync;** *synch.* This word, a truncated form of *synchronization* (or, as a verb, *synchronize*), is spelled *sync* in print nearly six times as often as it's spelled *synch.* It occurs most frequently in the phrases *in sync* (= correctly timed, compatible, in agreement), *out of sync* (meaning the opposite), and *lip-sync.* The inflected forms are *synced* /sinkt/ and *synchronizing* /sink-ing/, both of which unfortunately suggest a sibilant *-c.* But the alternatives, *synced* and *synchronizing,* are hardly better, since they might suggest a *-ch-* sound instead of the proper *-k-* sound. Most dictionaries are in (ahem) tune with the prevalent usage.

Interestingly, lexicographers have traced the verb (1929) back further than the noun (1937). It might be that the verb preceded the noun in actual usage, but this would be mildly surprising. More likely, earlier occurrences of the noun will be found to predate 1929. See *lip-sync.*

**synchronous;** *synchronic;* *synchronal.* *Synchronous* = (of an analysis, study, etc.) dealing with events at one time without considering historical antecedents. (Cf. *diachronic.*) *Synchronic* is a *needless variant of synonymous.*

**SYNESIS.** In some contexts, meaning—as opposed to the strict requirements of grammar or syntax—governs *subject—verb agreement.* Henry Sweet, the 19th-century English grammarian, used the term *“antigrammatical constructions” for these triumphs of logic over grammar.* (Expressions in which grammar triumphs over logic are termed *“antilogical.”*) Modern grammarians call the principle underlying these antigrammatical constructions *“synesis”* (/sin-ә-sis/).

The classic example of an antigrammatical construction is the phrase *a number of (= several, many).* It is routinely followed by a plural verb, even though technically the singular noun *number* is the subject <a number of people were there>. (See *number of.*) Another example occurs when a unit of measure has a collective sense. It can be plural in form but singular in sense—e.g.: *“Three-fourths is a smaller quantity than we had expected.”* "Two pounds of shrimp is all I need.”

If these constructions are grammatically safe, similar constructions involving *collective nouns* are somewhat more precarious. The rule consistently announced in 20th-century grammars is as follows: "Collective nouns take sometimes a singular and sometimes a plural verb. When the persons or things denoted are thought of as individuals, the plural should be used. When the collection is regarded as a unit, the singular should be used.” George L. Kittredge & Frank E. Farley, *An Advanced English Grammar* 101 (1913). Generally, then, with nouns of multitude, one can justifiably use a plural verb.

Among the common nouns of multitude are *bulk, bunch, flood, handful, host, majority, mass, minority, multitude, percentage, proportion, and variety.* Each of these is frequently followed by of [+ plural noun] [+ plural verb]—e.g.:

- “A great variety of clays were available to Mississippian potters in the Southeast.” Vincas P. Steponaitis et al., "Large-Scale Patterns in the Chemical Composition of Mississippian Pottery," *Am. Antiquity,* 1 July 1996, at 555.
- "Republicans in California see Boxer as a vulnerable target, and a host of them are actively considering the race.” Cathleen Decker, "New Welfare Law Should Be Amended, Boxer Says," *L.A. Times,* 16 Jan. 1997, at A3.
- “Of these 3,000, however, just a small proportion are enrolled in courses such as Foundations of Health or Human Sexuality.” Richard A. Kaye & Theodore Markus, "AIDS Teaching Should Not Be Limited to the Young," *USA Today* (Mag.), 1 Sept. 1997, at 50.
- "The majority of them were brought over by the autocratic tyrant, led astray, divided, slandered and finally violently suppressed.” “The Democratic Banner Cannot Be Obscured,” *Wall Street J.,* 18 Nov. 1997, at A22.

These nouns of multitude are preferably treated as plural when they're followed by of and a plural noun. Perhaps the best-known example is a *lot,* which no one today thinks of as having a singular force <a lot of people were there>. See *a lot.*

Occasionally an ambiguity arises—e.g.: *“There is now a variety of antidepressants that can help lift these people out of their black moods.”* If the sense of a *variety of* is "several," then *are* is the appropriate verb; if the sense of the phrase is "a type of," then *is* is the appropriate verb. Either way, though, a writer would be wise to reword a sentence like that one.

But the nouns *amount, class,* and *group* all typically call for singular verbs—e.g.:

- "This class of organizations was far more prevalent in the developing countries.” Lester M. Salamon & Helmut K. Anheier, "The Civil Society Sector," *Society,* 11 Jan. 1997, at 60.
- "A small group of conservative congressmen are [read is] thinking about drafting a bill requiring U.S. companies to translate the names of their businesses locating here into Spanish.” Paul de la Garza, "Hooters in Mexico May Prove Challenge," *San Antonio Express-News,* 25 Nov. 1997, at C1.

There may be little or no logical consistency in the two sets of examples just given—justifiable plurals and
less justifiable ones—but the problem lies just outside the realm of logic, in the genius of the language. It is no use trying to explain why we say, on the one hand, that pair of shoes is getting old, but on the other hand, the pair were perfectly happy after their honeymoon.

For more on grammatical agreement generally, see CONCORD & COLLECTIVE NOUNS.

synonym for pseudonym (= a pen name) is a bizarre error—e.g.: “All of the contributors used synonyms [read pseudonyms]: Etienne George signed himself as Edmund Delorne, a name he would use again in a subsequent publication; Georg Böttcher wrote verses in French under the name G. Tonneller; Arthur Stahl, in honor of a promenade in his hometown of Friedberg known as the ‘Rumania,’ assumed the pen name Rumanophile.” Robert E. Norton, Secret Germany 29–30 (2002). See pseudonym.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX synonym misused for pseudonym: Stage 1

synonymous (= equivalent in meaning) is sometimes confused with antonymous (= opposite in meaning)—e.g.: “The phrase ‘subsequent to’ is a preposition, with the same meaning as ‘after’ or ‘since.’ It is synonymous [read antonymous] with ‘prior to,’ which is also a preposition.” Gertrude Block, “The Punctuated Lawyer,” Fed. Lawyer, Jan. 1996, at 21. *Subsequent to is obviously antonymous—not synonymous—with *prior to.

In tone, it is analogous to *prior to. There would have been no confusion if the author had written, “It is the opposite of *prior to.”

Synonymous is often misspelled *synonomous—e.g.: “Woodrow Wilson ‘Woody’ Hite, the man whose name was synonymous [read synonymous] with big band music in Portland for decades, died Tuesday, Nov. 4, 1997, in Camarillo, Calif.” John Foyston, “Big Band Leader Woody Hite Dies at 82,” Oregonian (Portland), 7 Nov. 1997, at D12.

synonymy; *synonymity. Since the 18th century, synonymy has been the preferred form in AmE and BrE alike.

Current ratio: 6:1

synopsis (= a short summary of the main events or ideas in a book, film, play, etc.) makes the plural synopses /si-nop-seez/.

syntactic (= of, relating to, or involving the way words are arranged into sentences) is the standard adjective—*syntactical being a variant form. See -ic.

Current ratio: 9:1


synthesize; *synthetize. Although H.W. Fowler called the latter spelling “the right formation” (EMEUI at 593), synthesis has now fully taken hold, and *synthetize should be considered a NEEDLESS VARIANT. It has never been more than a linguistic cipher in either AmE or BrE.

Current ratio: 461:1

*syphon. See siphon.

systematic; systemic. Systematic = (1) carried out according to an organized plan; or (2) habitual, deliberate. Systemic = affecting an entire system; systemwide. Typically, systemic should be replaced by systematic unless the reference is to systems of the body <autoimmune and other systemic disorders> or METAPHORS based on bodily systems <our political order has been debilitated by a series of systemic problems>.

systematize; *systemize. The former is standard in AmE and BrE alike. The latter is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 15:1

systemic. See systematic.

systole (= a rhythmically occurring contraction, esp. by the heart when blood is forced through the circulatory system) is pronounced /sis-tal-lee/.

syzgy (= a straight-line configuration of three celestial bodies within the same celestial system, as happens, for example, during a solar or lunar eclipse) is pronounced /siz-a-jee/.

T

table, v.t., has nearly opposite senses in AmE and BrE. By tabling an item, Americans mean postponing discussion for a later time, while Britons mean putting forward for immediate discussion. Hence Americans might misunderstand the following sentences:

- “MPs from both sides of the Commons will tomorrow table parliamentary questions demanding to know what official action has been taken to uncover the facts.” John Furbisher & Richard Caseby, “God’s Policeman Keeps Head Down as Bricks Fly,” Sunday Times (London), 10 June 1990, § 1, at 4.
- “Ian Gibson, the Labour MP for Norwich North, warned that colleagues would table Commons motions condemning the pay increase at a time when Gordon Brown, the Chancellor, was demanding pay restraint from the public

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l-li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.

tableau. Pl. tableaux or (less frequently) tableaus. See plurals (b).

Current ratio: 13:1
taboo; *tabu. Although the two forms were close rivals throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, beginning in the 1890s taboo established itself as the standard spelling.

For the verb taboo (= to forbid or prohibit because of tradition or custom), the past tense is tabooed rather than *tabood. E.g.: “In golf’s rubric, the serious mention of those two words [Grand Slam] had long held the same tabooed rank as a discourse on the shanks.” Barker Davis, “Old Blue Gives a Wake-Up Call,” Wash. Times, 17 June 1997, at B1.

Current ratio (taboo vs. *tabu): 7:1
tack; tact. In sailing, a tack is a change in course made by turning the vessel or the sail so that the wind strikes the other side of the sail. To change tack, then, is to change course. Sometimes writers using this idiom pick the more familiar tack, possibly because the idiom suggests an unrelated but similar word (changing tactics) — e.g.:


- “He tries to explain, telling her it’s the U.S. Open venue. She mistakenly thinks he’s playing in the Open. After a deep breath, he tries a different tact [read tack].” Rich Cimini, “Getting Tee Time on Bethpage’s Black Doesn’t Happen Overnight,” Daily News (N.Y.), 19 May 2002, at 98.

Language-Change Index
tact misused for tack: Stage 1
Current ratio (different tack vs. *different tact): 21:1
tactile; *tactual. Tactile is the standard word meaning either “of, relating to, or involving touch” or “touchable, tangible.” *Tactual is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 17:1
takable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike. *Takable is a chiefly BrE variant. See Mute e.

Current ratio: 1:5:1
take. A. Inflection: take > took > taken. So inflected. The form *too ken is low dialect that occasionally shows up in quoted speech — e.g.:


- “Testimony showed Sokolowski told another man he ‘had token [read taken] care of’ Ellwood.” “Sentence Upheld in Grisly Murder,” News & Record (Greensboro), 4 Dec. 1999, at B6C.


Though unusual, the form *token isn’t new: it first appeared in print in the 18th century and has persisted as nonstandard.

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*token: Stage 1
Current ratio (taken vs. *token): 23,970:1

B. And bring. See bring (b).

*Takable. See takable.

take a decision. See Americanisms and Briticisms (c).

take for granted is sometimes written *take for granite, occasionally as a play on words — e.g.: “Just because she etches art in stone doesn’t mean Leda Miller’s work is taken for granite.” David Templeton, “Art on a Headstone,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 7 May 1995, at W1. But sometimes it’s just a malapropism — e.g.: “There’s a huge demographic out there who appreciates good film and shouldn’t be taken for granite [read granted].” Stephen Lynch, “Reality Fails to Bite When It Comes to Genera tion X,” Orange County Register, 23 Aug. 1994, at F2. In the literature on usage, this mistake was first recorded in the 1952 edition of a well-known college text: Norman Foerster & J.M. Steadman Jr., Writing and Thinking 340 (James B. McMillan ed., 5th ed. 1952).

Language-Change Index
*take for granite for take for granted: Stage 1
Current ratio (take for granted vs. *take for granite): 2,829:1
taken aback. This phrase (meaning “shocked or stunned, usu. by something someone has done”) is sometimes wrongly written — or wrongly said — *taken back. E.g.:

- “Never one to be taken back [read taken back] by a new situation, even at the age of eight, Paula had learned a technique for disarming people.” Walter B. Barbe, “My Friend Paula” (1958), in Readings in the Language Arts 468, 469 (Verna Dieckman Anderson et al. eds., 1964).


- “Nothing to do with me! She was completely taken back [read taken back]. ‘I can’t just stand by and see Sarah being cheated on.’” Isobel Stewart, “What Jenny Saw,” Good Housekeeping, Aug. 1996, at 137.

Language-Change Index
*taken back misused for taken back: Stage 2
Current ratio (somewhat taken back vs. *somewhat taken back): 19:1

takeover, n. One word.

taking account of; taking into account. For the use of these phrases as acceptable dangling modifiers, see Danglers (e).
talc, vb. (= to apply talcum powder to), anomalously makes talced and talcing, not *talled and *talicking. See -c.-

talisman. Pl. talismans. Sometimes the erroneous *talismen appears for the singular or plural, especially the latter—e.g.:


Language-Change Index
*talismen as a false plural for talisman: Stage 1
Current ratio (talismans vs. *talismen): 98:1
talk to; talk with. The first suggests a superior’s advising or reprimanding or even condescending <I want to talk to you about the work you’re doing> <a movie star wants to talk to me?>. The second suggests a conversation between equals, with equal participation <I want to talk with you about our project> <I can always talk with my husband after class>. The distinction is chiefly relevant when the parties have different levels of power, authority, or prestige.


tamable; tameable. The first is AmE, the second BrE. See mute e.

tangential (= peripheral, incidental) is the standard form in AmE and BrE alike. *Tangential is a needlessly variant. Occasionally the word is misspelled *taneous, which is something of a malapropism resulting from metathesis—e.g.: “In an effort to ensure at least a tangential [read tangential] spot in boxing, Hearns in January will don a new suit of clothes.” W.H. Stickney Jr., “Hit Man’ Gets into Promoting,” Houston Chron., 1 Oct. 1995, at 30.

tantalize = to torment by sight or promise of a desired thing kept just out of reach. The verb tantalize is derived from the Greek myth about Tantalus, the son of Zeus and the nymph Pluto. After becoming the king of Lydia, he offended the gods by divulging their secrets to mortals. Because the father of Tantalus was divine, Tantalus (though not a god) was himself immortal and so could not be executed for his crime. Instead, as an eternal punishment, he was plunged into a lake of Hades, up to his chin, while overhead boughs of edible fruit hung temptingly near. Whenever he dipped to drink, the water receded; whenever he stretched to eat, a wind blew the laden boughs out of reach.

Through slipshod extension, tantalize is now gradually being stretched to mean “to stimulate desire or the senses”—e.g.:

• “They’re currently scrambling to raise big money for TV ads, because they rightfully fear that Romney will have the money to saturate the airwaves with upbeat imagery and tantalizing sound bites.” Dick Polman, “GOP Outsider Charms Mass.,” Phil. Inquirer, 30 May 2002, at A4.

• “After I tracked down the tantalizing fragrance, I was quite surprised to find out it was coming from a petunia!” “These Plants Will Provide Pleasing Aromas All over Your Yard,” Macon Telegraph, 3 Oct. 2002, at 3.

• “Smoke frequently drifted over the glass divider between the bar and the dining area, interfering with the tantalizing odors emanating from the plates of those seated nearby.” Dale Rice, “A Mediterranean Getaway in Downtown Austin,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 28 Nov. 2002, at 8.

For the time being, careful writers will probably resist this extension—but it may inevitably become a legitimate sense.

Although it’s sometimes hard to be sure from the context, tantalize often seems to be misused for titil ate (= to excite sensually)—e.g.:

• “Kama Sutra tells the truth about eros: that no matter how tantalizing [read titillating?] sex can be, without love, it is unry, destructive and lonesome-making.” Rod Dreher, “Lush ’Kama Sutra’ Sensual, Not Sexy,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 7 Mar. 1997, Showtime §, at 6.

• “More sweet than sexy, more tender than tantalizing [read titillating?], the film is one that even a prime time audience could love.” Lauren Kern, “Warm! Fuzzy! Gay!” Houston Press, 22 May 1997.

Language-Change Index
tantalize misused for titil ate: Stage 1
tantamount (= equivalent) is sometimes misused for paramount (= supreme, preeminent)—e.g.:

• “With quality a tantamount [read paramount] concern, the Celcils are always looking for the right factories to produce items made exactly to their specifications.” Sheila Gadsden, “Train Itn’ Coppesource’s Cup of Tea,” S.F. Bus. Times, 24 July 1989, § 1, at 1.


• “But his requirement that Phil Jackson stay on for another season is of tantamount [read paramount] importance.” “Celtics’ $22 Million Offer Lures Knight from Lakers,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 6 July 1997, at C5.

See paramount. Cf. penultimate.

Language-Change Index
tantamount misused for paramount: Stage 1
Current ratio (paramount importance vs. *tantamount importance): 338:1
tape-record, vt. This verb is always hyphenated.

taqueria (= an informal Mexican restaurant specializing in tacos) is pronounced /tahk-ә-ree-ә/-not
Tatar /tahr/ la-tan/ (= a fine, stiff cotton fabric) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Tarletan is a variant.

Current ratio: 4:1

tarsus (= [1] the ankle, together with the small bones that make it up, or [2] a small plate within the eyelid) forms the plural tarsi /tahr-si/-not *tarsuses.

tartar; tartare. Tartar has several meanings: (1) “a solid acid present in grape juice and deposited as a reddish sediment in wine casks”; (2) “this same substance partly purified to make a cream used in cooking”; (3) “a hard, yellowish crusty substance that forms on teeth as a result of how saliva interacts with food particles; calculus.”

In AmE, tartar is the standard form in tartar sauce (derived from sense 2 above); in BrE, however, the normal spelling is tartare sauce (occasionally rendered as the gallicism sauce tartare, with a postpositive adjective).

The one instance in which tartare is standard in AmE is in the phrase steak tartare, a dish (and name) borrowed from the French in the 1920s.

As a postpositive adjective, tartare is pronounced /tahr-tahr/. The SOED suggests that all pronunciations of that spelling in BrE follow that form, but Briticized as /tah-tah/. The pronunciation of tartar in AmE is /tahr-tar/, in BrE /tah-ta/.

Tartar; Tatar. These are historically the same word, the first borrowed into Middle English from Medieval Latin, the second reintroduced into English from Persian or Turkish in the mid-19th century. The term refers to (1) a member of the Mongolian and Turkic peoples who, led by Genghis Khan (1202–1227), invaded central and western Asia, as well as eastern Europe, in the Middle Ages; (2) a descendant of those people, esp. someone whose family comes from European Russia, Crimea, or parts of Asia; or (3) any of the Turkic languages of these people. Although Tartar /tahr-tar/ has predominated in print sources since Middle English, Tatar /tah-tar/ has become almost equally frequent since the mid-20th century, and it is considered the preferable term for ethnological references.

One reason for the decline of Tartar in technical references is that the word took on a derogatory sense beginning in the 17th century (often capitalized also in this sense): “a savage; a violent, tempestuous, uncontrollable person.” Another reason is the etymological spuriousness of Tartar: in the 1300s, the Persian word Tartar was corrupted through false association with the Latin word Tartarus, meaning “hell.” Hence the scholarly trend in recent decades has been to prefer Tatar.

Taser is the trademarked name of an electrical stun gun and the company that invented it. For that reason, it is properly capitalized, and usually appears so even when used as a verb or an adjective—e.g.: “Find out what happened before the patient was Tasered . . . . All Tasered patients are considered to have experienced a fall until proven [read proved] otherwise.” Fire Chiefs Association of Broward County, Florida Regional Common EMS Protocols 162 (2010). But the margin isn’t wide—it’s lowercase nearly as often, especially when used as a verb.

The company capitalizes its entire name (TASER) as an acronym of “Thomas A. Swift Electric Rifle,” based on a Tom Swift book that was a childhood favorite of its inventor, Jack Cover.

task, v.t. Although modern word aficionados tend to think of the verb to task as a newfangled innovation, this usage dates from the 1500s. It means “to put to work on” or “to compel (someone) to undertake an assignment.” The verb was widely popular in the mid-19th century and then experienced a precipitate lull from about 1910 to the mid-1970s. So when the word inexplicably regained widespread currency in the 1980s and beyond—when English speakers were accustomed to the word only as a noun—many decried it as an annoying example of functional shift. Nothing I say here is likely to dissipate the visceral annoyance that purists may feel. But it’s worth the reminder to examine the history of words before excoriating them. On the other hand, task is legitimately subject to some gentle scorn on grounds of being a vogue word.

tassel (= a hanging ornament made of threads or strips) is sometimes misspelled *tassle—e.g.: “Shauvin spends at least an hour on weekends polishing and fixing her motorcycle with the shiny, gold skulls and long leather tassels [read tassels].” Virginia de Leon, “Va-Va-Vrooooom,” Spokesman Rev. (Spokane), 10 Aug. 1997, at E1.

As a verb, tassel makes tasseled and tasseling in AmE, tasselled and tasselling in BrE. See spelling (b).

tasty; tasteful. Although tasteless serves as the antonym of both—and although tasteful once meant “appetizing”—the differentiation between the words has been complete since the late 19th century. Tasty (= pleasing to the palate; delicious; appetizing) is literal. Tasteful (= having and displaying refinement in manners, the arts, and other matters of aesthetic judgment) is figurative.

Tatar. See Tartar.
tattoo, vb. Inflected tattooed and tattooing.

 taught. See taut (A).

taunt. See taut (A).

taut. A. And taught. Taut (= [1] tightly stretched; [2] tense; or [3] well-disciplined) is surprisingly often written taught (the past tense of teach)—e.g.:

- “Taught [read Taut] ropes sprawling this way and that anchored them to the ground.” Charlene Baumbich,

• “Muscles taught [read taut], bodies bent, the dancers’ breath became an integral part of the piece, their gasps, groans, shrieks and explosive exhalations providing a rhythmic counterpoint to the movement. The piece is laced with tension, and the dance is built around taught [read taut] muscles, twitching fingers and bent bodies.” Kip Richardson, “Rousseve’s Work a Touching Tribute,” Oregonian (Portland), 24 Jan. 1993, Lively Arts §, at 3.


In that last example, wrinkled leather, as opposed to taught leather, must come from old cows as opposed to educated ones.

**B. And taut**, n. & vb. Taunt is both a verb (“to provoke with sarcasm or insults”) and a noun (“a sarcastic, provocative gibee”). Unfortunately, writers are increasingly confusing that word with the adjective taut (= tightly stretched [literally or figuratively])—e.g.:


• “‘The shoulders are still broad and round with muscles, the biceps taunt [read taut].’” Elton Alexander, “Phillis Takes Charge as Hornets’ Leader,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 18 Apr. 1999, at C17.

• “‘Kai’s eyes gleamed as he waited by his partner’s feet, muscles taunt [read taut] under his golden fur as he anticipated the coming command.’” LaDonna Nicholson, “Four-Legged Enforcement,” Orange County Register, 30 Mar. 2000, at 1.

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**tautological**, dating from the early 17th century, has been the standard form since the 18th century. It’s six times as common as *tautologous, a needless variant.

Current ratio: 6:1

**tautology; redundancy. Tautology, a term found mostly in discussions of logic and rhetoric, refers to a restatement of something already said within the immediate context—in words that are different but do not add anything new. E.g.: “Some people in Europe seem to think international bureaucracies and global treaties automatically generate good policy. Indeed, they define good policy as anything that is produced by this process—a rather convenient tautology.” Daniel J. Mitchell, “European Cult of Multinationalism,” Wash. Times, 7 Nov. 2002, at A25. Redundancy, which is a more general term, refers to a word or phrase that adds nothing to the overall meaning because its sense has already been expressed <advance planning>. See REDUNDANCY.

### LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

| *taught for taught: Stage 1 |
| taught | current ratio (taught me vs. taught me): 1,900:1 |

**tear gas, n.; teargas, v.t. This term is spelled as two words for the noun, one for the verb. The inflected forms are teargassed and teargassing in AmE and BrE alike.

**techie, n.; techy, adj. A technology whiz or a computer repairer is a techie—e.g.: “So when it’s your home computer that’s on the fritz (a very pre-digital expression), you hire a computer technician, or ‘techie,’ to save you from your ignorance.” Philip Schmidt, Don’t Sweat It, Hire It 70 (2007). The corresponding adjective is usually spelled techy—e.g.: “For photographers who are new to digital, the histogram’s techy-looking graph can initially be confusing or even intimidating.” Matt Paden, Great Photos with Your Digital SLR 28 (2009).

**technic. See technique.

**technical; technological. The distinction is sometimes a fine one. Technical = (1) of, relating to, or involving
a particular science, art, or handicraft; or (2) of, relating to, or involving vocational training. Technological = (1) of, relating to, or involving the science of practical or industrial arts; or (2) of, relating to, or involving innovative gadgetry and computers. Technological connotes recent experimental methods and development, whereas technical has no such connotation.

**technique; *technic.** Technique has always been standard in AmE and BrE alike. *Technic* is a variant spelling to be avoided—e.g.: “I have heard this remedy [eye-muscle exercises] praised by those whom it has helped [the novelistic Aldous Huxley has written a glowing and laudatory book about this technic [read technique]].” Norman Lewis, Better English 238 (rev. ed. 1961).

Current ratio: 312:1

**technological.** See technical.

techy. See techie.

**teeming with (= to abound; be in plentiful supply) should be followed by a count noun <the pond is teeming with fish> <our suggestion box is teeming with slips>. But sometimes it’s misused for rich in, when applied to abstract noncount nouns—e.g.:


Teeming is also sometimes misspelled teem- ing—e.g.:

- “Helen King of Riverside wasn’t surprised when I recently reported that Mystic Lake is teaming [read teeming] with fish.” Bob Pratte, “Pogs Go the Way of All the Fads,” Press-Enterprise (Riverside, Cal.), 1 May 1995, at B3.
- “Gerber, with the help of other scouts, cut a swath through brush and a swampy area teaming [read teeming] with mosquitoes,” Judy Hartling, “Troop at Church Adds Three Eagle Scouts,” Hartford Courant, 8 Aug. 1996, Manchester Extra §, at 5.

**tepee.** See tepeee.

**teetotal; teetotaller.** The first is AmE; the second is BrE. This geographic distinction was fixed by the early 20th century. But in all varieties of English, teetotalism is the standard spelling. Cf. spelling (b).

**telecast > telecast > telecast.** So inflected. Avoid *telecasted—e.g.:


See -cast & irregular verbs.

**teleconferencing.** See conferencing.

**telegaph, vb.; telegram, n.** To telegaph is to send a telegram. Although telegraph has also been recorded as a verb since the mid-19th century, it has only sporadically so appeared and has never become standard—e.g.:


**telephone.** See -ee.

**telephonic.** Although telephone ordinarily serves as its own adjective <telephone call> <telephone directory>, telephonic proves useful to avoid miscues in some contexts—e.g.: “Just when you thought you were learning to live with voice mail, a new telephonic plague is about to sweep the business world—on-hold marketing.” Richard Tomkins, “Sold to the Person on Hold,” Fin. Times, 22 Sept. 1997, at 16. (Telephone plague might suggest a surfeit of telephones—as opposed to telephone calls.) Telephonic was coined as early as 1840 and came into widespread use as early as 1880.
temblor, vb. is so spelled—not *televize. The word (dating from the 1920s) is a back-formation from television.

Current ratio (televised vs. *televized): 308:1
tell; say. These verbs have distinct uses that most native speakers of English instinctively understand. Idiomatically speaking, you say that something is so, or you tell someone that something is so. Tell, in other words, needs a personal indirect object. You don’t tell that something is so, but instead tell someone that something is so—e.g.:

- “He told [read said] that he trained until he was nauseous and pulled his muscles.” Patricia de Martelaere & Kendall Dunkelberg, “Scars,” *Literary Rev.*, 22 Mar. 1997, at 527. (On the use of nauseous in that sentence, see nauseous.)
- “Mention the LSU fan he dumped into a garbage can and Knight will tell [read say] that if he had have [read if he had] been out of control, he’d have decked the guy.” Mike Littwin, “Self-Tarnished Knight Needs Same Tough Love,” *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), 15 May 2000, at C2.

Still, it’s permissible to say tell that to your father and the like—e.g.: “OK, RWD is better for towing, but tell that to the owner of a 4-cylinder engine.” Jim Mateja, “Sienna Makes Up for Rare Toyota Miscue,” *Chicago Trib.*, 21 Sept. 1997, at 1. In this usage, tell that to is a set phrase.

temblor; trembler. A temblor /tem-blar/ is an earthquake. A trembler is (1) a person who shakes with fear or whose religious practices include shaking, or (2) a species of songbird. The first use of temblor recorded in the OED is dated 1876. That was followed in 1913 by the first recorded use of *trembler*, labeled plausibly enough as a variant of temblor influenced by trembler—a historical double bobble. Today, temblor is by far the dominant form, appearing in print as often as trembler. Even trembler appears about as often as *trembler*—e.g.:


Although temblor originated as a Spanish term naturalized in English in the late 19th century, the plural was fully anglicized by 1910: temblors. The Spanish plural *temblos* is listed in some dictionaries as a variant plural. See plurals (b).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
temblor or *tremblor for temblor: Stage 1
temerarious. See timorous.
temerity (= rash boldness) is sometimes confused with timidity. In the following example, the writer’s meaning isn’t at all clear—e.g.: “There’s a wonderful moment when Hal actually has the temerity to place his hand on his father’s shoulder, a timid gesture of affection that he immediately is made to regret.” Lloyd Rose, “‘Henry IV’: Shortened and Sweet,” *Wash. Post*, 27 Sept. 1994, at D1.
temperature. A. Pronunciation. Temperature is pronounced /tem-pa-ra-char/ or /tem-pra-char/, not /tem-pa-ra-tyuor/, which is extremely pedantic, or /tem-pra-char/, which is slovenly. A combination of the precious and the slovenly, /tem-pa-tyuor/ is ridiculously affected.

B. For fever. In colloquial English, temperature has been used in the sense “fever” since the late 19th century. But this usage is illogical because everything has a temperature, in the general sense of the word. The better choice is fever—e.g.:

- “Mustang Joe, a finalist in the Wimbledon Derby, came down badly with the sickness and was running a temperature [read fever].” Roger Jackson, “Jo’s the Best,” *Sporting Life*, 20 Nov. 1995, News §, at 1.
- “One day recently, Christopher was running a temperature [read fever].” Patricia A. Russell, “‘Chris Is a Child Like Any Other Child,’” *Providence J.-Bull.*, 24 Apr. 1997, at C1.

Of course, it’s acceptable to say that someone is running a temperature of 104—because the word temperature makes perfect sense when it’s coupled with a specific number.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
temperature misused for fever: Stage 3

tempestuous; tempestive. Tempestuous (a common word) = stormy <Jane has a tempestuous relationship with her mother.>. Tempestive (an extremely arcane word) = timely, seasonable <a tempestive delivery>. The latter is sometimes misused for the former—e.g.:


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
tempestive misused for tempestuous: Stage 1
temporize. A. And temporalize. Temporize (fairly common since the 17th century) = (1) to gain time by evasion or indirection <the tough financial
solutions have long been apparent, but policymakers have temporized; or (2) to behave as the circumstances require, esp. by complying or yielding (after Jill threatened to leave, Jack temporized and wore a dark suit to the wedding).

Temporalize (never a common word) = (1) to become a part of earthly life; secularize; or (2) to place in time. Sense 1: "Still, having 'temporalized' himself in the act of creation, and having allowed himself to be affected by human suffering, His all-powerfulness already underwent [read had already undergone] a diminution." Richard Wolin, "Mortality and Morality," New Republic, 20 Jan. 1997, at 30. Sense 2: "What might it suggest, 1890s writers asked, for 'Woman' to be understood as 'New'—for the apparently 'natural' category of the feminine to be temporalized?" Jennifer L. Fleissner, "The Work of Womanhood in American Naturalism," Differences, 1 Mar. 1996, at 57.

B. And extemporize. Extemporize = to speak or perform extemporaneously; improvise. E.g.:

- "Marvin Jones had to extemporize Wednesday in front of Orlando's Downtown Athletic Club, the organization that awarded him the 1992 Butkus Award as the nation's top linebacker." Carter Gaddis, "Improvising Will Be Key as Jets' Jones Hits Camp," Tampa Trib., 13 July 1997, at 6.

tenant. See tenet.

tend = (1) to be predisposed to [something]; or (2) to look after or care for [someone or something].

- "Marvin Jones had to extemporize Wednesday in front of Orlando's Downtown Athletic Club, the organization that awarded him the 1992 Butkus Award as the nation's top linebacker." Carter Gaddis, "Improvising Will Be Key as Jets' Jones Hits Camp," Tampa Trib., 13 July 1997, at 6.

Avoid the variant spelling *tendencious.

Current ratio (tendentious vs. *tendencious): 97:1

B. With People. The word doesn't properly apply to people, in the sense prejudiced or biased—e.g.: "Bretcher's world is peopled by tendentious [read prejudiced or biased] hippies who turn into pretentious yuppies." Mary Schmich, "Accent on Agony," Chicago Trib., 3 Aug. 1997, at 18.

C. For contentious. Tendentious is occasionally confused with contentious (= combative)—e.g.:

- "The usual reason for producing expressions like 'says a survey,' according to a new report, 'latest research indicates,' 'scientists have discovered' or 'say doctors' is to add authority to some partisan or tendentious argument." Auberon Waugh, "A Plague on All 'Health Surveys,'" Sunday Telegraph, 26 Oct. 1997, at 37.
- "Politicians love to use history as a tool to justify policy. ... The tendency drives historians mad, however. They argue that such a shallow use of the past is selective, tendentious, and sometimes just factually incorrect." Mark Rice-Oxley, "In Arguing for War, Blair Enlists History as His Ally," Christian Science Monitor, 7 Mar. 2003, World §, at 7.

Avoid the variant spelling *tendentious.

Current ratio (tendentious vs. *tendentious): 97:1

C. For contentious. Tendentious is occasionally confused with contentious (= combative)—e.g.:

- "The structure represents Selig's vision for his sport—the opportunity to soar beyond the tendentious [read contentious] labor struggles that have bedeviled baseball for decades and into an era of not only prosperity, but peace." Teri Thompson, "Selig: A New View for Baseball," Daily News (N.Y.), 21 Oct. 2001, at 76.
- "Why Orwell Matters" suggests that neither camp is likely to win a lasting victory in the tendentious [read contentious] tug of war for the allegiance of a polemicist as gifted, and refractory, as Hitchens." Jim Barloon, "Why Orwell Matters," Houston Chron., 5 Jan. 2003, Zest §, at 18.

Avoid the variant spelling *tendentious.

Current ratio (tendentious vs. *tendentious): 97:1

D. For tendinitis. A surprising error is the substitution of tendentious for tendinitis (= inflammation of tendons in a joint). It probably results from trigger-happy users of spell-checkers—e.g.:

- "'However, I don't think my body can go another year at this intensity. I have had some lower back problems and patellar tendentious [read tendinitis] (jumper knees) so I want to leave the game healthy.' " Long and Fruitful


- “About 45 minutes before Sunday’s game, Nets coach Byron Scott said starting point guard Jason Kidd was going to sit out because of tendentious [read tendinitis] in his left foot.” John Reid, “Nets’ Kittles Returns Home as a Pro,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 10 Mar. 2003, Sports §, at 6.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

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**Tenses A. Generally.** The following table shows the basic tenses in English with the verb *be* conjugated.
The labels *1st*, *2nd*, and *3rd* stand for first person, second person, and third person.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicative Mood</th>
<th>Present Tense</th>
<th>Past Tense</th>
<th>Future Tense</th>
<th>Present-Perfect Tense</th>
<th>Past-Perfect Tense</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Singular</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>I am</td>
<td>We are</td>
<td>I will be</td>
<td>I have been</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>You are</td>
<td>You are</td>
<td>You will be</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>He is</td>
<td>They are</td>
<td>He will be</td>
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<td><strong>Plural</strong></td>
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<td>1st</td>
<td>We are</td>
<td>They are</td>
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<td>2nd</td>
<td>You are</td>
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<td>They are</td>
<td>They were</td>
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**Tennessean; *Tennessean.** The first has been standard since the 1930s, before which time the second (now but a variant) was somewhat more common. Although the final -e is dropped in this word, it's retained in the similar term *Tallahasseean.* See DENIZEN LABELS.

**Tennison.** The formal name of the 19th-century poet laureate is *Lord Alfred Tennison.* But writers often mistakenly write *Lord Alfred Tennynson* (and have done so since the late 19th century)—e.g.:

- “Harrogate had become the culture capital of Northern England, attracting such celebrities as Charles Dickens, *Lord Alfred Tennynson* [read Alfred, Lord Tennyson], George Bernard Shaw and Sir Edward Elgar, as well as most of Europe’s royalty.” David Yeandon, “Hear, Hear, Harrogate!” *Wash.* *Post,* 16 July 1995, at E1.


The reason it’s an error is that, with an English baron, *Lord* is almost always coupled with a last name instead of a first. The decision lies with the recipient. But usage can get complicated: W2 notes that “Lord Henry Derby” and “Lord Philip Derby” would be possible “for the younger sons of dukes and marquises.” Remember that.

**TENSES.**
Future-Perfect Tense
Singular Plural
1st I will have been We will have been
2nd You will have been You will have been
3rd She will have been They will have been

Subjunctive Mood

Present Tense (Suggestions, Requirements)
Singular Plural
1st (that) I be (that) we be
2nd (that) you be (that) you be
3rd (that) he be (that) they be

Past Tense (Present/Future Reference)
Singular Plural
1st (If) I were (If) we were
2nd (If) you were (If) you were
3rd (If) he were (If) they were

Past-Perfect Tense (Past Reference)
Singular Plural
1st (If) I had been (If) we had been
2nd (If) you had been (If) you had been
3rd (If) he had been (If) they had been

Cf. subjunctives.

B. Sequence of. The term sequence of tenses refers to the relationship of tenses in subordinate clauses to those in principal clauses. Generally, the former follow from the latter.

In careful writing, the tenses agree both logically and grammatically. The basic rules of tense sequence are easily stated, although the many examples that follow belie their ostensible simplicity.

1) When the principal clause has a verb in the present (he says), present perfect (he has said), or future (he will say), the subordinate clause has a present-tense verb. Grammarians call this the primary sequence.

2) When the principal clause is in past tense (he said, he was saying) or past perfect (he had said), the subordinate clause has a past-tense verb. Grammarians call this the secondary sequence.

3) When a subordinate clause states an ongoing or general truth, it should be in the present tense regardless of the tense in the principal clause—thus He said yesterday that he is Jewish, not *He said yesterday that he was Jewish.* This might be called the "ongoing-truth exception."

Examples may be readily found in which the primary sequence is mangled—e.g.: "Mrs. Yager faces a maximum sentence of up to 60 years in prison, although neither side expects that the maximum sentence will have been [read had] a choice in the matter." Eoin Colfer, *Artemis Fowl: The Arctic Incident* 112 (Am. ed. 2002).

An exceedingly common problem occurs with (tenseless) infinitives, which, when put after past-tense verbs, are often wrongly made perfect infinitives—e.g.:

- "Remembering how busy General Maxwell Taylor must have been as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1963, how would you have liked to have been [read to be] in his shoes when he received the following cablegram, dated October 31, 1963, from General Paul Harkins, United States commander in Vietnam?" David W. Ewing, *Writing for Results in Business, Government, and the Professions* 111 (1974).

- "Guest . . . had had plenty of time to have challenged [read to challenge] on either side." Geoff Lester, *Guest's Up and Downer!"* Sporting Life, 15 Nov. 1996, at 19.

- "It would have been unfair to the co-authors, he said, to have listed [read to list] Dr. Lu among them." Nicholas Wade, "Scientists Find a Key Weapon Used by H.I.V.," *N.Y. Times,* 19 Apr. 1997, at 1, 9.

This problem occurs frequently with the verbs seemed and appeared—e.g.:


- "Other residents, however, seemed to have enjoyed [read seemed to enjoy] the storm as they ventured into the hail-covered streets." Ibon Villelabeitia, "Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It . . . Er, Hail," *Orange County Register,* 16 Jan. 1997, Community §, at 1.

Cf. would have liked.

Finally, some writers mistakenly ignore the ongoing-truth exception—e.g.: "It hadn’t escaped my notice that many modern texts, like many older ones, were [read are] self-referential, or concerned with the pleasures of ‘recognition.’" Letter of Claude Rawson, *London Rev. of Books,* 18 May 1989, at 5.

On a related subject, see double modals.

C. Threatened Obsolescence of Perfect Tenses. Perhaps the heading here is overdrawn, but a distressingly large number of educated speakers of English seem at least mildly hostile to perfect tenses. There are three: the present perfect, the past perfect (or pluperfect), and the future perfect. And they’re worth some attention.

First, the present-perfect tense is formed with have [past participle], as in I have done that. Either of two qualities must be present for this tense to be appropriate: indefiniteness of past time or a continuation to the present. This tense sometimes represents an action as having been completed at some indefinite time in the past—e.g.:

I have played more than 1,000 rounds of golf.

They have seen Ely Cathedral before.

But sometimes, too, the present perfect indicates that an action continues to the present—e.g.:

I have played cards nonstop since 3:00 yesterday.

They have toiled at the project for three years now.
If neither of those qualities (imprecision about time or, if the time is precise, continuation to the present) pertains to the context, then the present perfect isn't the right tense.

Apart from the urge to convert this tense to simple past when the present perfect is needed, the most common error is to use the present-perfect form when the time is definite but the action doesn't touch the present—e.g.: "I have played [read played] cards nonstop from 3:00 to 5:00 PM yesterday."/ "They have toiled [read toiled] at the project for three years until last month." If, as in those examples, the action is wholly in the past—and the time is relatively definite—the simple past is called for.

Second, the past-perfect tense is formed with had [+ past participle], as in I had done that. This tense represents an action as completed at some definite time in the past—that is, before some other past time referred to. E.g.:

I had already taken care of the problem when you called yesterday.

By June 26 the money had disappeared.

Third, the future-perfect tense is formed with will (or shall) [+ have + past participle], as in I will have done that. This tense represents an action that will be completed at some definite time in the future—e.g.:

She will have published her second book by the time she's 30.

They will have gone to bed by midnight.

Of these three types, the present perfect causes the most confusion. Some writers mistakenly equate it with passive voice—to which it has no relation. Others simply want to cut have, thereby converting the continuing action to a completed action. They may call this economizing, but it's almost always a false economy. And if the have-cutters ever become numerous enough, they will have done (that's future perfect) the language serious harm.

tentative (/[ˈtɛntətɪv]/) is often mispronounced, and therefore mistakenly written, as if the word were *tentative—e.g.:

- "At the all-star break, he was making 42 percent (126 of 300) of his field goals, looking tentative [read tentative] with the ball." David Aldridge, "Harvey Grant Has Found That He Could Get to Like Starting After All," Wash. Post, 16 Apr. 1990, at C6.

Current ratio: 4,159:1
tenterhooks. A tenter is a frame for stretching cloth to dry, and tenterhooks are the hooks or nails placed in the tenter to hold the cloth. The set phrase on tenterhooks, then, refers to being stretched, therefore strained and nervous. Because the unfamiliar word tenterhook is rarely seen outside that phrase, it is prone to being misspelled *tenderhook, perhaps under the influence of tenderfoot or tindertbox—e.g.:

- “They did see the smoke from the huge Sioux and Cheyenne encampment, and were on tenterhooks [read tenderhooks] until Custer's scout, Curley, arrived on the morning of the 27th bearing confirmation of their fears.” Frederic Smith, "Civilian Grant Marsh Played Major Role in Bighorn Story," Bismarck Trib., 25 June 2001, at A1.
- “Nittoli said she was put on tenterhooks [read tenterhooks] in July, when she decided to leave Morristown Memorial Hospital and got a letter from Kalleberg suggesting she not quit the hospital because her job as SART and SANE coordinator was in jeopardy.” Peggy Wright, "Prosecutor's Office Scrambles After Resignations," Daily Record (Morristown, N.J.), 13 Jan. 2004, at A1.
- “There was That Guy, and he's in every line, the guy who declares to the people in front of and behind him in Europe, they're on tenterhooks [read tenderhooks] to see if we mess this one up, too.” Rachel Sauer, "New Voting Reality: A Long Wait in Line," Palm Beach Post, 3 Nov. 2004, at D1.

The error first occurred in AmE in the early 19th century and had spread into BrE by 1900. Cf. tenderbox.

Language-Change Index

tenthook misused for tenterhook: Stage 1 Current ratio (tenterhooks vs. *tenterhooks): 85:1
tenure; tender. Tenure (= [1] a holding by right, as of an elected office; [2] the time spent in such an office; or [3] an entitlement to a professional position, esp. at a university, with protection against dismissal) is sometimes used where the intent was tender, vb. (= to offer something, esp. in settlement of a debt or a dispute). When the thing being tendered is a resignation, this malapropism is particularly absurd—e.g.:


Language-Change Index

tenure misused for tender: Stage 1
tepee (= a conical tent made by American Indians of the Plains and Great Lakes regions) is the standard spelling of this quintessentially American word, whether in AmE or BrE. *Teepee and *tipi have been variants since the 18th century.

Current ratio (tepee vs. *tipi vs. *teepee): 2:1.5:1

tercentenary; *tricentennial; *tercentennial; *tri-centenary. Since the mid-19th century, the first has been the usual spelling for both the noun meaning “a period of 300 years” and the adjective meaning “of, relating to, or involving a 300-year period.” The other three are variant forms. See centennial.

Tercentenary is pronounced /tәr-sәn-ten/ or /tәr-san-ten-ә-ree/ .

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 23:3:2:1

termagant (= a quarrelsome, overbearing woman) is pronounced /tәr-mә-gәnt/, not /-jәnt/. The mispronunciation occurs twice in the movie Step sister from Planet Weird (2001).

terminable, adj. So written—not *terminatable. See -atable.

terminal. See terminus.

terminate. See fire.

terminus; terminal, n. Terminus = the place at the end of a travel route, esp. a railroad or bus line. Pl. termini or (much less commonly) terminuses. (See plurals (n.)) Terminal = (1) a station on a transportation route; (2) a computer workstation; or (3) a point for connecting wires in an electrical circuit.

terra cotta. The noun is so written <a bust in terra cotta>, but the adjective is terra-cotta <a terra-cotta bust>.

terrain; terrane. Terrain (dating from the mid-18th century) = the topography of a given region or piece of land. Terrane (dating from the mid-19th century) = (1) a specific geological formation in a given region; or (2) the rocks associated with such a formation. Although it originated as an altered spelling of terrain, terrane is now a standard geologist’s term.

terrine. See tureen.

territory; dependency; commonwealth. The distinctions in AmE are as follows. Territory = a part of the United States not included within any state but organized with a separate legislature (W11). Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands are territories of the United States; Alaska and Hawaii were formerly territories. Dependency = a land or territory governed, but not formally annexed, by a geographically distinct country. The Philippines was once a dependency of the United States. Commonwealth = a political unit having local autonomy but voluntarily joined with the United States. A few states are called commonwealths, but mostly one thinks of Puerto Rico and the Northern Mariana Islands as commonwealths. Puerto Rico is sometimes referred to as a dependency, but its proper designation is commonwealth.

In BrE, commonwealth = a loose association of countries that recognize one sovereign <the British Commonwealth>. See commonweal.

tessera (/tes-әr-a/) = (1) a small square tablet used in ancient Rome as a token; or (2) a small square block used in mosaic. The plural is tesserae (/tes-әr-e/) or tesseras. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (tesserae vs. tesseras): 180:1
testatrix (= a female maker of a will, or female testator) is increasingly viewed as archaic. Testator is generally viewed as a non-sex-specific term. See sexism (d).

testimony. See evidence (A).

tetchy; techy. See touchy.

tête-à-tête. Although the diacritical marks are mandatory, the term is ordinarily printed in roman type, not italics. The plural tête-à-têtes (italicized here only because it’s referred to as a phrase) is pronounced identically: /tet-a-tet/.

text, vb.; texting. As a verb, text (= to send a text message) sprang into favor in the late 1990s with the popularity of instant-messaging systems—e.g.: “If you’re shopping for a new plan, analyze your calling, texting and data-download patterns.” Liz F. Kay, “Finding New Ways to Trim Your Cell Phone Expenses,” Baltimore Sun, 22 Jan. 2009, at A8. The term was almost instantly familiar and filled a new need in the language, so it’s bootless to grouse about its success. See functional shift (d).

Of course, the verb is inflected text > texted > texted. Cf. sext.

text message is increasingly shortened to text (= a written message that is sent electronically, usu. from one handheld device to another).

textual; textuary. As an adjective, the latter is a needless variant. As a noun, however, textuary denotes a biblical scholar.

thalamus (= [1] a part of the brain that relays sensory impulses; or [2] the receptacle of a flower) forms the plural thalami. Though not unknown in AmE, thalamuses is rare. See plurals (b).

Current ratio: 431:1

than. A. Verb Not Repeated After (than is, than has).

Often it’s unnecessary (though not ungrammatical) to repeat be-verbs and have-verbs after than, especially when a noun follows—e.g.:• “Derby (pronounced Darby) is far more typical of English life than is [read than] London—in the same way that Dubuque is more typical of American life than New York City.” Ann Miller Jordan, “Derby Filled with Charm—and Ghosts,” Ft. Worth Star-Telegram, 26 Oct. 1997, at 1.


See comparatives and superlatives (c).

B. For then. This error is so elementary that one might fairly wonder whether it is merely a lapse in proofreading. But it occurs with some frequency—e.g.: “Mr. Bennett did wake up several times, hoping to hear good news, if not about himself, than [read then] at least about the two stars of the film, Nigel Hawthorne, nominated for best actor, or Helen Mirren, nominated for best actress.” Sarah Lyall, “For Alan Bennett, Home Is Where He’s Heartened,” N.Y. Times, 19 Oct. 1995, at B3. This error is extremely common, perhaps because the two words are almost homophones in some dialects of AmE. In any given instance, though, the error might be typographical. For the opposite error, see then (n).

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than misused for then: Stage 1

C. Case of Pronoun After: than me or than I?
Traditional grammarians have considered than a conjunction, not a preposition—hence He is taller than I (am). On this theory, the pronoun after than gets its case from its function in the completed second clause of the sentence—though, typically, the completing words of the second clause are merely implied. See understood words.

That view has had its detractors, including Eric Partridge, who preferred the objective case: You are a much greater loser than me (U&E-A at 330). Even William Safire plumps for the objective case: “The hard-line Conjunctionites have been fighting this battle a long time. Give them credit: they had to go up against the poet Milton’s treatment of than as a preposition—than whom in ‘Paradise Lost’—and against Shakespeare’s ‘a man no mightier than thyself or me’ in ‘Julius Caesar.’” Safire, “Than Me!” N.Y. Times, 16 Apr. 1995, § 7, at 16. See (o).

For formal contexts, the traditional usage is generally best; only if you are deliberately aiming for a relaxed, colloquial tone is the prepositional than acceptable. Often it seems ill-advised—e.g.:• “So many of our students seem to struggle… Are we really that much smarter than them [read they]?” John B. Mitchell, “Current Theories on Expert and Novice Thinking,” 39 J. Legal Educ. 275 (1989).
• “What makes the story even juicier is that Pamela, 74, has allegedly been feuding for years with her two former stepdaughters, both of them slightly older than her [read she]—and one of whom may face financial difficulties.” Mark Hosenball, “Clifford Pleads Ignorance,” Newsweek, 3 Oct. 1994, at 46.
• “Scrambling to improve his chances, Donald Skelton, a safe-deposit manager at Chase, plans to go to night school this summer at age 46. He had a rude awakening after 25 years at the bank when he learned that his daughter, fresh out of college, earned more than him [read he].” “At the New Workplace, an Unnerving Game of Musical Chairs,” N.Y. Times, 4 Mar. 1996, at A10 (photo caption).
• “The sun on the runway illuminated their hair, which was bobbed to shoulder length and styled to the same tint—all in their thirties (he was fifty-eight at the time), twenty years younger than him [read he], and of the same height.” Edward Hoagland, “Sex and the River Styx,” Harper’s Mag., Jan. 2003, at 49, 59.

See pronouns (b).

What about “My mother likes the dog more than me?” vs. “My mother likes the dog more than I?” These sentences say different things, even though than acts as a conjunction, seemingly, in the first as well as the second. The first means more than (she likes me), the second more than I (like the dog). The Beatles presented this dilemma in their song “If I Fell” (1964), in which John Lennon sang: “I must be sure, from the very start, that you would love me more than her.” Either this is bad English, or Lennon was envisioning a bisexual lover contemplating same-sex and different-sex lovers. But the latter has never seemed plausible—and the objective case is probably the speaker’s maladroit attempt to suggest that two women are vying for his affections. (Consider: it was the Beatles in the 1960s.) But even if than is taken as a conjunction in than her—as short for than (you love her), it represents unexemplary English.

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than with an objective pronoun
<he’s taller than me>: Stage 4

D. Than whom.
In the awkward and (fortunately) now-rare inverted construction (e.g., T.S. Eliot, than whom few critics could be considered better), one might expect the nominative who to be the preferred pronoun. Than is treated as a conjunction in formal usage, not a preposition (see (c)), so the preferable relative pronoun in formal writing would seem to be the nominative whom rather than the objective whom. But the anomalous phrasing has been traditional since the latter part of the 16th century. The OED states that than whom “is universally recognized instead of than who.”

A late-19th-century American rhetorician objected to the phrase: “Than whom, as in the sentence, ‘Wilfred, than whom no truer friend to me exists, counsels this course;’ is an anomalous expression (than being treated as if it were a preposition with an object, whereas it is a conjunction) which it is better to avoid. The high example of Milton has given currency to the phrase.” John F. Genung, Outlines of Rhetoric 57 (1893). But most 20th-century authorities accepted it. Of one them, G.H. Vallins, explained that “usage has triumphed over ‘grammar’ and the ordinary speaker or writer over the pedant.” G.H. Vallins, Good English: How to Write It 85 (1951).
thankfully

Still, very few “ordinary” speakers or writers ever use the phrase, which is essentially a literary idiom. It’s hardly surprising to find it in the writings of Hazlitt—e.g.: “I once knew a very ingenious man, than whom, to take him in the way of common chit-chat or fireside gossip, no one could be more entertaining or rational.” William Hazlitt, “On the Conversation of Authors” (1820), in A Reader for Writers 275, 291 (William Targ ed., 1951). But it would be surprising to find it in an informal essay written in the 21st century.

E. Prefer . . . than. See prefer.

F. Different than. See different (A).

thankfully = in a manner expressing thanks; gratefully <after being saved so unexpectedly, they thankfully said goodbye>. E.g.: “Obligations are thankfully acknowledged to a long line of etymologists, lexicographers, and philologists, whom it would be mere pedantry to call by name.” James Bradstreet Greenough & George Lyman Kittredge, Words and Their Ways in English Speech v (1901).

In the mid-1960s, the word came into frequent use in the sense “thank goodness; I am (or we are) thankful that”—that is, as a sentence adverb analogous to hopefully. (See hopefully.) It occurred first in BrE and then spread to AmE. Although this use of thankfully is now fairly common, it has been somewhat on the decline since about 1960. See thank you.

thank you. A. Generally. This phrase remains the best, most serviceable phrase, despite various attempts to embellish it or truncate it: thanking you in advance (presumptuous and possibly insulting), thank you very much (with a trailer of surplusage), thanks (useful on informal occasions), many thanks (informal but emphatic), *much thanks (archaic and increasingly unidiomatic), *thanks much (confusing the noun with the verb), and *thanx (unacceptably cutey).

Thank-you, n., is so hyphenated <a thousand thank-yous>.

B. Response. The traditional response to Thank you is You’re welcome. Somehow, though, in the 1980s, You’re welcome came to feel a little stiff and formal, perhaps even condescending (as if the speaker were saying, “Yes, I really did do you a favor, didn’t I?”). As a result, three other responses started displacing You’re welcome: (1) “No problem” (as if the speaker were saying, “Don’t worry, you didn’t inconvenience me too much”); (2) the slightly longer Not a problem (same implication); and (3) “No, thank you” (as if the person doing the favor really considered the other person to have done the favor). The currency of You’re welcome seems to diminish little by little, but steadily. Old-fashioned speakers continue to use it, but its future doesn’t look bright. Other traditional responses are Don’t mention it and Not at all. Other nontraditional responses include You bet and No worries. See no worries.

than whom. See than (d).

that. A. And which. You’ll encounter two schools of thought on this point. First are those who don’t care about any distinction between these words as relative pronouns, who think that which is more formal than that, and who point to many historical examples of copious whiches. They say that modern usage is a muddle. Second are those who insist that both words have useful functions that ought to be separated, and who observe the distinction rigorously in their own writing. They view departures from this distinction as “mistakes.”

Before reading any further, you ought to know something more about these two groups: those in the first probably don’t write very well; those in the second just might.

So assuming you want to learn the stylistic distinction, what’s the rule? The simplest statement of it is this: if you see a which without a comma (or preposition) before it, nine times out of ten it needs to be a that. The one other time, it needs a comma. Your choice, then, is between comma-which and that. Use that whenever you can.

Consider the following sentence: “All the cars that were purchased before 2008 need to have their airbags replaced.” It illustrates a restrictive clause. Such a clause gives essential information about the preceding noun (here, cars) so as to distinguish it from similar items with which it might be confused (here, cars that were purchased from 2008 on). In effect, the clause restricts the field of reference to just this one particular case or...
class of cases—hence the term restrictive. Restrictive clauses take no commas (since commas would present the added information as an aside).

Now let's punctuate our sample sentence differently and change the relative pronoun from that to which: “All the cars, which were purchased before 2008, need to have their airbags replaced.” This version illustrates a nonrestrictive clause. Such a clause typically gives supplemental, nonessential information. Presumably, we already know from the context which cars we’re talking about. The sentence informs us that the cars need their airbags replaced—oh, and by the way, they were all bought before 2008. The incidental detail is introduced by which and set off by commas to signal its relative unimportance.

A restrictive clause is essential to the grammatical and logical completeness of a sentence. A nonrestrictive clause, by contrast, is so loosely connected with the essential meaning of the sentence that it could be omitted without changing the meaning.

Hence, three guidelines. First, if you cannot omit the clause without changing the basic meaning, the clause is restrictive; use that without a comma. Second, if you can omit the clause without changing the basic meaning, the clause is nonrestrictive; use a comma plus which. Third, if you ever find yourself using a which that doesn’t follow a comma (or a preposition), it probably needs to be a that.

The most common problem is that people use which when the sentence really needs that—e.g.: “Despite all the uncertainty which [read that] surrounded the 1994 season—and the doubts which [read that] still linger like a hangover that just won’t quit—Paul O’Neill was sure of one thing.” Don Burke, “Yanks Ink O’Neill: 4 Years, $19M,” Star-Ledger (Newark), 29 Oct. 1994, at 29. And this bad habit leads to even worse ones, such as overlong sentences and remote relatives.

Although the usual mistake is which for that as a restrictive pronoun, that is occasionally misused as a nonrestrictive pronoun—e.g.: “To me it’s pretty certain no Republican national leader would call to the attention of the public these controversial subjects that have no definite solution.” Letter of Brooks Norfleet Jr., “Clinton Facing Real Problems,” Dallas Morning News, 30 Nov. 1993, at A16. (Delete that and insert a comma—which.)

British writers mostly ignore the distinction between restrictive and nonrestrictive relatives. Most commonly which encroaches on that’s territory, but sometimes too a nonrestrictive which remains unpunctuated—e.g.:

- “Esa-Pekka Salonen, the boyish (36 going on 18) music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic which plays the Proms at London’s Albert Hall next week, says . . . .” Antony Thorncroft, “A Conductor Who Fits the Bill,” Fin. Times, 26 Aug. 1994, at 11. (Insert a comma before which.)
- “The decision is the second defeat in five months for the French government which has been attempting to delay liberalising its domestic air transport market while it seeks to restructure its loss-making flag carrier.” Paul Betts et al., “France Ordered to Open Two Internal Air Routes,” Fin. Times, 27 Oct. 1994, at 1. (Insert a comma before which.)
- “Force Ouvrière, one of the French Unions which [read that] were most aggressive in calling for the industrial action that disrupted the country last year, yesterday lost control of the Caisse Nationale d’Assurance Maladie, the national health care agency, for the first time since 1967.” “Hardline French Union Loses Role,” Fin. Times, 13 June 1996, at 2.

One last thing. The Fowler brothers are often credited with “inventing” this distinction in The King’s English (1906)—and the credit often seems to take the form of blame: “The ban on the restrictive which was made up suddenly by H.W. and F.G. Fowler in The King’s English . . . . This spurious rule, which dismayed other grammarians, had no background in usage and cannot always be followed, notably in ‘that which’ clauses.” Don Bush, “Grammatical Arthritis,” Technical Communication, Feb. 1994, at 125. Although the Fowlers’ exposition on this point is nothing short of brilliant, many earlier writers had already suggested the distinction. Note, however, that the first and third authors engage in the very misusage they talk about (both noted by a bracketed n.b.):


“That” is used in speaking of a class generally, and “that” when we mean to designate any particular individual of that class.


“Which” is used in speaking of a class generally, and “that” when we mean to designate any particular individual of that class.

Some critics have lately objected to the use of that, as a relative, conceiving which to be in all cases “the preferable word” [Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric]. But this is certainly a hasty and erroneous opinion. We have in English three relatives, that, who, and which; and, in their respective and appropriate use, we possess an advantage . . . peculiar to our language, and which [n.b.] I hope we shall not be tempted to relinquish. [In the examples that Odell then gives, the thats are used restrictively, the whiches nonrestrictively.]

“Which” is used in speaking of a class generally, and “that” when we mean to designate any particular individual of that class.
“Who that is a sincere friend to it, can look with indifference on the attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric.” — Washington.

“Thoughts that breathe, and words that burn.”


Adjective clauses may be classified as restrictive and unrestrictive. Restrictive clauses limit the scope, or application, of the word they modify; as Water that is stagnant is unhealthful. Unrestrictive clauses do not so limit, or restrict, the application of the word they modify; as Water, which is oxygen and hydrogen united, is essential to life.

Bolinger, The dog you gave me

Some teachers insist that the relative that should be used, instead of who or which, when the relative clause serves to restrict the meaning of the antecedent, and that who or which should be used, instead of that, when the relative clause adds something to the meaning of the antecedent, or explains it.

Adams Sherman Hill, Our English 33 (1888).

The relative who or which may, and theoretically does, introduce a new fact about its antecedent; its office is, therefore, to head a coordinate clause, as may be shown by using its equivalent and he, and it, and they. The relative that is used only to introduce subordinate clauses necessary to define or restrict or complete our thought of the antecedent . . . . There are many cases where, for the sake of euphony or clearness, who or which has to be used though the meaning is restrictive. Such cases should be studied; and wherever that will go smoothly, use it. Do not be so careless in this respect as some writers are.

John F. Genung, Outlines of Rhetoric 94–95 (1894) (elsewhere referring to “the restrictive that” and “the coordinate which”).

The only retrospective blame that might lie with the Fowler brothers is that they pressed their point too diffidently. The distinction between that and which makes good sense. It enhances clarity. And the best American editors follow it.

Although linguists have generally been unsympathetic to maintaining the distinction, the distinguished Dwight Bolinger has urged its utility: “Which is used in nonrestrictive clauses not because of any rule about nonrestrictive clauses, but because such clauses are outside the flow of the sentence and call for a relative that will put the hearer on notice.” Dwight Bolinger, Language: The Loaded Weapon 172 (1980).

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which used with restrictive clauses: Stage 4

B. Wrongly Suppressed that. As a relative pronoun or conjunction, that can be suppressed in any number of constructions (e.g., The dog you gave me rather than The dog that you gave me). But in formal writing, that is often ill-advisedly omitted. In particular, the conjunction that should usually be retained to introduce clauses following verbs such as acknowledge, ask, believe, claim, doubt, and said, because without the conjunction what follows might be taken to be a noun complement. Dropping that after the verb can create a miscue, even if only momentarily—e.g.:

- “Son acknowledges being a member of a discriminated minority—his grandfather emigrated from the Korean Peninsula to work in the coal mines—may have helped him turn his eyes abroad early,” Yuri Kageyama, “Softbank President Credited with Making Company an Industry Leader,” L.A. Times, 21 June 1996, at D7. (Insert that after acknowledges.) For more on this use of discriminated, see discriminate.

- “They believed prisoners should be placed in isolation and educated.” Mary Frain, “Criminal Justice—and Injustice,” Telegram & Gaz. (Worcester), 27 Sept. 1996, at C1. (Insert that after believed.)

The writers who ill-advisedly omit that seem deaf to their ambiguities and miscues. When one instance occurs in a piece of writing, more are sure to follow. The following examples come from one article—which contains six more errors of the same variety:

- “But the state charged the lease deal [read charged that the lease deal], signed in 1991, sprang from a web of fraud and deceit.” P.L. Wyckoff, “State Pays While Bankruptcy Delays Lease Suit,” Sunday Star-Ledger (Newark), 11 Aug. 1996, § 1, at 25, 32.

- “During more than a year of negotiations and bureaucratic processing, the Karcher group claimed the property [read claimed that the property] was worth $2 million when it really was only worth $850,000, the state said.” Ibid.

See MISCUES (f).

C. Used Excessively. Those who rabidly delete that (see (b)) seem to be overreacting to those who use it excessively—e.g.: “In a 1990 book of his successes and misadventures, News of My Death . . . Was Greatly Exaggerated (a tiresomely self-centered, but nonetheless bright and lucid analysis of the ’80s boom-to-bust cycle), Hall points out, among other things, that while the problem as of ’86 and ’87 was that no one had any money, the bigger problem that had foreshadowed that circumstance was that everyone had had too much money.” Jim Atkinson, “The Great Dallas Bust,” D Mag., Dec. 1995, at 91, 92. (A possible revision: In 1990 Hall wrote a book about his successes and misadventures: News of My Death . . . Was Greatly Exaggerated. It’s tiresomely self-centered, but it’s still a bright and lucid analysis of the ’80s boom-to-bust cycle. In his view, although the problem in ’86 and ’87 was that no one had any money, this had resulted from an even bigger problem: in the early ’80s, everyone had too much money. [Five thats to one.])

D. Unnecessarily Repeated as Conjunction. One must be careful not to repeat the conjunction that after an intervening phrase. Either suspend it till just before the verb or use it early in the sentence and omit it before the verb—e.g.: “Mr. Sieffer has gone through half a dozen lawyers, each thinking that with a little bit of work that he, too, could claim a piece of that magical work.” David Margolick, “At the Bar,” N.Y. Times, 8 Dec. 1989, at 27. (Delete the second that.)

E. For very or so. In certain negative constructions, that commonly functions adverbially—as a loose equivalent of very <1 don’t like pasta that much> <1 was never that good at biology>. Some writers have objected when the degree of comparison is vague
(how much don’t you like pasta, and how bad were you at biology?). Although no reasonable person objects to the adverbial that when the point of comparison is explicit <i>1 got three scoops—even though I didn’t want that much!>, usage becomes unmoored when no comparison is intended <i>1 did it, but I didn’t even try that hard!>. Yet this is now an established casualism, more characteristic of speech than of writing. For a good discussion that dates the trend toward using that for very from the mid-20th century, see Richard K. Redfern, “Not That Bad: Comments on the Adverbial That,” 40 Am. Speech 74–76 (1965). Cf. so (b).

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*all that* for so very <i>it’s not all that interesting>: Stage 4

**F. And who.** Is it permissible to say <i>people that</i>, or must one say <i>people who</i>? The answer is that <i>people that</i> has always been good English, and it’s a silly fetish to insist that <i>who</i> is the only relative pronoun that can refer to humans. See who (d), (e).

**G. As a Pointing Word.** See pointing words.

that is. Conventional wisdom once held that if this phrase begins a sentence, the result is a sentence fragment. (See incomplete sentences (a).) But good writers unimpeachably use the phrase in this way, in place of in other words—e.g.:

- “While adopting certain teaching techniques, we are more interested in communication than in composition. That is, with due respect to Shakespeare and others, we want our girls to communicate freely with the live world around them rather than plunge into musty old books.” Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita 179 (1955; repr. 1982).
- “But the base and, I believe, the country want someone in the White House who doesn’t sound like another George Bush. That is, they want someone who doesn’t suffer from an infallibility complex, who can admit mistakes and learn from them.” Paul Krugman, “Wrong Is Right,” N.Y. Times, 19 Feb. 2007, at A15.

Because of the close relationship between what follows that is and what comes before, a semicolon or an em-dash often substitutes for a period before that is—e.g.:

- “Definitions, contrary to popular opinion, tell us nothing about things. They only describe people’s linguistic habits; that is, they tell us what noises people make under what conditions.” S.I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action* 171 (1949).
- “In other words, the propositions of philosophy are not factual but linguistic in character—that is, they do not describe the behavior of physical, or even mental, objects; they express definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions.” A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* 57 (2d ed. 1952).
- “Wages and salaries serve the same economic purposes as other prices—that is, they guide the utilization of scarce resources which have alternative uses.” Thomas Sowell, *Basic Economics* 144 (rev. ed. 2004).

The longer phrase, that is to say, is usually wordy in place of that is—e.g. “The real solution is to make college football and men’s college basketball programs uniform across NCAA divisions. That is to say [read That is], make Division 1-A schools compete within the same rules as Division III schools.” Letter of Jerome Peirick, “College Athletes,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 18 Sept. 1997, at B6. Cf. namely & viz. that said. See having said that.

**that which.** When this stiff-sounding noun phrase can be replaced with what, it generally should be—e.g.: “Why continue to weep for that which [read what] is lost?” “NFL Poll: Luv ‘Em and Leave ‘Em,” Houston Chron., 28 Aug. 1997, at 2. Sometimes the word that’s needed is whatever—e.g.: “That which [read Whatever] was subversive was perceived as liberating.” Rachel Campbell-Johnston, “The Way We Look Now,” Nat’l Rev., 13 Oct. 1997, at 41. (Another possible revision: Anything subversive was perceived as liberating.)

But when that has an antecedent, that which is needed—e.g.: “The best financial advice is that which makes you the most money, not that which calls market tops or bottoms.” Laszlo Birinyi Jr., “The Relative-Performance Trap,” Forbes, 13 Oct. 1997, at 426.

When that becomes, in plural, those, the second word in this construction may be either which or that. But that is better because the relative pronoun is restrictive—e.g.:


We use that which in the singular because that that is intolerably awkward, but in the plural those that isn’t awkward at all.

**the. A Pronunciation.** The pronunciation rule for the definite article parallels the usage rule for the indefinite articles a and an. Before a word that starts with a vowel sound, say /ˈðiː/ & /ˈðeɪ/ ant <a> & <e>a>. Before a word that starts with a consonant sound, say /ˈðeɪ/ & /ˈðeɪ/ bee <a> & /ˈðeɪ/ condor>. There is a twist, however: when saying the word for emphasis, say /ˈðiː/ no matter what word follows <the was /ˈðeɪ/ worst movie I’ve ever sat through>. Most of us, when speaking naturally, get THUH distinction between THEE and THUH right without even thinking about it. It’s when we start dwelling on it and imposing a misguided standard of correctness on ourselves that we begin to make a fetish out of saying THEE [before consonant sounds]. Then our speech becomes stilted and stagy.
because we are always trying to say things THEE “right” way instead of THUH natural way.

Charles Harrington Elster, BBBM at 465.

B. Capitalization in Names. On the question whether to capitalize the definite article when it begins a name, see capitalization (c).

theater; theatre. The first is the usual spelling in AmE, the second in BrE. Somewhat surprisingly, the AmE spelling was not fixed until the 1940s. See -er (b). The word is pronounced /thee-ə-tәr/, not /thee-ay-tәr/ or /thee-ay-tәr/.

the case of. This flotsam phrase is almost always best omitted. See case (A).

the fact that. See fact (b).

theft. See burglary.

The Hague. See Netherlands.

their. A. And they’re. A book like this one need not explain such elementary distinctions. So it will not. But: “Liberals are again trying to explain why they lost their fifth presidential election in 20 years. They’ve been talking about what they’re [read their] party should be for.” “What’s a Liberal For?” Wall Street J., 13 Jan. 1989, at A6. For still another common mistake, see there. See also spelling (A).

B. Singular Antecedent with their. See concord (b).

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They’re misused for their: Stage 1

theirs, an absolute possessive that takes no apostrophe, is sometimes wrongly written *their’s—e.g.:


• “Apparently, it can happen even in a marriage such as theirs [read theirs],” Anna L. Bisol, “Montachusett People,” Telegram & Gaz. (Worcester), 25 Mar. 2001, at 2.

• “A. The soon-to-be expanded dump’s operators offer assurance that the stink isn’t their’s [read theirs],” “What’s That Smell?” Daily News (L.A.), 25 Apr. 2001, at N14.

See possessives (c).

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*their’s for theirs: Stage 1

Current ratio (theirs vs. *their’s): 214:1

*themselves. See ourself.

*themselves, though common in the speech of the uneducated, is poor English. With origins in the late 18th century, it seldom appears in print—e.g. “He encouraged those in attendance to be leaders, but to go beyond devoting theirselves [read themselves] to their careers to devote time to their family and personal lives.” “Brentwood Honors 5 Leaders,” Tennessean, 7 Oct. 1996, at F6. See pronouns (e).

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*themselves for themselves: Stage 1

Current ratio (themselves vs. *themselves): 3,182:1

theism; deism. These denote different ways of believing in God. Theism = the belief in one God who created and guides the universe. Deism = the belief in one God who created but does not intervene in the universe. For a discussion of those who reject both of these beliefs, see atheist.

the late. See late.

the likes of. See like (v).

*themselves. See sexism (b).

then. A. As an Adjective. Then should not be hyphenated when alone as an adjective meaning “that existed or was so at that time” <the then mayor of San Diego>. When the word is part of a phrasal adjective, the phrase should be hyphenated <then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani>, but not when it occurs after the noun <Rudolph Giuliani, then mayor of New York, said . . . >. Cf. once & often (b).

B. For than. This is a distressingly common error, especially in newsprint—e.g. “He enjoyed much more autonomy with ‘Face/Off’ then [read than] he did with his other movies.” Douglas J. Rowe, “Director Woo Puts a New Face on American Family Values,” Salt Lake Trib., 4 July 1997, at C8. For the reverse error, see than (b).

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than misused for then: Stage 1

thence; whence; hence. Thence = from that place or source; for that reason. Whence = from there. Hence = (1) for this reason; therefore; (2) from this source; (3) from this time; from now; or (4) from this place; away. They’re literary archaisms—except for hence in sense 1. See hence & whence.

thenfurther; *thenceforward. Both are antiquesounding, having enjoyed their heyday before 1800. The first remains standard. The second is a needless variant. For the misuse of henceforth for thenceforward, see henceforth (d).

the Netherlands. See Netherlands.

the number of. See number (b).

theorem. So spelled—not *theorum (a misspelling traceable to the mid-19th century).

Current ratio: 4,085:1

theoretical; *theoretic. The standard form is theoretical in AmE and BrE alike—not *theoretic. See -ic.

Current ratio: 25:1

theoretically. See sentence adverbs.

therapist; *therapeutist. The standard term has always been therapist. *Therapeutist, sometimes used in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, is now obsolete in AmE and BrE alike.

Current ratio: 1,782:1
there for they're or their is an embarrassing confusion of homophones. It's the type of solecism one expects from a grade-school student, not from a professional writer or editor. But it is a common inadvertence in journalism—e.g.:

- "And that's where these radio stations are really missing the boat, because there [read they're] missing the folks who hold the purse strings to all the disposable income." Brad Tooley, "Canyon Views," Canyon News, 13 Jan. 1994, at 1, 2.

See their.

**thereabouts; *thereabout.** Although any writer might be well advised to avoid either term, the former is preferred and overwhelmingly more common (it all happened in 2006 or thereofabouts). Cf. whereabout(s).

Current ratio: 5:1

there are. See there is & expletives.

thereby. See therefore (d).

**therefore. A. Punctuation Around.** One must take care in the punctuation of therefore. When a comma appears before therefore, the preceding word gets emphasized (it was John, therefore, who deserved the accolades) (suggesting that somebody else got the accolades but didn't deserve them). (Cf. however (b).) Or you can reverse the order of the words to put therefore just before the word needing emphasis, but without surrounding commas (it was therefore John who deserved the accolades). But the word is often mispunctuated. To see the false emphasis in each of the following examples, read the word preceding therefore as if it were strongly stressed:

- "I have continuously [read continually] heard from residents about their firm opposition to the influx [read establishment] of such a clinic, which would inevitably increase crime in our community," said Harris, adding that she, therefore, had approached Kearse to reach a resolution." Sid Cassese, "Hempstead Wins Drug Clinic Battle," Newsday (N.Y.), 30 July 1997, at A23. (Read: . . . adding that she had therefore approached Kearse to reach a resolution. Part of the trouble in this example stems from faulty placement of the adverb. See adverbs (a).) For the misuse of continuously in that sentence, see continual.
- "He was a Roman Catholic and felt all citizens of the country should share his religious beliefs. He, therefore, began to arrest all Orthodox Catholics." "Catholics, Nazis in World War II," Providence J.-Bull., 22 Aug. 1997, at B7. (Read: He therefore began to arrest all Orthodox Catholics.)
- "The results would allow parents in Alabama to know how their children fared against children in Minnesota and they, therefore, could agitate for better instruction when their children fell behind." Jim Wooten, "Setting School Agenda," Atlanta J.-Const., 10 Sept. 1997, at A12. (Read: The results would allow parents in Alabama to know how their children fared against children in Minnesota, and they could therefore agitate for better instruction when their children fell behind.)

**B. Run-on Sentences with.** One should take care not to create run-on sentences by joining two independent clauses with therefore—e.g.: "Byfield had hired him for a ridiculous reason: 'He grew up in New York, therefore I liked him.'" Kenneth Whyte, "Let Byfields Be Byfields," Saturday Night, 1 Feb. 1996, at 15 (mispunctuating an oral comment). (A possible revision: He grew up in New York—therefore, I liked him. Or: He grew up in New York; therefore, I liked him. Or: He grew up in New York. Therefore, I liked him.)

**C. And therefore.** Therefore (stress on first syllable), an adverbial conjunction, means "for that reason, consequently." It's the usual word. Therefor (stress on last syllable), adv., & adj., means "for that" or "for it" (<he showed charity and was finally rewarded therefor> <the recognition therefore>). Some writers mistake the two terms, especially in law (where therefor appears most frequently). As Eric Partridge noted, "many quite good writers do not even know of the existence of therefore" (Ur & A at 332). Maybe that's because it's legal jargon. If the good writers that Partridge mentions start overusing it, they'll risk no longer being called "good."

**D. For thereby.** Therefore shouldn't be confused, as it sometimes is, with thereby (= by that means; in that way)—e.g.: "The bank recently completed negotiations to offer a student lending package in conjunction with Columbia University in New York, therefore [read thereby] providing student loans to college students at an expensive school." Marian King, "Banks Given More Incentives to Offer Loans for Students," Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 1 Jan. 1997, at 14.

**therefor. E. *So therefore.** See so (d).

there is; there are. A. As Signals of Clutter. These phrases, though sometimes useful, can also be the enemies of a lean writing style, as several commentators have observed—e.g.:

- "The habit of beginning statements with the impersonal and usually vague there is or there are shoves the really significant verb into subordinate place instead of letting it stand vigorously on its own feet." David Lambuth et al., *The Golden Book on Writing* 19 (1964).
- "'The trouble with 'there' has nothing to do with grammar or with 'correctness' of any kind. It's a perfectly proper word, and it moves in the best circles; you will find it in
abundance in the work of the most distinguished writers. But the fact remains that it is one of the most insidious enemies a beginning writer faces in his search for style. It is the enemy of style because it seldom adds anything but clutter to a sentence. And nothing saps the vitality of language as quickly as meaningless clutter.” Lucille Vaughan Payne, *The Lively Art of Writing* 64–65 (1965).

- “The *there* construction is not to be condemned out of hand; it is both idiomatic and common in the best literature; it is clumsy and to be avoided with a passive verb; and in view of the prejudice against it [for promoting wordiness], the writer who uses it discriminately should take heart and be prepared to defend himself, for defense is indeed possible.” Roy H. Copperud, *American Usage and Style: The Consensus* 380–81 (1980).

When is the phrase *there is* defensible? When the writer is addressing the existence of something. That is, if the only real recourse is to use the verb exist, then *there is* is perfectly fine—e.g.:


Otherwise, though, the phrase should typically be cut—e.g.: “*There is* wide support among congressional Republicans for a flat tax.” (IRS Faces New Round of Scrutiny,” *Dallas Morning News*, 20 Sept. 1997, at F1. (A possible revision: *Congressional Republicans tend to support a flat tax.* Or: *Many congressional Republicans support a flat tax.*) The phrase *there is wide support* has become a cliché among political commentators. And it does exactly what Lambuth and Payne warn against: it robs the sentence of a good strong verb.

**B. Number with.** The number of the verb is controlled by whether the inverted subject that follows *is or are* singular or plural. Mistakes are common—e.g.:


- “With an onslaught of fresh new talented female R&B groups, *there is* [read *are*] several ways you, the consumer, can decipher whether or not you should purchase their products.” Craig D. Frazier, “*Tha Truth,* a Group of Talented Young Female Rappers with Style,” *N.Y. Amsterdam News*, 15 Mar. 1997, at 30.

Constructions with seem to be and appear to be follow the same model: the number of the inverted subject dictates the number of the verb. Again, mistakes are common—e.g.:


- “*There seems* [read *seem*] to be two key reasons for Capriati’s renaissance.” Sandra Harwitt, “Capriati’s Life Back in Focus,” *USA Today*, 26 Jan. 2000, at C3.

Especially when followed by a negative, *there has* in many minds come to represent a single situation. It therefore often appears, though wrongly, with a singular verb—e.g. “*There wasn’t* [read *weren’t*] any other witnesses.” Rebecca Thatcher, “Girl’s Report of Abduction, Sexual Assault Investigated,” *Austin Am.-Statesman*, 9 Dec. 1994, at B1 (quoting the Austin, Texas, police chief). The person who says “*there wasn’t . . . [plural]*” here would never say “they was.” See expletives & inversion.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. *there is* (or *there’s*) with a plural subject <*there’s three things*>: Stage 2

2. *there is* (or *there’s*) with a compound subject whose first member is singular <*there’s an outhouse and a sump pump out back*>: Stage 4

**thesaurus** (= a book or online resource that supplies synonyms) has long formed the standard plural *thesauri*. But since about 1960, *thesauruses* has climbed in frequency, especially in AmE. (See plurals (b).) E.g.:

- “In addition, there are the computerized *thesauruses* included in most word-processing programs.” Leslie T. Sharpe & Irene Gunther, *Editing Fact and Fiction* 204 (1994).


- “Teaching students how to use dictionaries and *thesauruses* is essential since many English words have multiple meanings and students have to choose the appropriate meaning for the context.” Betty Roe et al., *Secondary School Literacy Instruction* 136 (2010).

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*thesauruses*: Stage 5

**these.** See pointing words.

*these kind of; *these type of; *these sort of. These illogical forms were not uncommon in the 17th and early 18th centuries, but by the mid-18th they had been stigmatized. Today they brand the speaker or writer as slovenly. They appear most commonly in reported speech, but sometimes not—e.g.:

- “What’s disheartening about this, from the Lebanon point of view, is what happens next for a Lebanon team that felt it was built for *these kind of challenges* [read *this kind of challenge*].” Mike Gross, “Berks Power Chops Down Cedars,” *Patriot & Evening News* (Harrisburg), 6 Sept. 1997, at C1.

- “It’s just that *these sort of things* [read *this sort of thing*] always seem[s] to happen to the Angels.” J.A. Adande, “Shedding His Wings,” *L.A. Times*, 17 Sept. 1997, at C1.

- “But by making *these type of incidents* [read *this type of incident*] racial, he not only is [read not only is] he doing his player a disservice, he is failing her as a father.” Bill Stamps, “Who Is The Racist?” *L.A. Times*, 20 Sept. 1997, at B7. For more on the nonparallel construction in that sentence, see parallelism.

Of course, it’s perfectly acceptable to write *these kinds or these types or these sorts*, as many writers conscientiously do—e.g.:
they. A. Number. On the use of this word as a singular term, see concord (b), pronouns (d) & sexism (b). See also no one.

B. Corporate they. Just as the first-person we often carries a corporate sense (see first person (b)), the third-person they can express a corporate policy or plan. This usage is a casualism—e.g.: “A magazine editor writes to say they are doing an article on the healing power of laughter.” Andy Rooney, Common Nonsense 178 (2002).

Language-Change Index
these followed by kind, type, or sort in the singular: Stage 2

they’d better; they better. See better (a).

they’re. See their.


Language-Change Index
*thiefs for thieves: Stage 1
Current ratio (thieves vs. *thiefs): 499:1

thimblesful. Pl. thimblesfuls, not *thimblesful. See plurals (g).

Current ratio: 13:1

thing after thing (is) (are). See subject-verb agreement (h).

thingy; thingamajig; thingamabob. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the first two emerged as casualisms to denote something one can’t remember the name of or doesn’t know the name of. Among the variant spellings are *thingumajig and *thingumabob. The word thingy—which also first appeared in the 18th century but isn’t recorded in most dictionaries—was used with a frequency about equal to that of the longer words until 1990 or so, when it suddenly surged in popularity.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 15:3:1

think. See don’t think.

think coming, another. See another think coming.

third person should be pluralized third persons, never *third people.

Current ratio: 84:1

Third World. Originally, this term denoted the group of underdeveloped nations (especially in Africa and Asia) not aligned with either Western democracies (i.e., the First World—or Free World) or Communist countries (i.e., the Second World) during the Cold War. But as the world turns, so does the language. In his New Political Dictionary (1993), William Safire notes that “with the end of the bipolar geopolitical world in 1990, a multipolar world was spawned; the third world became the South in a North–South relationship.” Safire quotes Henry Grunwald from Foreign Affairs: “The ‘Third World’ urgently needs to be renamed, and not only because the ‘Second World’ has collapsed. The inadequacy of a label covering everything from dysfunctional non-countries in Africa to emerging industrial powers in South America indicates a lack of press understanding and attention.” NPD at 795.

As Safire’s example above illustrates, capitalization styles differ on this phrase: The New York Times uses lowercase, while the AP Stylebook uses caps. The latter choice is more logical, since the original sense paralleled the always-capitalized Free World, which in turn had historical foundation in the always-capitalized New World.

this. See pointing words.

thither. See hither.

thitherto. See hitherto.

*tho. See although.

thoroughgoing (a solid word) means “thorough,” but it connotes zeal or ardor. It is not, therefore, merely a needless variant of thorough—e.g.: • “There is no question the charter needs a thoroughgoing review and rewrite.” “L.A. City Elections,” L.A. Times, 16 Mar. 1997, at M4.
• “[The governor] hasn’t risked one iota of political capital to put such thoroughgoing reform on the state’s agenda.” “Give Back the Money,” Sacramento Bee, 12 May 1997, at B6.

those. See pointing words.

*those kind of; *those type of; *those sort of. See *these kind of.

those which; those that. See that which.

Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). ▪ Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
though. See although.

thought leader (= a person or company with a reputation for innovation and success in a field) is a vogue word that has been around since the 1970s—e.g.: “To get the message across, Monsanto will aim its television advertising at people who write letters to editors and speak out on public issues. It will direct its magazine ads to ‘thought leaders’ through campaigns in the three national general newswEEKLYs and National Geographic.” Donald P. Burke, “Monsanto Speaks Out on Benefit/Risk,” Chemical Week, 26 Oct. 1977, at 5.

Like many vogue words before and since, this one has suffered from its share of ridicule—e.g.: “Each day certain economists and others warn us that the American economy is in serious trouble. . . . This caterwauling would be amusing except that so many of our politicos and supposed thought-leaders take this stuff seriously.” Malcolm S. Forbes Jr., “Major Problem with the American Economy: Hypochondria,” Forbes, 9 Mar. 1987, at 33.

A true “thought leader” would never think of using such a term any more than such clichés as cutting edge or thinking outside the box.

though . . . yet. See although . . . yet & correlative conjunctions.

thrash; thresh. Thresh = (1) to beat soundly, flog; (2) to defeat decisively; or (3) to move or toss about violently. Thresh, which sometimes carries those meanings, should be restricted to the sense “to separate grain from chaff by beating.”

threefold. See twofold.

*360-degree turnaround. See 180-degree turnaround.

threepeat, a portmanteau word dating from the late 1980s, denotes a third consecutive champion—a portmanteau word dating from the late 1980s—e.g.: “Do you think the team might threepeat?” It became something of a vogue word. It is also used as a verb <Do you think the team might threepeat?>. It is wordplay that combines three and repeat. In sports talk, the term has become something of a vogue word. It is also used as a verb <Do you think the team might threepeat?>. It should be solid, as shown, not hyphenated.

threnody /thren-ə-dee/ (= a funeral song; elegy) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Threnode is a variant.

Current ratio: 373:1

thresh. See thrash.

threshold. So spelled. *Threshhold, a common misspelling that emerged in the 19th century, occasionally appears in print—e.g.: “We dared to cross the threshold [read threshold] from sophisticated, drawing-room, strangled drollery to the wilderness where we not only faced the lion’s roar but smelled the breath of their bad habits.” Letter of Richard Harris (the actor), “A Sharp Kick from a Man Called Horse,” Sunday Times (London), 6 Aug. 1995, § 3, at 8. The word is not a compound of the verb hold, but rather a modern form of the Old English thaerscwold (“doorsill”).

three (= three times) is a literary archaism that is sometimes useful. Common in the 17th and 18th centuries, it has steadily declined in use since about 1800. But it appears not to be going extinct—e.g.: “He’s thrice-divorced and no longer the superstar of Brisbane radio.” Steven Rosen, “‘Serenade’ Offbeat Comedy with Certain Dark Elements,” Denver Post, 8 Aug. 1997, at F3. When thrice follows the verb—and is not, as in the previous example, part of a phrasal adjective—it sounds pretentious. E.g.: “He may like a hot dog,’ says Steve Tobash, golf pro at the Army–Navy Country Club, where Clinton has played thrice [read three times] since rehabilitation. ’But if he eats a hot dog, he works it off.” Kevin Walker, “Quips, Quotes, Quibbles & Bits,” Tampa Trib., 10 Aug. 1997, at 8.

thrive > thrived > thrived. Thrived, not *throwe, is now considered the better past tense—e.g.: “He released them and—with no natural predators—they throwe [read thrived] in the abundant wetlands.” William J. Kole, “Muskrats’ Tunneling Imperils Dutch Dikes,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 28 Aug. 1997, at A4. Likewise, *thriver, not *thriven, is the better past participle. The irregular forms persisted longer in BrE than in AmE, but in all varieties they were obsolescent by 1950. See irregular verbs.

Language-Change Index

thriven as a past form: Stage 5
Current ratio (thriven vs. throwe): 14:1

throes of, in the. In this phrase, meaning “struggling in the process of (something very painful or difficult)” <in the throes of childbirth>, *throes is sometimes mistakenly spelled throws (an error that spread during the 1990s)—e.g.: *“I turned on the light and observed my much-loved pet in the throws [read throwes] of a grand mal seizure.” Liz Quinlan, “A Painful Decision Made Even Harder,” Syracuse Herald-J., 11 July 1997, at B8 (quoting an anonymous reader).


The word is misused when the situation does not involve serious pain or difficulty—e.g.: *“The legal action took HBO executives by surprise, since they were in the throwes [read process] of sweetening Gandolfini’s deal for the upcoming season.” Cara DiPasquale & Kris Kamopp, “Gandolfini Says HBO Violated His Contract,” Chicago Trib., 11 Mar. 2003, at 28.

* “The usual closing-time shenanigans . . . take an obtuse turn when it is revealed that Nate might actually be in the throes of [read having] serious feelings for bar regular Andrea.” Julio Martinez, “King of Clubs,” Daily Variety, 18 Mar. 2003, at 38.

Language-Change Index

1. *in the throws for in the throws: Stage 1
Current ratio (in the throes of vs. *in the throws of): 36:1

2. throws used without a sense of struggle: Stage 2

throw > threw > thrown. So inflected. *Throwed is dialectal, appearing mostly in reported speech of

*thru*, a variant spelling of through, can be traced to the 17th century, but it had little currency until the early 20th. It’s a casualism to be shunned in serious writing. Oddly, it appears in parts of the Internal Revenue Code applicable to “pass-thru” entities and “look-thru” rules.

Current ratio (through vs. *thru*): 613:1

**thrust** > **thrust** > **thrust**. So inflected. *Thrust* is a common error—e.g.:

- “He lunged, he thrust [read thrust], he parried and chopped.” Marie Villari, “Ironing Out the Wrinkles in This Story,” Post-Standard (Syracuse), 8 Mar. 2001, Madison §, at 5.

See irregular verbs.

**thunderous.** So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *thundrous*.

Current ratio: 303:1

**thus.** A. General Senses. A formal adverb that dates from Old English, thus has four meanings: (1) in this or that manner <one does it thus>; (2) so <thus far>; (3) hence, consequently; and (4) as an example. In contexts, forms the plural *tibiae* (*tib-i-ee*) much more often than *tibias*. Cf. *fibula*.

Current ratio: 1,016:1

**thudbit; titbit.** These by-forms denote (1) “a fine morsel of food,” or (2) “a choice piece of information, esp. of a gossipy kind.” Both date from the 17th century. In World English and AmE alike, the spelling *titbit* generally held sway until the late 19th century. Beginning in the 1880s, *titbit* overtook it in frequency of occurrence in AmE. The same thing happened in World English in the late 1930s. Since 1980 the predominance of *titbit* has been dramatic. Yet in BrE, the reduplicative *titbit* has always predominated. One might speculate that a puritanical resistance to prurient-sounding words accounts for the American changeover.

tie makes, in the present participle, *tying*. *Tieing*, though common, is incorrect—e.g.:


See diacritical marks.

**till.** See *till*.

**tilde.** See diacritical marks.

**till; until.** *Till* is, like *until*, a bona fide preposition and conjunction. Though perhaps a little less formal than *until*, *till* is neither colloquial nor substandard. As Anthony Burgess put it, “In nonpoetic English we use ‘till’ and ‘until’ indifferently.” A Mouthful of Air 158 (1992). It’s especially common in BrE—e.g.:

timbal


But the myth of the word’s low standing persists. Some writers and editors mistakenly think that till deserves a bracketed sic—e.g.: “ ‘Trading in cotton futures was not practiced till [sic] after the close of the Civil War, spot cotton being quoted like other futures was not practiced in the original source being quoted).”

If a form deserves a sic, it’s the incorrect *’til: the word has no literary history as a contraction. Not until the 1980s was it widely perceived to be one. Worse yet is *’till, which is abominable—e.g.: “A month or two remain ’till [read till] you grab your dancing shoes, plus a crew of pals or that special date.” Francine Parnes, “Primping for the Prom,” Denver Post, 21 Mar. 1997, at E1.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX  
1. *’til for till: Stage 2  
   Current ratio (till vs. *’til): 73:1  
2. *’till for till: Stage 1  
   Current ratio (till vs. *’till): 150:1

timbal. See timpani (A).

timbre; timber. These are different words in both BrE and AmE. Timbre (/tim-bәr/ or /tam-bәr/) is primarily a musical term meaning “tone quality.” E.g.: “Nor was his voice, when he spoke, of a timbre calculated to lull any apprehensions which his aspect might have inspired.” P.G. Wodehouse, The Return of Jeeves 116 (1954). Timber (/tim-bәr/) is the correct form in all wood-related senses. Cf. -ER (B).

timeout, in sportswriting and parenting, is increasingly spelled as one word. The plural is timeouts, not *timesout. See PLURALS (G).

*time period is a common redundancy that became widespread in the late 20th century. The word period is almost always sufficient—e.g.:  
- “And the average low drops from 70 to 62 for the same time period [read period],” Bill Bair, “September a Wet Month, but It Wasn’t a Soggy One,” Ledger (Lakeland, Fla.), 1 Oct. 1996, at B3.  
- “That is why Barlow said his company requires that the right of easement be good for a certain time period [read period], such as 10 years.” Judy Harriman, “Clearing the Path for Condo Sale,” St. Petersburg Times, 1 Nov. 1996, at D2.

Cf. period of time.

*times less than. See ILLOGIC (G).

*times more than. See ILLOGIC (H).

time when. See reason why.

timorous; temerarious. These similar-sounding words are antonyms. Timorous (/tim-a-rәs/) = fearfully reluctant to act. (It’s related to timid.) Temerarious (/tem-a-rair-e-as/) = foolhardily daring; rash and reckless. (It’s related to temerity. See TEMERITY.) The latter, a literary word, has never been in widespread use.

timpani. A Tale of Two Words. First, there’s the Latinate word tympanum, which denotes (1) the ear-drum, (2) the middle ear, (3) the diaphragm in an old-fashioned telephone, (4) in architecture, the vertical recessed face of a pediment, as over a door, (5) a hand drum of ancient Greece or Rome, (6) a modern kettledrum, or (7) a drumhead—that is, the stretched membrane of a drum. The plural is tympana in senses 1–4 and tympani in the drum senses (5–7).

Second, there’s the Italianate timpano, denoting a kettledrum. The plural is timpani.

In music, the words are almost always used in the plural. Tympani has a long tradition in English-language print sources, tracing back to the 18th century. Its rival, timpani, didn’t take root in the language until the 1920s, first in BrE and then in AmE. From 1950 to the present day, the two spellings have been jostling for predominance in BrE print sources; the competition did not become close in AmE print sources until the 1980s. But over the sweep of the period known as Modern English, tympani has long held sway.

What happened is that in the early 20th century, musicians and musicologists recognized timpani as an Italian word—the most frequent singular being timpano. A leading mid-20th-century musical encyclopedia has this entry (in full): “timpani. The Italian word for kettledrums. Printers and copyists often substitute y for i in this word; a mistake, since the letter y does not exist in the Italian language.” 8 Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians 480 (Eric Blom ed., 1954).

In AmE journalism, timpani now preponderates by a significant margin. This might have come about because timpani is perceived as the direct Italian etymon, whereas tympani goes back to a Latin spelling. The singular being timpano, musicians and musicologists might have thought the -y- simply wrong—mixing an Italian spelling with a Latinate one, the Latin singular being tympanum. Yet tympani is the traditional plural for the Latin word in drum senses.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX  
timpani spelled tympani: Stage 5  
   Current ratio (tympani vs. timpani in World English): 2:1

B. Singular or Plural. The word timpani—though borrowed into English as the plural form of the Italian singular timpano—has become interchangeably singular or plural. Most commonly, of course, the word is plural—e.g.: “The Jefferson Symphony Orchestra has been awarded a $14,110 grant by the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation for a set of four new timpani.” “Good for You,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 3 Oct. 1996, at
D14. But it's often singular as well. Even professional musicians commonly refer to a timpani, not *a tim-
pano. E.g.:
• “[It is an opera] house where Mozart's double-bass or tim-
• “I hear a timpani.” “Hot Ticket Items,” Sacramento Bee, 17
May 1996, at TK3.
• “The incessant beat of an Aztec drum, which looks like a bongo but booms like a timpani, permeates the entire
building.” Hsiao-Ching Chou, “Fiddle Fervor Woman Passes on Legacy of Unique Instrument,” Denver Post, 28

See plurals (b).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
timpani as a singular: Stage 5

C. *Timpani drum. This phrase is a redundancy that had little currency till the late 20th century. It
should be halved—e.g.:
• “The pit . . . is made up of 14 people on xylophones, marimbas, chimes, gongs, tympani drums [read timpani
or kettledrums], glockenspiels, bells, triangles, tambourines and more.” Michael Colton, “Esprit de Corps,” Bos-
• “A timpani drum [read timpani or kettledrum], its head
torn, . . . was serving as a trash can.” Sandy Strickland,
“Paxon Band on the Run in Search of Donations,” Fla.
• “Percussive instruments can also be played in an expressive
sustaining fashion, such as a roll on a snare or timpani drum
[read timpani or kettledrum], where the drum is struck

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*timpani drum for timpani or kettledrum: Stage 1
Current ratio (timpani vs. kettledrum vs. *timpani drum): 123:32:1

tinderbox (= [1] a box for holding kindling, or [2] a
source of incitement, esp. to violence) is sometimes
misspelled *tinderbox—e.g.:
• “But the detention center is an emotional tinderbox [read
tinderbox], with tensions running high, said Dr. Don R.
Heacock, a psychiatrist, who explained that residents are
‘very often frightened and anxious about being incar-
cerated.’” Elsa Brenner, “Trying to Avoid Giving Up on
• “The number of people whose immune systems were
suppressed to support transplanted organs or to fight
cancer added to the tinderbox [read tinderbox]. In the
1980s, in areas of Africa devastated by political upheaval
and AIDS, the white plague flickered, caught fire and

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
tinderbox misspelled *tinderbox: Stage 1

Current ratio: 37:1

tinge, vb., traditionally makes the present participle
tinging in AmE and BrE alike—not *tingeing.

tinker’s damn (= something valueless) is the stan-
dard spelling. The phrase’s mid-19th-century origin is
unknown, but it probably alludes to the tinkers’ repu-
tation for profanity. *Tinker’s dam is a variant spelling,
said to have originated from the tinker’s little dam of
bread to keep solder from running through a hole in
a pot being mended. See etymology (b). Current ratio: 3:1

CURRENT RATIO: 3:1

inflammation, “ and this

-tion on brain stem pressure, which can cause

Current ratio: 378:1

See zombie nouns.

-tion. See ZOMBIE NOUNS.

-tip. See tepee.

tipstaff (= a court officer who acts as crier and other-
wise helps the judge) predominantly forms the plural
tipstaves in AmE and BrE alike. Although the home-
grown plural tipstaffs has long vied closely, it remains
a secondary variant.

tipster; tipper. Both mean “someone who gives a
critical piece of information (i.e., a tip).” Tipster often
refers to someone who gives tips to police in criminal
investigations or sells tips relating to speculative or
gambling subjects <an anonymous tipster called the
police and implicated Mr. Kryder>.
Tipper shares with tipster the meaning of an informer who tips off police on illegal activities. But more commonly it signifies (1) "someone who gives a gratuity" <at restaurants, he's a lousy tipper>, or (2) in business parolce, "someone who gives or sells tips to securities and other investors" <we invested in the stock after talking to our tipper>.

tire; tyre. Although traditionally the spelling tire was AmE and tyre BrE, since about 1950 tire has seriously rivaled tyre in BrE print sources. The traditional BrE spelling appears to be losing air.

Current ratio (BrE): 2:1
Current ratio (World English): 9:1

tiro. See tyro.

titbit. See tidbit.

tithe (= a donation of 10% of one's income to support charitable or religious activities) derives from Middle and Old English words for tenth. That percentage is commonly understood — e.g.: "After her conversion, it took her three years to start giving the 10 percent, or tithe. Now she would never consider not giving it." Sara Miller Llana, "Wealth Gospel Propels Poor Guatemalans," Christian Science Monitor, 17 Dec. 2007, World §, at 1.

Given that familiarity, *ten-percent tithe* is surely a redundancy — e.g.: "Two weeks ago, Fellowship Bible Church had its Commitment Sunday. Members were asked to pledge chunks of money beyond the 10-per-cent tithe [read tithe] every pastor hopes, in vain, that every congregant gives." Bill Sanders, "Fellowship in Black and White," Atlanta J.-Const., 28 Oct. 2007, at M1. In fact, though, in loose usage tithe now commonly denotes a donation of whatever size — e.g.: "Both figures are well shy of the biblical 10 percent tithe." Chrissie Thompson, "Church Tithing Continues to Ebb; Only 2.56 Percent Given in 2004," Wash. Times, 13 Oct. 2006, at A9. Cf. dedicate.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

tithe to mean a donation of other than 10% of income: Stage 3

titillate; titivate. Titillate = to cause arousal or excitement, esp. of a sexual nature <titillating photographs>. Titivate = to smarten or spruce up <speed-dating aficionados who relentlessly titivate themselves>. A variant spelling of the latter is *titivate. For the difference between titillate and tantilize, see tantalize.

titmouse (= a small songbird) is also known as a tit, but only serious birdwatchers use the shortened form (because of the vulgar homonym). The vastly predominant plural (and the one recognized by dictionaries) is titmice, not *titmouses — e.g.: "In recent days chickadees, titmice, robins, cardinals, and white-breasted nuthatches seemed to celebrate the return of blue skies and sunshine." Scott Shalaway, "Birds First Sign of Spring," Pitt. Post-Gaz., 16 Mar. 2003, at D16. The form *titmouses, though perhaps logical (since it's not a mouse at all), occurs so infrequently as to be ill-advised — e.g.: "Other visitors to the Gibbs' yard Monday were cardinals, white-throated sparrows, . . . titmouses [read titmice], chickadees, juncos, Carolina wrens, bluebirds and goldfinches." Sylvia Cooper, "Watch Out for the Birds," Augusta Chron., 24 Jan. 2003, at D10.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

*titmouses for titmice: Stage 1
Current ratio (titmice vs. *titmouses): 134:1

Titular Tomfoolery. Nowadays almost any appositive is likely to be treated as if it were a title. This trend is primarily the fault of newspapers and magazines, which create descriptive titles for people on the fly. So instead of Timothy McVeigh, the convicted bomber, journalists want to say convicted bomber Timothy McVeigh. Worse yet, some writers would even capitalize the descriptor, further elevating the common noun to title status — e.g.: Convicted Bomber Timothy McVeigh.

Acceptance of these false titles (though never the capitalized form) is partly attributable to their sanction by the Associated Press: "Other titles serve primarily as occupational descriptions: astronaut John Glenn, movie star John Wayne, peanut farmer Jimmy Carter." Associated Press Stylebook 251 (Norm Goldstein ed., 2002). But The New York Times gives better advice: "Only official titles — not mere descriptions — should be affixed to names. Do not, for example, write pianist Lynn C. Arniotis or political scientist Tracy F. Baranek. But in a reference to someone well known, a descriptive phrase preceded by the is acceptable: the sociologist Merrill H. Cordero." The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage 334 (Allan M. Siegal & William G. Connolly eds., 1999).

This trend resulted from an understandable desire for economy in both words and punctuation, since most appositives require an article (a or the) and commas. Yet the result is often a breeziness that hardly seems worth the effort of repositioning the words from their traditional placement — e.g.:

- “They played eventual champion Arkansas in the opening round last year.” “Familiar Role for A&T,” Asheville Citizen-Times (N.C.), 15 Mar. 1995, at D3. (Insert the before eventual champion, and put commas before and after Arkansas.)

A true title of authority, such as general or mayor, is properly capitalized before a person's name <General Tommy Franks> <Mayor Willie Brown>. Job descriptions are not <flutist Ian Anderson>. Just where to draw the line can be an exercise in frustration. But
even titles of authority are not capitalized when used as appositives following the name <Andrew Cuomo, governor of New York>.

**Tomes**, the practice of separating parts of a compound word by inserting another word between those parts, seldom occurs today. Typically, it occurs either in humorous passages or in low colloquial language—e.g.: "The crowds and the loud music and the X Games are miles and miles away, a whole 'nother country away," Chris Jenkins, "Hell of a Race," San Diego Union-Trib., 24 June 1997, at D1. (See *set phrases.* But *tomes* occurs in other phrases as well—e.g.: "'[H]e might be in Florida some-damn-where;" says Fred Haselrig, Carlton's father." Michael Silver, "Invisible Man," Sports Illustrated, 18 Dec. 1995, at 66. In a similar vein, Joseph Pulitzer (1847–1911) of the New York World had a pet word: *indegoddampendent.* This type of interpolated profanity use is common in BrE with *bloody*—e.g.: "It is also, as her fans Down Under rightly proclaim, *absolutely* wonderful." Paul Cole, "Special Kasey," Sunday Mercury (U.K.), 21 Apr. 2002, at P38. In AmE, far stronger language is commonly inserted, as moviegoers know only too well.

The traditional form of *tomes*, however, occurs with formal words ending in *-soever*. It has an archaic ring to it, and most readers probably encounter it primarily in the King James Version of the Bible—e.g.: • "What things *soever* ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them and ye shall have them." Mark 11:24. • "Then answered Jesus and said unto them, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what *he* doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.' " John 5:19.

The modern tendency, of course, is to write *whatever things*.

*Tomes* is pronounced /ˈtoʊ-mee-sis/ or /ˈmee-sis/. Contemporary linguists often call *tomes* "*infixed.*" For an impressive study, see James B. McMillan, "Infixed and Interposing in English," 55 Am. Speech 163–83 (1980).

to all intents and purposes. See for all intents and purposes.

to begin. See begin (A).

to cast aspersions. See aspersions.

Toqueville, de. See names (D).

toe the line; toe the mark. These phrases—meaning "to conform to the rules; to do one's duty"—derive from track-and-field events in which the contestants were once told to put one foot on the starting line. (Now the shouted instruction is *On your marks!* The phrases appear to be Americanisms that originated in the early 19th century. See Charles Earle Funk, *Heavens to Betsy! and Other Curious Sayings* 136–37 (1955; repr. 1986). Especially in the phrase *toe the line*, the metaphor is sometimes badly distorted from *toe to tow*—e.g.: • "Wood's bill prohibits gag clauses, but the House version eliminates provisions that would have required health insurers to disclose the financial incentives (or penalties) that can persuade physicians to *tow* [read *toe*] the line in much the same way." Tom Paulson, "Doctors Still Hope for State Help on Insurance Issue," Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 1 Mar. 1996, at C1.

"Meanwhile the Bosnian Serb Republic's ruling Serb Democratic Party, covertly led by Mr. Karadzic, has threatened to *tow* the territory's president, Biljana Plavsic, unless she *tows* [read *toes*] the line." "Voting Ban on Karadzic," Guardian, 2 July 1997, at 17.

"Pressure from such microscopic scrutiny suggests that China will have to *tow* [read *toe*] the line, or world powers will retaliate with trade sanctions." M. Ray Perryman, "Hong Kong Shows How the Child Can Also Be the Parent," San Antonio Bus. J., 25 July 1997, at 55.

="*Tow* [read *Toe*] the line: carry one's load; follow set rules or orders strictly. Every employee needs to *tow* [read *tow*] the line around here." Joseph Melillo & Edward M. Melillo, American Slang 210 (2005).

See *lapseus linguæ*.

Although *toe the line* is about five times as common as *toe the mark* in print sources today, the latter idiom has not entirely disappeared—e.g.: "In his latest tape, Osama bin Laden denounced Muslim countries that don't *toe his mark* as 'tyrannical and apostate regimes, which are enslaved by America.' " Ron Grossman, "Also-Rans Snipe at U.S.," Chicago Trib., 2 Mar. 2003, Perspective §, at 1.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

* **toe the line** *vs.* **toe the line**: Stage 2

Current ratio (toe the line vs. *toe the line*): 8:1

together appears in many a redundancy, such as *blend together*, *connect together*, *consolidate together*, *couple together*, and *merge together*. These phrases should be avoided, except when part of a set phrase (e.g., *join together* in a marriage ceremony). Cf. *mutual* (A).

For the distinction between altogether and all together, see *altogether*.

together with. See subject–verb agreement (E).

to include. See include.

tolerance; toleration. The former is the quality, the latter the act or practice. As a matter of word frequency, *toleration* occurred much more often in print sources than *tolerance* during the 17th to 19th centuries, but the position was reversed about the time of World War I: since 1914, *tolerance* has consistently appeared in print more frequently than *toleration*.

tome refers not to any book, but only to one that is impossibly or forbiddingly large (the one you're holding comes to mind).
tony (= fashionable and expensive) is so spelled in all varieties of World English. The word is occasionally misspelled *toney.

too. A. Beginning Sentences with. It is poor style to begin a sentence with too (= also), although there is a tendency in facile journalism to use the word this way. Instead of *Too, we shouldn’t forget, write Also, we shouldn’t forget or, better, And we shouldn’t forget. Words such as moreover, further, and furthermore are also serviceable in this position—though they are heavy.

B. For very. This informal use of too almost always occurs in negative constructions (<i>it’s not too common</i>). But there are exceptions <i>you’re too kind</i>.

C. Too [+ adj.] a [+ n.]. This idiom being perfectly acceptable, there is no reason to insist on the artificiality of a too [+ adj. + n.]; that is, <i>too good a job</i> is better than *a too good job. E.g.: “But Monica is too nice a person for that kind of behavior.” Dale Robertson, “For Seals, What Could Have Been Radiates in Hingis,” Houston Chron., 6 June 1997, at 1. For the bad form *too good of a, see of (b).

*tooken. See take (A).

topography. See typography.

Torino. See Turin.

tornacic (= of, relating to, or involving a tornado or tornadoes) was coined in the late 19th century as an adjective corresponding to the 16th-century word <i>tornado</i>. The newer word can be seen as a pomposity because <i>tornado</i> generally serves as its own adjective <i>tornado activity</i>. But some writers seem to like the mock-technicality of tornacic—e.g.: “The peak of the storm hit Brockton and Mary D in Schuylkill Township, where tornadic [read tornado] damage was a quarter-mile wide.” Kristen Klick, “Schuylkill Was Ripped by Twister,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 15 May 1996, at B1. Tornadic is pronounced either /tor-nay-dik/ or /tor-na-dik/.

tornado. Pl. tornadoes—not *tornados. See plurals (d).

current ratio: 7:1

torpid. See turbid.

torsibility. For the use of this noun in opposite senses, see contronyms.

tortellini; tortelloni. Tortellini, the more usual word, normally denotes small squares of pasta that are formed into rings or hat shapes after stuffing. While tortellini is both singular and plural in English, the Italian singular is tortellino (= a small cake or fritter). Depending on the cookbook you consult, tortelloni either refers to a larger version of tortellini or is another name for ravioli.

tortfeasor (= someone who commits a civil wrong) was once spelled as two words (<i>tort feasor</i>, then was hyphenated, and now has been fused into a single word.

tortious. See tortuous.

tortoise. The standard pronunciation is /tort-ôs/, not /tor-toyz/ (a spelling pronunciation). Cf. porpoise.

tortuous; torturous; tortious. Tortuous (/tor-choo-ôs/) = full of twists and turns <a tortuous path through the woods>. Torturous (/tor-char-ôs/) = of, characterized by, or involving torture <torturous abuse>. Tortious (/tor-shôs/) = (1) of, relating to, or involving a civil wrong (i.e., a tort) for which a person can sue <tortious liability>; or (2) constituting a tort <a tortious act>. Two mistakes are fairly common—both involving tortuous.

First, that word is occasionally misused for tortuous—e.g.: “Dozens of deaf Mexican immigrants huddled around Spanish-speaking interpreters in Queens and, using Mexican and American sign language, vividly described their long and tortuous [read torturous] ordeal at the hands of the smuggling ring, which forced them to sell $1 trinkets on the subway from morning until night.” “Deaf Immigrants Exploited Over 10-Year Period in City,” N.Y. Times, 22 July 1997, at A2.

Second, tortuous is sometimes misused for tortious (the least common of the three words)—e.g.:

- “In return, Bocwinski agreed to drop the three other allegations, which were described in the settlement agreement as ‘tortuous [read tortious] acts.’” Pat Clawson, “Village Approves Lawsuit Settlement,” Chicago Trib., 7 Oct. 1996, at 3.

In those examples, it’s hard to know who made the error: the queror or the original writer. But somebody did.

Language-Change Index
1. tortuous misused for tortuous: Stage 2
   Current ratio (tortuous interrogation vs. *tortuous interrogation): 6:1
2. tortuous misused for tortious: Stage 1
   Current ratio (tortious act vs. *tortious act): 14:1

total, vb., makes totaled and totalling in AmE, totalled and totalling in BrE. See spelling (b).

*totally obsolete. For this phrase, see archaic.

to the contrary. See contrary (b).

to the effect that is often verbose for <i>that</i>.

to the manner born. See manner born.

totting up (= adding up, calculating) is sometimes incorrectly made totting up (which means “carrying up”)—e.g.: “Toting [read Totting] up a lifetime of 35 campaigns, in primaries and general elections,
looking back on the proud history of a district once represented by the Speaker of the House, William B. Bankhead (Tallulah’s father), Mr. Bevill maintained that the weight of history was on the Democrats’ side.” Robin Toner, “Retirements a Hurdle for Dixie’s Democrats,” N. Y. Times, 7 July 1996, at 1, 8.

touchy; tetchy; techy. Touchy = (1) oversensitive; irritable <he was a bit touchy during the interview>; or (2) requiring caution or tact in handling <a touchy subject>. Even though it predates touchy, tetchy (as well as its alternative spelling techy) is now a variant form (in sense 1). Tetchy occurs more often in BrE than in AmE.

For techy as an adjective meaning “involving one or more techies” (technology whizzes), see techie.

toupee is so written in English—not *toupée, though the form *toupé might be suggestively mimetic.

tourniquet is so spelled. See SPELLING (A). It is pronounced /tә-tә-ni-ˈkәt/ in AmE and /tә-ni-ˈkәt/ in BrE.

toward. A. And towards. Since about 1900, toward has been the predominant and editorially preferred form in AmE; towards has always been predominant in BrE. See DIRECTIONAL WORDS (A).

B. Pronunciation. The word is preferably pronounced /ˈtɔr-dəd/ (to rhyme with board), not /ˈtɔrd/ or /ˈtɔr-ˌwərd/. See CLASS DISTINCTIONS.

C. Misused for to or against. Toward implies movement. It shouldn’t be used when the sentence would be served by to or against—e.g.—

- “Perhaps he should consider his own attitude, which appears to be one of prejudice toward [read against] people from certain parts of the country.” Cameron T. Shalamune, “No One Has Come Here to Make Others Unhappy,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 24 Sept. 1997, at A48.
- “The author, Jan Murphy, suggests that our library officials acted with prejudice toward [read against] Laura Bast, who desired to volunteer with the library.” Story Overdramatized,” Patriot & Evening News (Harrisburg), 6 Oct. 1997.

towel, vb., makes towed and toweling in AmE, toweled and towelling in BrE. See SPELLING (b).

to(-)wit. The ordinary progression in such common phrases is from two words, to a hyphenated form, to a single word. Though some writers have experimented with the single-word version, and the hyphenated form was once common, today it seems that to wit is destined to remain two words—if indeed its destiny is not oblivion. To wit is a legal ARCHAISM in the place of which namely is almost always an improvement. Cf. namely & viz.

toxic, n.; toxin. It’s true that toxic, which is mostly an adjective <toxic substances>, has been a noun meaning “a poisonous substance, chemical or otherwise” since the late 19th century <releasing toxins into the air>. It’s also true that toxin is narrower in scope: technically speaking, it means “a poisonous substance produced by a living organism, esp. a disease-causing substance.” Despite those inconvenient facts, though, toxic is almost invariably used as an adjective today; to use it as a noun in general writing invites confusion and probably suspicion that the writer has blundered.

toxicology; toxology. Toxicology = the science of poisons. Toxology = the branch of knowledge dealing with archery.

toxin. See toxic.

toxology. See toxicology.

trachea (= the tube that takes air from the throat to the lungs; windpipe) has traditionally formed the classical plural tracheae (/ˈtræki-ˈeɪ/)—but then again the plural form is rarely needed outside medical and biological writing. Since about 1980 the homegrown tracheas has begun to rival its Greek sibling in all varieties of English.

tracheotomy; tracheostomy. The two are distinct. Tracheotomy (dating from the early 18th century) refers to any surgical cutting through the skin into the trachea. Tracheostomy (dating from the early 20th century) refers to the surgical formation of a hole through the neck and into the trachea to allow the passage of air. Since the early 1960s, tracheostomy has appeared more frequently in print.

track; tract. Track (= a course or beaten path) is sometimes misused for tract (= a parcel of land) in the phrase tract of land. Less common than it once was, the error still occurs—e.g.—

- “In the early 1960s, a very large underground circular tunnel about 85 feet underground was being dug on a huge track [read tract] of land south of Dallas, Texas, to house equipment for a very high-energy circular particle accelerator.” Robert E. Krebs, The History and Use of Our Earth’s Chemical Elements 365 (2d ed. 2006).
The opposite error has also sometimes occurred since the late 19th century. E.g.:

- “The prompt will always display the path of the current directory to help you keep track [read track] of where you are in the filing system.” T. Sheldon, “Building an Orderly Hard Disk,” PC Mag., 15 May 1984, at 269.

The same error occurs, though less often, when the subject is the digestive tract—e.g.: “Doctors diagnosed Crohn’s, an autoimmune disease that confuses the immune system and causes inflammation in the digestive tract [read tract],” Greg Bishop, “A Couple Grapple for Love, and Love of Achievement,” N.Y. Times, 12 June 2008, at D6. Cf. soundtrack.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. track misused for tract: Stage 1
   Current ratio (tract of land vs. *track of land): 90:1
   2. tract misused for track: Stage 1
   Current ratio (kept track of vs. *kept tract of): 950:1

tradable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *tradeable. See mute e.

trademark; tradename. Today in AmE, tradenames identify businesses; trademarks identify goods produced by or services provided by businesses. Since the mid-20th century, each term has been solidified (no hyphen) in AmE and BrE alike. See servicemark.

traditionalist; *traditionist. The first is the standard term; the second has been a needless variant since the late 19th century.

Current ratio: 46:1

traffic, v.i., forms the particles trafficking and trafficked, and the agent noun is trafficker. But the adjective is trafficable. See -c-.

tragic; *tragical. Tragic is standard. Although *tragical predominated before 1750 and competed closely till 1800, it has been a needless variant in decline since then.

Current ratio: 35:1

trammeled (= to bind, shackle, or otherwise restrain) makes trammeled and trammeling in AmE, tramelled and trammelling in BrE. See spelling (b).

tranquility; *tranquility. Since about 1980, the two spellings have been about equally common. But since the 17th century, tranquillity has been considered the standard spelling, and *tranquility a variant form. This despite the spelling *tranquility in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

Current ratio: 2:1

transatlantic; *trans-Atlantic. The former has been the standard spelling since the 18th century—on both sides of the Atlantic. Transpacific follows the same standard—except that trans-Pacific is curiously prevalent in BrE.

transcendent; transcendent. Transcendent = surpassing or excelling others of its kind; preeminent. It is loosely used by some writers in the sense “excellent.” Transcendent = supernatural; mystical; metaphysical; superhuman. The adverbial forms are transcendently and transcendentally.

transcript; transcription. The former is the written copy, the latter the process of producing it.

transfer, n.; *transferral; *transferal; transference. The first is the standard term. The second and third are needless variants—though if you must use one, *transferral is the better spelling. Transference justifies its separate existence primarily in psychological contexts, in the sense “the redirection of feelings or desires” <one twin felt guilt by transference even though he was nowhere near when his brother committed the crime>.

transfer, v.t., is traditionally accented on the second syllable, hence the past-tense spelling transferred, not *transfered. See spelling (b).

transferrable. Since the 18th century, the word has been so spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *transferrable or *transferrible. This despite the accent on the second syllable: /tranz-fәr-ә-bal/. In this way, the word is anomalous. Cf. deferrable & inferable.

Current ratio (transferable vs. *transferrable vs. *transferible): 6,696:75:1

*transferal; *transferral; transference. See transfer, n.

TRANSFERRED EPIPHET. See hypallage.

transfixion; transfiction. These homophones are distinct. The first denotes the state or condition of being transfixed. The second is a neologism referring to a type of fiction involving or appealing to transgender people.

transformational; transformative. Transformational is the broader term, meaning “of or characterized by a change of form or substance.” Transformative means “causing or (less commonly) susceptible to such a change.”

transfusible. Despite the worldwide predominance of fusible, not *fusible, the spelling transfusible has become standard in AmE and BrE alike. That spelling overtook the traditional *transfusible in the 1960s and 1970s and is now unquestionably preponderant. See -able (a).

Current ratio: 2:1

transgender; transgendered. The precise meaning of this new term (dating only to the mid-1970s) is hard to pin down, but it’s most commonly used as a broad adjective describing people whose self-identity does
not match the sex they were labeled with at birth—e.g.: “[Dr. Norman] Spack subjects his patients to a lengthy evaluation process before recommending hormone therapy. Kids undergo a battery of interview-based psychological tests to see if they meet the medically established criteria for gender-identity disorder. . . . There are many mysteries about the transgendered. This could clear up one of them.” Laura Fitzpatrick, “The Gender Conundrum,” *Time*, 19 Nov. 2007, at 59. The term is not necessarily an identification of sexual orientation.

Transgender is the broader and more common term. The participle *transgendered* might suggest some form of physical alteration—e.g.: “Rhiannon O’Donnabhain is suing the IRS in a case advocates for the transgendered are hoping will force the tax agency to treat sex-change operations the same as appendectomies, heart bypasses and other deductible medical procedures.” “Around the Nation,” *Record* (N.J.), 17 July 2007, at A6.

**transgression** for *transition* is a malapropism—e.g.: “Ms. Ash said the laser center ‘is a natural transgression [read transition] into a new technology.’” Raquel Santiago, “Firms Turn Eyes to Laser Surgery,” *Crain’s Cleveland Bus.*, 29 Jan. 1996, at 3.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

* transshipment

**transience; *transiency.** The latter is a NECESSARY VARIANT. Current ratio: 9:1

**transient, adj.: transitory; transitive.** Transient = coming and going; impermanent; temporary <transient workers>. Transitory (= fleeting) has virtually the same meaning but is more commonly applied to things or events than to people <transitory renown>. Transitive is a grammatical term denoting a verb that takes a direct object <transitive verbs>.

Tran*rent* is best pronounced /tr-

**translucent.** See transparent.

**transmissible.** So spelled in AmE and BrE alike.

*Transmissible* is a variant. See -ABLE (A). Current ratio: 89:1

**transmit.** See send.

**transmittal; transmission; transmittance.** Transmittal is more physical than transmission, just as admission is more physical than admission. Transmittal, though labeled rare in the OED, is common in AmE, especially in the phrase transmittal letter (= a cover letter accompanying documents or other things being conveyed to another). E.g.: “Middleton noted in his transmittal letter that Trie was a friend of Clinton’s and ‘a major supporter.’” Sharon LaFraniere & Susan Schmidt, “White House Ignored Red Flags About Fundraisers,” *Oregonian* (Portland), 15 Feb. 1997, at A1.

**Transmittance** is a scientific term dealing with the transfer of radiant energy, etc. <spectral transmittance> <thermal transmittance> <amplitude transmittance>. The commercialese appears on many cover sheets where the simple fax would do nicely. See fax.

**transnational.** So spelled.

**transpacific.** See transatlantic.


“‘If the arts board wants to improve its image, start by following its own rules, operating with transparency and abiding by the spirit of the open meeting laws,’” Randy Krebs, “Our View” (Editorial), *St. Cloud Times* (Minn.), 15 Mar. 2003, at B7.


**transparent; translucient.** A transparent substance allows light to pass through it freely, so that objects beyond it may be seen clearly. On the other hand, a translucent substance allows light to pass through it but diffuses it, so that objects beyond it are not clearly visible. Hence ordinary glass is transparent, while frosted glass is translucent.

**transpire.** The traditionally correct meaning of this word is “to pass through a surface; come to light; become known by degrees.” But that sense is now beyond redemption, though writers should be aware of it. Today, of course, the popular use of transpire is as a FORMAL WORD equivalent to happen, occur, or take
place. But when used in that way, transpire is a mere pomposity displacing an everyday word—e.g.:  
- “Satisfied that something unusual was indeed transpiring [read happening], the team then arranged for a visit to the house.” David Lazarus, “Ghostbuster Snare Clients on Net,” S.F. Chron., 13 Oct. 2002, at G1.

Another loose usage occurs (not transpires) when transpire is used for pass or elapse—e.g.: “Three days transpired [read passed] between the call and discovery of the dead child.” Steven K. Paulson, “911 Call Was Made From Mansion Before Body Found,” Times Union (Albany), 10 Jan. 1997, at A3.

All in all, transpire fits the definition of a skunked term: careful writers should avoid it altogether simply to avoid distracting readers, whether traditionalists (who dislike the modern usage) or others (who may not understand the traditional usage).

LANGUAGe-CHANGE INDEX
transpire for happen or occur: Stage 4

transportation; transportal; *transportment. The first is the usual word for the system, method, business, or process of taking goods or people from one place to another. The second is often used as a technical term for the conveyance of pollen, seeds, etc. from one place to another. The third is a needless variant.

transposition; *transposal. The latter is a needless variant.

transportation
Current ratio: 518:1

transsexual. So spelled—not *transsexual.

Current ratio: 38:1

transshipment (= to transfer from one ship or vehicle to another) is so spelled—without a hyphen. The word is often misspelled *transship—e.g.: *Japanese intelligence sources speculated that the shipment may have originated in China and been transshipped [read transshipped] through the North Korean port of Chongjin by a middleman.” Richard Lloyd Parry, “North Korea: Was Made from Mansion Before Body Found,” Times Union (Albany), 10 Jan. 1997, at A3.

All in all, transship fits the definition of a skunked term: careful writers should avoid it altogether simply to avoid distracting readers, whether traditionalists (who dislike the modern usage) or others (who may not understand the traditional usage).

LANGUAGe-CHANGE INDEX
transship for transportment: Stage 4

trapezoid; trapezium. These words are traps for the geometrically unwarly. In AmE, a trapezoid is a shape with four sides, two of which are parallel; in BrE, it is a four-sided shape with no parallel sides. In AmE, trapezium is the word for the latter sense (a four-sided shape with no parallel sides), while in BrE it bears the former sense (a four-sided shape with two parallel sides). The predominant plural of trapezium is trapeziums in both AmE and BrE (a recent development in both)—though in World English trapezia has predominated since about 1970. The two plurals have been locked in rivalry since the 18th century.

trauma, in pathology, means “a serious wound or shock to the body,” but in popular contexts it has been largely confined to figurative (emotional) senses. Cf. insult. Pl. traumas—preferably not the pretentious *traumata (in steep decline since about 1960).

Current ratio (traumas vs. *traumata): 32:1

travel, vb., makes traveled and traveling in AmE, travelled and travelling in BrE. See SPELLING (b).

travelogue (= a lecture or film documentary about travel to a particular place) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Travelog is a variant. (See catalog(ue), dialogue & pedagoge.) For a comment on the potential decline of the -ue form, see -agog(ue).

trawl, vb.; troll, vb. Trawl = (1) to fish with a large cone-shaped net (called a trawl) that is dragged on the bottom of a sea or lake; or (2) to search through (documents, computer files, etc.) to gather information. Troll = v.t., (1) to roll (something) around and around; (2) to sing robustly; (3) to pull through water; (4) to try to obtain something from by searching or interrogating; v.i., (5) to catch fish by dragging a lure or a baited hook, esp. from a moving boat; (6) to talk quickly; or (7) to roam; wander. Each word seems sometimes to be displaced by the other—e.g.:  
- “It was the second day experts from Colorado Alligators, a farm near Alamosa, trolled [read trawled] the pond with a huge net.” Carla Crowder, “Hundreds Hope, After a While, to Spy Elusive Critter,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 19 Aug. 1998, at A4.

Then again, sense 2 of tawl is virtually indistinguishable from sense 4 of troll. The usual phrase today is trolling the internet, not tawling.

LANGUAGe-CHANGE INDEX
1. tawl misused for troll: Stage 2
2. troll misused for tawl: Stage 2

tread > trod > trodden. So inflected. Trod is a variant past participle. Although many American dictionaries (surprisingly) list *untrodd as the standard adjective in preference to untrodden, the latter form is seven times as common.

Since the mid-20th century, many writers have tried to make trod into a present-tense verb. They’re treading heavily on the language—e.g.:  
- “A truce was declared yesterday in the latest battle of Manassas, as state and federal officials announced a plan to widen a perilous intersection without trodding [read treading] on a sacred Civil War battleground.” Dan Eggen, “Past Gives Ground to Safety,” Wash. Post, 29 Oct. 1998, at B5.

The mistaken form *trodde appears as both a past tense and a past participle—e.g.:

See irregular verbs.

Treaded is the accepted past tense and past participle only in the sense of treading water, both literally and figuratively—e.g.:

• “He reached the western wall and treaded water as he groped for a handhold along the frosted stone.” Michael Allen Dymmock, The Cymry Ring 8 (2006).

**Language-Change Index**

1. trod misused for present-tense tread: Stage 1 Current ratio (treading on vs. *trotting on*): 251:1
2. *trotted for trod: Stage 1 Current ratio (trod on vs. *trotted on*): 526:1
3. *trotted for trodden: Stage 1 
4. treaded in reference to treading water: Stage 5

treasonable; treasonous. Ernest Gowers wrote in 1965 that of these synonymous words, “treasonous is now comparatively rare, and more likely to be met in verse” (FMEU2 at 647). Modern dictionaries still seem to agree, listing treasonous only as a variant of the older word, treasonable. And in AmE legal writing, that remains true: treasonable is five times as common as treasonous in court decisions (although federal criminal statutes use them interchangeably). But in modern American journalism, treasonous has scored a coup: it’s the more common variant today. In World English, however, treasonable predominates by a 2-to-1 ratio.

*Treat with dignity. See dignity.

treble; triple. These words are distinguishable though sometimes interchangeable. Outside baseball contexts <he tripled to deep right field>, trebled is a common term—e.g.:

• “The last time Congress ‘reformed’ campaign finance, it trebled the amount of money that is taken out of the Treasury (your money) and given to presidential candidates.” Theo Lipman Jr., “What Political Campaigns Need Is Lots More Money,” Baltimore Sun, 26 Nov. 1996, at A13.

• “By 1992 it [South Africa’s HIV rate] had trebled to 2.2 per cent. By the time South Africans voted in their first free elections in 1994 it had trebled again to 7.6 per cent. When Nelson Mandela stepped down and Thabo Mbeki took over in 1999 it had trebled once more to 22.4 per cent.” Peter Gill, Body Count 64 (2006).

But in general, the baseball habits have permeated the language as a whole, and people are likely to talk about the tripling of costs, revenues, etc., as opposed to trebling.

As an adjective, treble usually means “three times as much or as many” <treble damages>, whereas triple means “having three parts” <a triple bookshelf> <triple bypass surgery>.

trek, n., derives from the Dutch trekken “to march or travel.” It’s occasionally misspelled *treck*—e.g.:


As a verb, trek makes trekked and trekking. But the misspelling occurs with the verb as well—e.g.:

• “Trekking [read Trekking] through rice paddies to check out reports of beatings one day, . . . the Americans aren’t even sure how far their new jurisdiction extends.” Andrew Selisky, “With Haitian Police Gone, U.S. Troops Become Cops,” Orange County Register, 2 Oct. 1994, at A13.
• “On Thursday, while some of his colleagues were trekking [read trekking] north to Hamilton Park, the Carsones were making their first trip to Slimbridge.” Tony Stafford, “Success Breeds Success for a Real Winner,” Sunday Telegraph, 14 Apr. 1996, at 5.

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*trekking for trekking: Stage 1 Current ratio (trekking vs. *trotting*): 482:1

treblem; *trembler. See temblor.

trespassers will be prosecuted. This phrase, which most readers would construe as referring to criminal proceedings, usually expresses an untruth. In most states (Louisiana is a notable exception), trespass to land is ordinarily a tort—not a crime. Although the landowner can sue, the district attorney won’t prosecute. But a trespasser who causes damage, as by trampling crops or breaking windows, can be criminally prosecuted.

-Tress. See sexism (d).

triage (= a utilitarian and humanitarian method of deciding who receives medical treatment first according to how serious the need is) is sometimes misused for trio—e.g.:
triathlon. See -athlon.

*tribesperson. See sexism (c).

*tricentenary; *tricentennial. See tercentenary.

triceps. While the technically correct term for these three-anchored muscles (especially the back muscle of the upper arm, called the triceps brachii by anatomists) is triceps in both singular and plural forms, it has become so common since 1950 when writing of a single muscle to drop the -s that triceps has become a variant form—e.g.: “Then a therapist thumps the triceps and biceps of the bad right arm.” Katti Gray, “Healing Is a Matter of Time—and Love,” Newsday (N.Y.), 29 Oct. 2002, pt. II, at B2. This variant appears mostly in listings of sports injuries. It is better to stick to the standard singular triceps, by far the more commonly used form. But given the acceptance of biceps as a singular, triceps probably can’t be far behind. See biceps. Cf. pecs & quadriceps.

Current ratio (left triceps vs. left triceps): 4:1

trifecta (/trɪˈfɛktə/) is a wager to pick, in correct order, the first-, second-, and third-place winners of a race, especially a horse race. The term was coined in the 1970s on the model of perfecta (= a wager to pick the first two winners of a race), which itself dates from 1961.

trillion. In the United States and France, trillion means “a million millions”; but in Great Britain, it traditionally means “a million million millions.” The difference is more than substantial. But British writers today generally follow the American usage. Cf. billion.

trim. For the use of this verb in opposite senses, see contronyms.

trimestral—not trimestrial—is the traditional, standard adjective corresponding to trimester. Cf. semestral.

Current ratio: 1:1

trimonthly (= [1] occurring once every three months; or [2] lasting for three months) is typically inferior to the more common quarterly—e.g.: “The money that they collect this month will allow them to continue to provide such services as publishing a trimonthly [read quarterly] newsletter.” Darren Becker, “Montreal Centre Wages Campaign for Peace,” Montreal Gaz., 15 Dec. 1996, at D3.

triumvir (= one of three officers forming an administrative or rulemaking group, which is called a triumvirate) forms the plural triumvirs or (less good) *triumviri. (See plurals (b).) The word is pronounced /tri-əm-vir/. Current ratio (triumvirs vs. *triumviri): 9:1

-TRIX. See sexism (d).

trold; trodden. See tread.

troll. See trolw.

trolley (= a wheeled carriage) is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Trolly is a variant. Current ratio: 124:1

trompe l’oeil; *trompe d’oeil; *trump l’oeil. The first spelling of this GALLICISM, meaning “deceives the eye,” is by far the most common. It’s predominant in AmE and BrE print sources, and it’s the spelling recorded in most dictionaries. The second spelling is less common. The last two are needless variants, the last one rare. The phrase can apply to any illusion as well as to a highly realistic style of painting—e.g.: “In architecture, fashion, and art, the Baroque period is distinguished by elaborate accessories and embellishments, from Corinthian capitals on pillars to ribbons and laces on clothing to the grand display of trompe l’oeil [read tromp l’oeil] murals to the grand statues of Bernini.” Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Communion Blood 16 (1999).

“‘The latest for high-flying male executives, says Forbes magazine, is a custom-crafted porcelain veneer for one’s teeth. This tromp l’oeil [read trompe l’oeil] is pearly white, dazzling and very costly,” Ros Davidson, “A Drug Invented for Chemical Warfare Has Taken Off Across America as a Beauty Treatment That Paralyses . . . ,” Sunday Herald, 28 May 2002, at P8.

The phrase is pronounced (in English) /traump lə-ee/. Current ratio (first three headwords in order): 342:7:1

troop; troupe. Both words have their origins in the medieval French term troupeau, meaning “crowd” or “herd.” Troop = an assembled unit of soldiers <a troop of parachutists>. The plural form troops signifies soldiers <the troops were deployed along the crest of the ridge> and is usually modified by an adjective to indicate some special training or assignment <ski troops> <airborne troops> <desert troops>. An adjective may also designate the soldiers’ command...
level or department <divisional troops> <corps troops> <army troops> <Allied troops>. In this sense, 

**troops** refers to individual soldiers <three troops were injured in the raid>, but only when the reference is plural. That is, a single soldier, sailor, or pilot would never be termed *a troop*. 

While some object to the use of *troops* (always plural) to refer to individuals, the usage is hardly new—

• “A Vera Cruz letter-writer says that in the course of the insurrection in that city, three of the Government *troops* were killed and five wounded.” “Mexican News—Further Details,” *N.Y. Times*, 17 June 1853, at 1. Today it’s standard, despite the inherent ambiguity presented by the collective sense of *troop*. 

*Troupe* = a company of actors, acrobats, or other performers <a troupe of actors> <a troupe of circus performers>. Some writers misuse *troop* for *troupe*—e.g.: 


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*troop* misused for *troupe*: Stage 1

Current ratio (theater/-re *troop* vs. 

*theater/-re *troupe*): 41:1

**trooper; trouper.**  

**Trooper** = (1) a cavalry soldier or horse; (2) a police officer mounted on horseback; or (3) a state police officer. **Trouper** = (1) a member of an acting troupe; (2) someone who handles adversity well; or (3) a loyal, dependable person. The proper *troupe* = (1) a figure of speech, esp. a word or phrase used metaphorically, or (2) a motif. 

*troupe* (/trohp/) means (1) a figure of speech, esp. a word or phrase used metaphorically, or (2) a motif. Sense 1 is the traditional one—e.g.: “And yet he has held on to the *trope* of product-launch-as-birth; as recently as the days following the launch of the iPhone, he surprised someone who’s known him for more than a decade by speaking of the laborlike ‘emotional trauma’ of bringing the iPhone to market.” Tom Junod, “Steve Jobs and the Portal to the Invisible,” *Esquire*, 1 Oct. 2008, at 185. But the second sense is far more common in AmE print sources today: e.g.—“‘Nick & Norah’ is clearly more mainstream and formulaic than ‘Victor Vargas’. . . . But [Peter] Sollett is able to take familiar teen *tropes* and transform them into low-key magic.” David Ansen, “Love Me, Love My Mix Tape,” *Newsweek*, 6 Oct. 2008, at 58. And even that sense has itself become more of a *trope* in the traditional meaning: the sense is often closer to “cliché” than “motif.”

**troubled; troublesome; troublous.**  

*Troubled* = (1) anxious or worried [he had a troubled look]; or (2) having lots of problems [a troubled relationship].  

*Troublesome* = causing many pesky problems [troublesome dietary restrictions].  

*Troublous* = (1) stormy and difficult [these troublous times]; or (2) causing serious trouble; troublesome [a troublous position to take in the litigation].  

*Troublesome* is a literary, old-fashioned word.  

**troubleshoot > troubleshoot > troubleshot.** So inflected. The erroneous past-tense and past-participial form *troubleshooted* sometimes appears, especially in AmE—e.g.: 

• “Throughout the evening she *troubleshooted* [read *troubleshot*], greeted guests, mounded the winning low bid on a set of top-notch golf clubs placed by mistake on the silent-auction table, and worried about how the crowd was responding to the new location.” Nancy Bartley, “Far East Gala II,” *Seattle Times*, 16 Sept. 1991, at C2. 

• “She’s budgeted, run elections outside the city, helped prepare tax bills, maintained vital records, taken County Board minutes, *troubleshooted* [read *troubleshot*] disputes, etc.” “Peoria County Clerk: JoAnn Thomas,” *Peoria J. Star*, 24 Oct. 1998, at A4. 

• “The approach to *troubleshooting* will vary slightly depending on whether it is a new system being commissioned or an old system being *troubleshooted* [read *troubleshot*].” Deon Reynders et al., *Practical Industrial Data Communications* 405 (2005). 

See irregular verbs. 

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*troubleshooted* for *troubleshoot*: Stage 1

Current ratio (troubleshoot vs. *troubleshooted*): 10:1


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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
trouper. See troop.

troupe. See troop.

trouper. See trouper.

troupeau /troy-soh or troo-soh/ (= the personal possessions that a woman brings with her into marriage) is an archaic word, to say the least. It has traditionally formed the French plural troupeaux in AmE and BrE alike. But since about 1970, troupeaux has made headway in AmE, while troupeaux has been somewhat in decline.

Current ratio (troupeaux vs. troupeaux): 2:1

truculence; *truculency. The first has been standard since about 1830. The second, though older in the language, is a NEEDLESS VARIANT that rarely appears.

Current ratio: 33:1

truculent = (1) cruel, savage; or (2) aggressively defiant; challengingly sulky; disagreeably feisty. Although sense 2 was once condemned as a SLIPSHOD EXTENSION, today it is the ordinary use—e.g.:

• “The Oilers acquired Edmonton native Brantt Myhres, a truculent left winger, from the Tampa Bay Lightning yesterday in exchange for a conditional draft pick.” Tim Wharnsby, "Errey Will Sign with Stars," Fin. Post, 17 July 1997, at 56.


Some usage books also condemn using truculent to mean "mercenary" or "base," but actual instances in which the word has those meanings are extremely rare.

*true facts. See fact (E).

*trump l’oeil. See trompe l’oeil.

truncheon. So spelled. See spelling (A).

trustee, n. A. And trusty. Trustee (/tras-tee/) = a person who, having a nominal title to property, holds it in trust for the benefit of one or more others (the beneficiaries). Trusty (/tras-tee/), n., is an Americanism meaning “a (trusted) convict or prisoner.” E.g.:

“Because five jail trustees, supervised by the St. John Sheriff’s Office, provided the labor, the addition cost taxpayers less than $12,000.” "Room to Grow," Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 19 Sept. 1997, at B1.

B. And executor. In the context of wills and estates, people are frequently confused about the difference between an executor and a trustee. The executor collects the decedent’s property, pays the debts, and hands over the remaining property to the people who are entitled to it under the will. A trustee becomes necessary only when the property must be held for a time because it cannot, for some reason, be handed over at once to the people entitled to it.

try and is, in AmE, a CASUALISM for try to—e.g.: "Mr. Kemp, who seemed intent on slowing his normally rapid speaking pace, accused the Administration of 'demagoguery' in using 'fear' to try and [read try to] panic older voters with charges that Republicans endanger the health of the Medicare program.” Francis X. Clines, “Candidates Stick to the Issues, Not Ducking the Touchy Ones,” N.Y. Times, 10 Oct. 1996, at A15. In BrE, however, try and is a standard idiom.

Current ratio (try vs. try and): 9:1
tsar. See czar.

T-shirt; t-shirt; tee shirt; *tee-shirt; *T-shirt. Although most writers prefer T-shirt (the predominant form since 1950), tee shirt is common and t-shirt acceptable (though it’s not recorded in most dictionaries). But the hyphenated *tee-shirt is so rare that it is properly labeled a NEEDLESS VARIANT. Forbes seems to be the only prominent publication that consistently uses the unhyphenated form *T-shirt—e.g.: “A charter airline called Hooters Air, owned by the restaurant chain known for its curvy waitresses in tight T-shirts [read T-shirts] and hot pants, will take off by midyear—featuring flight attendants garbed in clingy warm-up suits.” Aliya Sternstein, “Unfasten Your Seat Belts,” Forbes, 17 Feb. 2003, at 52.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 156:20:10:3:1

tubercular; tuberculous; tuberculoid; tuberculosis. Tubercular = (1) of, relating to, or involving tuberculosis <tubercular disease>; (2) caused by the tubercle bacillus <tubercular meningitis>; (3) having lesions that are or seem like tubercles <tubercular disease>; (2) caused by the tubercle bacillus <tubercular meningitis>; (3) having lesions that are or seem like tubercles <tubercular disease>; (2) caused by the tubercle bacillus <tubercular meningitis>. Tuberculoid = resembling or mimicking tuberculosis <tuberculoid leprosy>. Tuberculosis = having or covered by tubercles <tuberculoid skin>.

In short, tubercular is the broadest, most multifaceted term, and it was the most popular of the terms in the 19th century. In its two senses, tuberculous has been more commonly used in medical literature since 1900—hence tubercular meningitis was nearly 25 times as common as tubercular meningitis in 1960 and about 5 times as common in 2008. The most specific and least common terms are tuberculoid and tuberculosis.

As long as this bacterial disease (formerly known as consumption) inhabits the globe, we are going to need all four adjectives.

tubful. Pl. tubfuls—not *tubsful. See plurals (g).

Current ratio: 4:1

Tucsonan; *Tucsonian; *Tucsonite. The first is standard; the others are NEEDLESS VARIANTS. See DENIZEN LABELS.

Current ratio (Tucsonan vs. *Tucsonian): 5:1
tumbril; *tumbrel. Tumbril (= a cart designed esp. for farm use) is the standard spelling—and has been since 1820 or so in both AmE and BrE. The variant spelling *tumbrel, though accorded the primary status in many English-language dictionaries, has not clearly predominated in any variety of English since 1813.

Current ratio: 2:1

tunable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *tun-able. See MUTE E.

Current ratio: 13:1

tuna fish. Strictly speaking, tuna fish is redundant because tuna is invariably a fish. Many have complained about this issue, which first arose about 1914—e.g.: • “If he had his way, he would rid the world of ‘tuna fish.’ ‘What else can a tuna be?’ asks Anderson.” Robert L. Miller, “Letter from the Publisher,” Sports Illustrated, 9 July 1984, at 4.


In fact, though, the phrase (dating from the early 20th century) denotes a useful nuance: tuna fish is the type of processed, canned fish that is commonly served in sandwiches, whereas tuna typically refers to fresher types such as those found in seafood restaurants and sushi bars. Cf. apple cider.

tunnel, vb., makes tunneled and tunneling in AmE, tunneled and tunnelling in BrE. See SPELLING (8).

tu quoque /too kwoh-kwee/ (lit., “you also”) = a retor—
kind; accusing an accuser of a similar offense. Traditionally, the phrase serves as a noun—e.g.: • “Another element of Ehrenreich’s argument . . . can be summed up as tu quoque—or, you’re another.” Midge Decter, “Who Is Addicted to What?” Commentary, 1 Apr. 1994, at 53.

• “Such gatekeepers of the right as Irving Kristol and Robert Bartley bithly promote their flat-earth ideas with breathtaking intellectual dishonesty, and no amount of tu quoque can smear it away.” Todd Gitlin, “Up from Conservatism,” Wash. Monthly, 1 Sept. 1996, at 46.

The term is also frequently used as an adjective—e.g.: • “But Mr. Wheatcroft’s book is more than an extended tu quoque philippic against moralistic hypocrites in the West.” Herb Greer, “The Ottomans,” Nat’l Rev., 15 Aug. 1994, at 68.

• “They managed to outflank the court’s ban on tu quoque evidence (meaning, ‘If I am guilty, you are, too’), a stricture aimed at keeping Allied excesses, notably the mass bombing of German cities, out of the trial.” Robert Shnayerson, “Judgment at Nuremburg,” Smithsonian, 1 Oct. 1996, at 124.

And it’s awkwardly coming into use as a verb—e.g.: • “Retiring Sen. Dennis DeConcini at first declined to answer her question, finally tu quoque-ing her with the question, ‘What about your own pension, Miss Stahl?’” William F. Buckley Jr., “Pension Exposé Perfectly Timed,” Daily Oklahoman, 5 Nov. 1994, at 8.

• “Even the new scandal over Clinton’s shady ties to an Indonesian financial group, which date back to his early days in Arkansas politics, isn’t helping Dole, who has also taken enough money from foreign donors that the Clinton campaign, unable to deny the charges, can ’tu quoque’ the issue.” Joseph Sobran, “Not Different Enough,” News & Record (Greensboro), 27 Oct. 1996, at F4.

See LATINISMS.

turbid; turgid; turpid; torpid. Turbid = (of water) muddy, thick; (fig.) disordered. Turgid = swollen, distended, bloated, as with fluid—and by extension, it means “pompous.” Turpid is a rare word meaning “filthy, worthless”; it’s related to the word turpitude (= baseness, depravity). Torpid = dormant, sluggish, apathetic.

Turbid is sometimes erroneously displaced by turgid—e.g.: • “Is there some way for us in the media to escape the turgid [read turbid] river flowing from our cynical exploitation of Diana’s death and hypocritical lynch-mob reporting of Bill Clinton’s indiscretion?” Brandt Ayers, “Gossip Gone Mad Threatening to Hang the Media’s Credibility,” Charleston Gaz., 9 Sept. 1998, at A7.


• “Frazier serendipitously discovers (as I did as a boy, 60 years before) a stream in Montclair, N.J., called the Third River, which winds its tired way through suburban strip malls, mill towns, industrial wastelands, Environmental Protection Agency Superfund sites and turbid [read turbid] swamps to the Passaic River, Newark Bay and eventually the Atlantic Ocean.” E. William Smethurst Jr., “Ian Frazier’s Perfect Book on Fishing Is Quite a Catch,” Chicago Trib., 19 May 2002, Books §, at 4.

Turbid has two corresponding nouns: turbidity and turbidness. Although the OED gives preference to turbidness, the form turbidity appears hundreds of times as often in print sources, perhaps because of its resemblance to morbidity—e.g.: • “The fish were stressed in recent weeks by increases in water temperature and turbidity, he said.” “State Kills 3,500 Trout After Disease Spreads,” Baltimore Sun, 18 Aug. 1995, at C12.


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turgid misused for turbid: Stage 1
tureen; terrine. *Tureen* (/ˈtʊrən/) = a large lidded dish used for serving vegetables or soup. This has been the standard spelling since the early 18th century. Etymologically, it was a corruption of the French word terrine—influenced perhaps by the spelling of the Italian city Turin. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, terrine began to appear on French-influenced ethnic menus throughout the English-speaking world in the sense of either a food made of cooked meat, fish, or fruit and served in a usually loaf-shaped dish; or else the loaf-shaped dish itself. The words are now doubtfuls: they have more or less distinct meanings and forms even though they are etymologically identical (I own a soup *tureen* given to my parents at their wedding in 1951) <She frequently orders lamb-curry *terrine* at her favorite Moroccan restaurant>.


turgid; turpid. See turbid.

Turin; Torino. Since the 18th century, the anglicized name (or exonym) for the Italian city has been *Turin*—not *Torino*. We likewise say *Rome*, not *Roma*; *Florence*, not *Firenze*; *Venice*, not *Venezia*. Yet when NBC broadcast the Winter Olympics from *Turin* in 2006, all the broadcasters hewed to calling the city *Torino*. Perhaps it seemed more "authentic." Perhaps the exonym *Turin* was not considered well-enough known to English speakers with its anglicized name, or perhaps broadcasters were concerned that all the "Torino 2006" signs might confuse viewers. One wonders, though, what would happen if the site had been Venice or Florence.

Current ratio: 3:1

Turkmen. For a citizen of Turkmenistan, this is the standard term. The plural is *Turkmens*. See denizen labels.

Two archaic variants are *Turcoman* (prevalent from the 18th century to about 1875) and *Turkoman* (prevalent from about 1875 to 1950). They formed their plurals in -*man*s, not -*men*. *Turkmens* has been vastly predominant since about 1950.

Current ratio (Turkmans vs. Turkomans: 7:2:1

turnaround, 180-degree. See 180-degree turnaround.

tussah; tussore; tussar. A 16th-century Hindi loanword denoting a type of silk that first became widely popular in the late 19th century, *tussah* is the standard spelling in AmE; *tussore* in BrE; and *tussar* in Indian English. In World English, *tussah* has predominated since about 1990.

twilight; twilit. Though normally a noun, *twilight* can function as an adjective <her twilight years>. And in most contexts it’s better than *twilit*, which suggests (wrongly) that there’s a verb *to twilight*. But the form *twilit* is current and acceptable in the sense "lighted by twilight" <a twilit stadium>. Those who find that phrase strange-looking can always resort to a roundabout wording <a stadium illuminated by twilight>. *Twilighted* is nonstandard. Cf. light.

Current ratio (twilit vs. *twilighted*): 24:1

Twitter. One *tweets* or *sends a tweet* on Twitter, the social-media website. At least I do from time to time: @BryanAGarner.

two and two (is) (are). See subject–verb agreement (g).

twofold, threefold, fourfold, and the like should each be spelled as one word.

*two halves. See half (d).

two worst. See worst (b).

tying. So spelled—not *tieing. See tie.

Current ratio: 229:1

tyke (= [1] a mongrel dog, or [2] a child, esp. a small boy) is the standard spelling. *Tike* is a variant.

Current ratio (tykes vs. *tikes*): 4:1

tympanum. See timpani.

*tympanum* (the eardrum) forms the standard plural *tympana*—*tympanums* being a variant.

Current ratio (tympana vs. *tympanums*): 4:1

*tyne. See tine.

type. See class.

type of—like kind of, sort of, and variety of—is often used unnecessarily and inelegantly. But when the word *type* does appear, it must have its of—which is unfortunately dropped in the following examples. They are typical of the modern American colloquial trend:

- “Councilman Mike Tassin also opposed the project, saying this type person [read type of person] does not match others already in the area.” Adrian Angelette, “Rodeo Bar Development Reined In,” *Advocate* (Baton Rouge), 25 Mar. 1997, at B1.

For the phrase *these type of*, see *these kind of*. Cf. couple (c).

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*type person for type of person: Stage 3

Current ratio (type of person vs. *type person*): 18:1

typescript. See manuscript.

typhoon. See hurricane.

typing; typewriting. *Typing* is the standard term for operating an alphanumeric keyboard whether done on a typewriter, a computer, a PDA, or any other device. *Typewriting* refers to typing on a typewriter; on other devices it’s become an obsolescent variant. But *typewriting* continues to be a useful term for (1) the
act of operating a typewriter, or (2) the words physically printed on paper by a typewriter.

**typo** (= a typographical error) forms the plural **typos**.

**typographical; typographic.** Generally speaking, the first is preferred in both AmE and BrE—but each appears on both sides of the Atlantic. (See -ic.) In AmE, **typographical** is the usual choice when the following word begins with a vowel. It’s most often used in the set phrase **typographical error**.

**typography; topography.** **Typography** = the study and techniques of using type in printing, esp. as a designer or a typesetter. **Topography** = the three-dimensional shape of terrain. On occasion the first word gets misused for the second—e.g.: “The highest and best use of the property is the mining of limestone, says the appeal, *given the typography* [read topography], the high grade of plattin limestone deposits, the character of the surrounding property and the historic use of the subject property and the surrounding property.” Ralph Dummit, “Pressure Prompts Hearing on Quarry,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 12 Aug. 1998, St. Charles Post §, at 1.

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**topography** misused for **topography**: Stage 1

**tyrannical; tyrannous.** Though the senses often seem to merge, **tyrannical** means “of, relating to, or involving a tyrant,” while **tyrannous** means “of, relating to, or involving a tyranny.” **Tyrannical** is the more usual word in AmE and BrE alike. In the following example, it can be readily seen that a tyrant is being suggested: “Is Parks and Recreation Commissioner Harry Stern a tyrannical despot who deprives hobbyists of their natural right to troll for metallic treasure?” Rachel Malamud, “A Stern Confrontation,” Village Voice, 29 July 1997, at 26.

Yet here the two forms provoke suspicions of *ineligent variation: “As for white fears of tyrannical black governments (there is no shortage of examples from black-ruled Africa), need I remind him that the victims of these tyrannous regimes are predominantly black people?” Milton Allimadi, “Democracy in S. Africa,” Newsday (N.Y.), 6 Oct. 1990, at 14.

**tyrannize,** a verb introduced into the language in the 15th century, was originally an intransitive verb meaning “to exercise oppressive power” <he tyrannized over his people for two decades>. Since the late 19th century, the verb has more commonly been transitive in the sense “to oppress or rule over severely” <he tyrannized his people for two decades>.

**tyre.** See tire.

**tyro** (= a beginner, novice) is the standard spelling in AmE. **Tiro** predominates in BrE. Pl. **tyros** (or, in BrE, **tiros**). See **PLURALS (d)**.

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**U**

**U and Non-U.** See class distinctions.

**ugly** is sometimes used in the sense “ill-tempered, mean” <Mike is being ugly again>. The OED dates **ugly** in the sense “cross, angry” from the 17th century, with examples up to the 19th century. **Ugly customer** (= a person who is difficult to deal with or likely to cause trouble) appears in Charles Dickens’s Martin Chuzzlewit (1844) and several other 19th-century sources.

**ukase** (/yoo-kays/ or /yoo-kays/), originally a Russian term, meant literally “a decree or edict, having the force of law, issued by the Russian emperor or government” (OED). By extension it has come to mean “any proclamation or decree, esp. of a final or arbitrary nature.” E.g.: “Robert Landauer, former editorial page editor of The Oregonian, says citizens see the planning as growing out of a participatory process and not from **ukases** issued by professional planners.” E.J. Dionne, “Portland Has Cut Through Obstacles to Make Urban Planning Work,” News & Record (Greensboro), 1 June 1997, at F4.

**ukulele.** Preferably so spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *ukelele (a variant spelling perhaps influenced by the clipped form uke (/yook/)). See spelling (a).

Current ratio: 8:1

**ulna** (= the inner bone of the lower arm), perhaps because it appears mostly in technical contexts, forms the plural **ulnae** (/al-nee/) much more often than **ulnas**.

Current ratio: 4:1

**ult.** See inst.

**ultimate destination.** See destination.

**ultimately** = (1) in the end <she ultimately changed her mind>; (2) basically; fundamentally <the two words are ultimately related>. Cf. penultimate.

**ultimatum.** Pl. **ultimatums.** The native plural -ums has long been considered preferable to the Latinate *ultimates*, which has been comparatively uncommon in print sources since about 1900. E.g.: “The 49ers president delivered an ultimatum to a town that doesn’t
respond to *ultimata* [read *ultimatum*].” Ray Ratto, “This Ultimatum Goes Against Team Policy,” S.F. Examiner, 12 Feb. 1997, at D1. See PLURALS (b). Current ratio: 7:1

**umbo** (= a rounded protuberance in the middle of a shield) forms the plural *umbones* (/ˈom-boh-niz/) — not *umbos*.

Current ratio: 2:1

**umlaut; diaeresis.** These words denote the same mark consisting of two raised dots (´) placed over a vowel, but they serve different phonetic functions. An umlaut (pronounced /oom-laut/) indicates that the vowel has a modified sound—especially in German, as in *Männer* (pronounced /men-ner/). Generally, when an umlaut is omitted from a German word or name, an e is inserted after the vowel that had the umlaut—so, for example, *Göthe* becomes *Goethe* and *Münster* becomes *Muenster*. A diaeresis (pronounced /dt-er-a-sis/ and sometimes spelled *dièresis*) indicates that the second of two adjacent vowels is pronounced separately, as in *naïve*.

But the distinction is largely academic: even with modern word-processing capabilities, these marks are often omitted. See DIACRITICAL MARKS.

**umpteenth** is sometimes misspelled *umteenth*—e.g.: “A House subcommittee is at work on Virginia’s *umteenth* [read *umteenth*] study of campaign-finance reform.” “Campaign-Finance Reform: Mandate Disclosure,” *Virginian-Pilot & Ledger Star* (Norfolk), 8 Aug. 1996, at A18.

Current ratio: 287:1

**unable.** See incapable.

*unadvisable.* See inadvisable.

**unalienable.** See inalienable.

**unalterable; *inalterable.*** The first is standard. The second is a NEEDLESS VARIANT.

Current ratio: 16:1

**unanimous** appears in various redundant phrases, such as *unanimously of one opinion, *entirely unanimous, and *completely unanimous. See ADJECTIVES (b) & REDUNDANCY.

**unapt.** See inapt.

**unartistic.** See inartistic.

**unavoidable.** See ADJECTIVES (b).

**unaware; unawares.** Properly, *unaware* is the adjective <I am unaware of that book> and *unawares* the adverb <the rainstorm caught us unawares>. Hence *taken unaware and *caught unaware are mistakes for the SET PHRASES *taken unawares and *caught unawares, both of which have a continuous literary tradition in AmE and BrE from the 18th century. E.g.:

- “Reportedly, he has had the ailments for months but the Flyers were caught unaware [read unawares],” Nancy L. Marrapese, “Burning Ambition,” *Boston Globe*, 28 Sept. 1997, at E13.

**unbeknown; unbeknownst.** George P. Krapp suggested that both forms are humorous, colloquial, and dialectal. *A Comprehensive Guide to Good English* 602 (1927). The *COD* likewise suggests that both are colloquial. Eric Partridge and John Simon have written, in conformity with the *OED*, that unbeknown is preferred over the dialectal unbeknownst.

These inconsistent pronouncements serve as confusing guides. We can perhaps accept as British orthodoxy the *COD’s* suggestion that in BrE the forms are colloquial (for *unknownt*). In AmE, neither can really be called dialectal or colloquial, since the words are essentially literary. In current AmE usage, unbeknownst far outranges unbeknown in frequency, and it must therefore be considered at least acceptable. But unbeknownst, like other -st forms (e.g., whilst, amidst), seems to come less naturally to AmE. So there’s something to be said for preferring unbeknown—e.g.:

- “Unbeknown to her, though, Christmas was the day a curse transformed him from a handsome but vain young prince into the ugly, angry Beast.” Susan King, “The Untold Chapter,” *L.A. Times*, 13 Nov. 1997, at F41.
- “Unbeknown to the participants—either before or after—for some of the people, slipped into twenty of their thirty sets was a word linked to the negative aspects of ageing—words like old, lonely, grey, forgetful, retired, etc. The other participants, again quite unbeknown to them, saw only neutral words not linked to ageing.” Ian Robertson, *The Winner Effect: How Power Affects Your Brain* 90 (2012).

See DIACRITICAL MARKS.

From 1800 to about 1968, unbeknown was the predominant form in AmE print sources, and it was predominant in BrE till about 2000. Since then, unbeknownst has grown in frequency of occurrence and surpassed its rival. Though it shows no signs of retreating, it has not yet reached Stage 5 because some worthy opinion-makers still wrinkle their noses.

**Language-Change Index**

unbeknownst for unbeknown: Stage 4

Current ratio (unbeknownst vs. unbeknown): 3:1

**umteenth** (read *umteenth*) when
uncategorically. See categorically (b).

uncategorical. See adjectives (b).

*uncategorically is a silly but distressingly common malapropism for categorically (= unconditionally, without qualification). Having first appeared about 1900 and spread during the latter half of the 20th century, it came to national prominence in 1991. Testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Judge Clarence Thomas “uncategorically” denied that he had discussed pornographic materials with Ms. Anita Hill: “Senator, I would like to start by saying unequivocally, un categorically, that I deny each and every single allegation against me today.” The Thomas Nomination,” N.Y. Times, 13 Oct. 1991, § 1, at 12.

Even by then, the illogically formed nonword had already made its way into print—e.g.: “‘I adore Rourke,’ Jean-Pierre Wagneur says uncategorically [read categorically].” Alessandra Stanley, “Can 50 Million Frenchmen Be Wrong?” N.Y. Times, 21 Oct. 1990, § 6, at 41. Cf. *unmercilessly & *unrelentlessly.

unbroken. See atheist.

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uncertainty. See uncertainty.

uncharted (= unmapped), as in uncharted territory, is often wrongly written unchartered. Although the erroneous form is not nearly as common as the correct one, it has been gradually spreading since the mid-1970s—e.g.:

• “He believes this latest frontier in communications is an uncharted [read unchartered] territory bound to attract Wild West-type outlaws.” Stephen Rodrick, “Cyberstoned,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 22 May 1995, at A10.

• “This was not the Africa of Tarzan lore, my friend. Rather, it was unchartered [read uncharted] territory, a presentation of a dignified Africa.” Rhonda Chriss Lokeman, “From Africa, with Love,” Kansas City Star, 20 June 1995, at B7.

• “The benefits of moving into uncharted [read uncharted] territory are often weighed up against the perceived dangers of allowing such open-ended opportunities to emerge.” Beginning Teachers: Reviewing Disastrous Lessons 23 (Michael Crowhurst ed., 2015).

An airplane might be uncharted if it had no scheduled flights. But unknown territory is uncharted, not unchartered. Cf. chartered plane.

An airplane might be uncharted if it had no scheduled flights. But unknown territory is uncharted, not unchartered. Cf. chartered plane.

Language-Change Index

uncharted misused for uncharted: Stage 1

Current ratio (uncharted waters vs. unchartered waters): 13:1

uncommunicative; *incommunicative. The former has been standard since about 1800. The latter is a needless variant. Current ratio: 13:1

uncomparable. See incomparable.

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uncomparably (= unreasonably, unscrupulously, outrageously) is sometimes misused for unconscionably or unselfconsciously—e.g.: “Educated speakers who unconscionably [read unconsciously or unselfconsciously] say ‘It is me’ generally shy away from ‘It is him’, ‘It is her’, ‘It is us’, and the like.” Norman Lewis, Better English 186 (rev. ed. 1961) (in which the author argues that “It is me” is “established, acceptable English”). See conscionable.

unconscious; subconscious. These words are most commonly adjectives. Unconscious = (1) lacking consciousness; senseless <the blow knocked him unconscious>; (2) unaware <she was unconscious of the danger>; (3) not perceived by oneself <an unconscious slip of the tongue>; or (4) not done on purpose; unintentional <an unconscious slight>. Sub conscious = not fully or wholly conscious <a subconscious motive>.

But the words are also synonymous nouns meaning “the part of the human psyche that is inaccessible to consciousness and that is largely dominated by repressed desires and experiences that can’t be recalled.” Professional psychologists “tend to use the term ‘unconscious’ in preference to ‘subconscious’ nowadays. . . . [But] the preferred lay term seems to be ‘subconscious’.” Donald Watson, A Dictionary of Mind and Spirit 326 (1991).

unconstitutional. See nonconstitutional.

uncontrollable; *incontrollable. The former has been standard since the 17th century. The latter is a needless variant. Current ratio: 207:1

Uncountables. See count nouns and mass nouns.

uncovered is often ambiguous. It may mean (1) “not covered” <because they forgot to put up the tarp, the plants were completely uncovered throughout the storm>; or (2) “having had the cover removed” <the winds blew the tarp and uncovered the plants>. Hence, to say the plants were uncovered during the storm creates an ambiguity.

unctuous (/əŋk-choo-əs/) is so spelled. *Uncious (/əŋ-shəs/) is a not-uncommon mispronunciation
and misspelling based on *unction—e.g.: “Most unbelievably *unctious [read *unctious]: Ginger Spice of the Spice Girls, after winning Best Dance Video: ‘Lady Diana had real girl-power.’” Jim Sullivan, “MTV Awards: The Show, the Sex, the Stupidity,” Boston Globe, 5 Sept. 1997, at C16.

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*unctuous* misspelled *unctious*: Stage 1

Current ratio: 68:1

_undeniably_. See clearly.

**underestimate** is often misused for *overestimate* when writers intend the phrase *impossible to overestimate*. The misuse renders the phrase illogical, even ludicrous—e.g.:  
- “Claiming ‘it’s impossible to underestimate’ [read *overestimate*] the timidity of professors,’ Mansfield [Harvey C. Mansfield Jr.] worries that too many scholars are studiously avoiding teaching the hot topics of the day,” Anthony Flint, “Mansfield’s Leaving Would Be Harvard’s Loss,” Boston Globe, 6 June 1993, at 41.
- “‘It is impossible to underestimate [read *overestimate*] the amount of damage the health care bill did in shaping the image of President Clinton as a big-government proponent,’ Mr. From said at a news conference.” Richard L. Berke, “Centrist Democrats’ Poll Warns Clinton of Unrest,” N.Y. Times, 18 Nov. 1994, at A10.
- “If we venture beyond the belief that war is determined by structural factors outside human control, it is impossible to *underestimate* [read *overestimate*] the importance of political norms for handling conflict.” Susan G. Sample, “Military Buildups: Arming and War,” in *What Do We Know About War?* 165, 191 (John A. Vasquez ed., 2000).

This error is akin to using *could care less for couldn’t care less*. See *couldn’t care less* & *illogical*.

Sometimes, though, the writer really means *underestimate*—e.g.: “A little subtlety would have greatly enhanced ‘Hamburger Hill’ potential for tragic irony, but the film makers are rigorously dedicated to the proposition that it’s impossible to underestimate the intelligence of moviegoers.” Kevin Thomas, “‘Hamburger Hill’: On the Lean Side,” L.A. Times, 28 Aug. 1987, § 6, at 1.

**Language-Change Index**

*impossible to underestimate for impossible to overestimate*: Stage 2

Current ratio (impossible to overestimate vs. *impossible to underestimate*): 7:1

_underhanded; underhand_, adj. The shorter form is much older <underhand dealings>—having become established in the early 18th century—but *underhanded* spread in the 19th century and is now about twice as common. It must be accepted as standard—e.g.: “Partisans accused each other of unnecessary delay and *underhanded* negotiating tactics.” Jeff Mayers & Mike Flaherty, “Senate GOP Could OK Budget Deal,” Wis. State J., 20 Sept. 1997, at B1. Increasingly, *underhand* is confined to literal senses <because he hurt his shoulder, the tennis champion is temporarily having to use an underhand serve>.

**Language-Change Index**

*underhanded for underhand*: Stage 5

Current ratio (*underhanded tactics vs. underhand tactics*): 2:1

_underlay, n._; _underlayment_. Denoting material placed under a structure, as for support, or under a floor covering or rooftop, *underlay* is the traditional noun, dating from the 14th century. It is the noun in BrE. *Underlayment*, dating from 1949, is an Americanism that since 1970 has surpassed the old form in frequency of occurrence in AmE. But there the close linguistic rivalry continues—and lexicographers are said to be placing long-term wagers on one form or the other. My guess is that *underlayment* will be uncontested in AmE one day before long and that BrE will follow suit about 30 years later. But linguistic predictions are notoriously unreliable.

**underlie; underlay**, vb. *Underlie* is so spelled.

*Underly* is an infrequent blunder—e.g.:  
- “They [want to restore] principles that some, maybe even most, people believe to *underly* [read *underlie*] the cornerstone of our cultures: human relationships, love, marriage.” Susan E. Foley, “Fearmongering,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 15 May 1997, at A9.
- “It is this belief, as well as other beliefs that devalue women and support male privilege and entitlement, that *underly* [read *underlies*] the violent behavior.” Paul Lee, “Domestic Violence,” Oregonian (Portland), 9 Aug. 1997, at C7. (On the reason for using the singular verb, see Subject—Verb Agreement (e.).)
- “Monocultures of the mind, like agricultural monocultures, are vulnerable to parasitisation or sudden collapses to a degree that biodiverse systems are not; and as Robert Ulanowicz argues, apparently ‘irrational’ associations and even ‘mistakes’ seem to *underly* [read *underlie*] much human creativity.” David W. Kidder, *Nature and Experience in the Culture of Delusion* 263 (2012) (footnotes omitted).

Writers fall into the error because they more commonly see the adjectival participle *underlying* than the uninflected verb.

*Underlay* is properly the past tense of *underlie*—e.g.: “Atkins gets the doggedness, the country-boy simplicity that *underlay* Dunne’s unquestioning devotion to duty, as well as the fay quality of his madness.” Marianne Evett, “Irishman’s Story a Poignant Tragedy,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 11 May 1997, Arts §, at 21. But the word is sometimes used wrongly for *underlie*—e.g.: “As the ground thaws in the spring, the moisture is kept from draining downward by the *underlaying* [read *underlying*] ice.” "Beleaguered Vermont Endures Rite of Spring," Providence J.-Bull., 6 Apr. 1997, at B2. As with the root verbs *lie* and *lay*, errors with the past tense and past participle are myriad—e.g.: “Under such circumstances, it was almost

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

1. underlie misspelled *underly*: Stage 1 currents ratio (underlie the vs. *underly the*): 72:1
2. underlay misused for underlie: Stage 1 Current ratio (the underlying rock vs. *the underlaying rock*): 1,351:1

**undermine.** See circumvent.

**undersigned, n.** Eric Partridge said that this attributive noun <the undersigned agrees to the following terms and conditions> is “permissible in law; affected or tediously jocular elsewhere” (*U & A* terms and conditions> is “permissible in law; affected or tediously jocular elsewhere)” (U & A at 340). But even in law it’s a silly way of avoiding the first person.

**UNDERSTOOD WORDS** are common in English, and they usually aren’t very troublesome if we can mentally supply them. Often they occur at the outset of sentences. More important is short for what is more important; as pointed out earlier is short for as was pointed out earlier.

In a compound sentence, parts of a verb phrase can carry over from the first verb phrase to the second, in which they are understood: “Gorbachev has demanded that Lithuania suspend the declaration of independence before the blockade can be lifted and talks begun.” (That sentence is considerably more elegant than it would have been if the second verb phrase had appeared in full: *talks can be begun*.)

On verbs supposedly “understood” whose absence detracts from clarity, see be-verbs (A).

**under the circumstances.** See circumstances (A).

**underway; under way.** Some dictionaries record the term as two words when used adverbially, one word when used as an adjective preceding the noun *underway refueling*. In the phrases get underway (= to get into motion) and *be* underway (= to be in progress), the term is increasingly made one word, and it would be convenient to make that transformation, which has been underway since the 1960s, complete in all uses of the word.

*Under weigh for underway is a visual malapropism undoubtedly based on a mistaken association with the nautical phrase *to weigh anchor*—e.g.:


• “After all, the life dynamic at play aboard a sailing ship under weigh [read underway] is trust.” Mark McGarrity, “Joining the Sail Century,” *Star-Ledger* (Newark), 30 June 2000, at 1.

This error is nothing new: it has occurred with some frequency since the mid-18th century. Cf. *aweight*.

Although most other compound words starting with *under-* are closed, until recently the major newspaper style manuals still made *underway* two words. That changed in 2013 when the *AP Stylebook*—used by most U.S. newspapers—accepted it as one word in all uses.

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*under weigh for underway: Stage 2 Current ratio (get underway vs. *get under weigh*): 7:1

• *undistinguishable.** See *indistinguishable.

**undocumented alien.** See illegal immigrant.

**undocumented immigrant.** See illegal immigrant.

*undoubtedly* is an archaic nonword equivalent to the standard *undoubtedly* or *indubitably*. E.g.: “As quarterback Damian Poalucci begins his final campaign against New Haven Saturday, he’s also starting a season where he will undoubtedly [read undoubt-edly] be the Warriors’ most-watched player—by opponents and fans alike.” Jeff Schuler, “Poalucci Has Gaudy Numbers to Live Up To,” *Morning Call* (Allentown, Pa.), 12 Sept. 1997, at S9. See *doubtlessly. Cf. supposedly.*

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*undoubtedly for undoubtedly: Stage 1 Current ratio (undoubtedly vs. *undoubtedly*: 87:1

undoubtedly. See *doubtlessly & clearly.*

**undue alarm** is not always an illogical phrase—e.g.: “Committee Chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), sponsor of the legislation, said the CFTC was reacting to the legislation, said the CFTC was reacting with ‘perhaps undue alarm.’” Mike Dorning, “Futures Overseer Fights Plan to Ease Regulation,” *Chicago Trib.*, 12 Feb. 1997, Bus. §, at 1 (implying that some amount of alarm might be justified). But it usually does signal illogic—e.g.:

- “To prevent *undue alarm*, Wednesday’s test [tornado-warning system] will occur only if weather conditions are fair.” “Metro Report,” *Dallas Morning News*, 10 Dec. 1996, at A24. (And if fair weather comes, only the right amount of alarm will occur?)
uneconomic, to one unskilled in accounting, may seem like an oxymoron. The term refers to income derived from investments as opposed to wages.

strictly speaking, un economical should be the antonym of economical (= using resources carefully and without waste) and noneconomic the antonym of economic (= of, relating to, or involving trade, industry, and monetary policy and performance). That is the position in AmE—the two polarities just described. *Uneconomic is a needless variant of both words.

But in BrE, curiously, un economic has been the predominant antonym of economical since the early 20th century <large cars are un economic to run>. E.g.: “Manifestly un economic [read un economical] projects have been pursued . . . . Lavish spending on the new federal capital, Abuja, is at odds with economic [correct] realities.” “Aid and Reform in Nigeria,” Fin. Times, 6 Jan. 1992, at 10. But given that un economical has grown close to un economic in their BrE rivalry, one can justifiably hope that the anomalously missing -al from the negative form in that variety of the language will soon be restored. See economical (A).

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1. uneconomic for un economical (AmE): Stage 1
2. uneconomic for un economical (BrE): Stage 4

unenforceable; *nonenforceable. The first is standard in AmE and BrE alike. The second is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 100:1

unequivocal; *unequivocable. The adjective equivocal (= deliberately unclear in conveying information or opinion) was first used as an English word in the mid-16th century. By the mid-18th century, the antonym unequivocal (= completely clear and without possibility of doubt) had come into use. By 1800, the two terms occurred in print sources with almost equal frequency. Since the 1940s in AmE and the 1960s in BrE, the negative term unequivocal has occurred with greater frequency than equivocal.

In the mid-19th century, the mistaken form *unequivocable first appeared. It became more and more widespread during the 20th century, reaching its zenith of popularity in the early 1980s. It has tapered off significantly since then, perhaps with the rise of spell-checkers. Fortunately, it has never seriously rivaled the correct adverb unequivocally.

Unequivocal is pronounced /әn-i-kwiv-әl/. Cf. *inimicable (discussed at inimical).

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*unequivocable for unequivocal: Stage 1
Current ratio (unequivocal vs. *unequivocable): 674:1

unessential. See nonessential.

unexceptionable; *unexceptional. Unexceptionable (= not objectionable) is historically the far more usual term. E.g.: “The imperial Chinese went so far as to dub their country ‘the Middle Kingdom’ so as to reflect what to them seemed an unexceptional truth.” Paul Campos, “Self-Absorption American-Style,” Rocky Mountain News (Denver), 11 Dec. 2001, at A33.

Unexceptional (= not unusual) didn’t come into common use until the mid-19th century. It now occurs with almost equal frequency. E.g.: “Outfielder Matt Lawdon is fine but unexceptional.” Rod Beaton, “Yankees Land Their Men Again,” USA Today, 14 Dec. 2001, at C7. See exceptional (A).

*unexpressive. See inexpressive.

*unfeasi lable. See infeasible.

*unfrequent. See infrequent.

unhappily. See happily.

uniform. See adjectives (B).

unintentional murder. See murder (B).

uninterest. See disinterest.

uninterested. See disinterested.

unique. Strictly speaking, unique means “being one of a kind,” not “unusual.” Hence the phrases *very unique, *quite unique, *how unique, and the like are slovenly. The OED notes that this tendency to hyperbole—to use unique when all that is meant is “uncommon, unusual, remarkable”—began in the 19th century. However old it is, the tendency is worth resisting.

Unless the thing is the only one of its kind, rarity does not make it unique. For instance, if a thing is one in a million, logically there would be two things in two million. Rare indeed but not unique.

So because uniqueness, unlike rarity, is an absolute quality, something cannot logically be more or less unique than something else—any more than it could be especially complete. But some modifiers can justifiably be paired with unique—e.g.
unkept

unkept. A. Sense and Use. Unkept is often said to be a word with a “lost positive,” one of those interesting negatives without a corresponding positive word (cf. discombobulate, disgruntled, nondescript). That is, the word kempt is thought to be obsolete while unkept thrives. (Perhaps this says something about the state of the world.) Unkept means “uncombed, disheveled” (another word with a lost positive), although some of the earliest uses from the 14th century were figurative: unkept rhymes and unkept words. By the 18th century, most uses were literal: unkept hair, unkept locks, unkept fellows, unkept cotton. By the 19th century, the word took on broader senses of untidiness and applied to other things, such as clothes and farms.

The degree to which kempt is a lost positive is greatly overstated. Although Will traces the word back only to 1929, in fact it has appeared in print sporadically from the late 18th century, usually in the phrases well-kempt, ill-kempt, more kempt, and less kempt. These uses have steadily appeared up to the present day.


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Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
Most commonly, *unkempt* appears (quite appropriately) in phrases such as *unkempt hair*, *unkempt commitments*, and *unkempt vows*—e.g.: “The *unkempt* vow involves the company's stated intent to make its wildly popular AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) software work with other instant-messaging programs.” Steven Levy, “Time for an Instant Fix,” Newsweek, 30 Sept. 2002, at 38.

But the erroneous usage has become fairly common—e.g.:


These sentences, however, don't reflect prevailing usage. In identical contexts—those involving beards, hair, appearance, and hygiene generally—*unkept* remains about 100 times as common as *unkempt*. The gap has increased. In an October 2002 search of the AllNews database in Westlaw, *unkempt* occurred in the context of beards, hair, appearance, or hygiene only 70 times in a whole decade (1992–2002), while *unkept* occurred 3,456 times. E.g.: “Reid tried to board an American Airlines flight, but his *unkept* appearance and lack of baggage prompted airline security to question him closely, and he missed his flight.” “Bomb Suspect Offers Guilty Plea,” Wash. Post, 3 Oct. 2002, at A1.

Apart from the sonic similarity, it's perfectly possible to retrace how the confusion arose. You *keep house*; you *keep up your yard*. If you don't do these things, your house looks *unkempt* (that's where the extension started)—e.g.: “Officer Jerry Fogt . . . said that the inside of the house was dirty and *unkept*.” Lisa Perry, started)—e.g.: “Officer Jerry Fogt . . . said that the inside of the house was dirty and ‘unkept.’” Dayton Daily News, 19 Dec. 2000, at A1. Notice that the journalist used quotation marks around what she probably took as a person’s surroundings are *unkept* said to be poor usage.

The word is premised on the analogy of letting a threatening or vicious animal off a leash. But a surprising number of writers have misunderstood that what happened in the primary campaign. “Carl Wolter couldn't have picked a better time to *unlease* a fiery temper at managers who fail to make budget.” Eric N. Berg, “Suntrust's Florida Ambitions,” N.Y. Times, 24 Nov. 1986, at D1.

The mind can be an incredible tool with the power to *unlease* much-needed lessons on those who persecute others.” Roger Hurlburt, “Matilda's a Witty Tale of Mischief,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 2 Aug. 1996, Showtime §, at 5.

Though some critics have called the phrase a “gaucherie” and worse, *unlike* in—in which *unlike* takes on an adverbial sense—is now common in AmE and BrE alike. Of all the instances in which *unlike* appears, it is followed by *in* about 2% of the time—meaning, statistically, that it's quite frequent. E.g.:

- “Britain's Department of Trade and Industry is set today to propose new rules for the country's auditing industry, but *unlike in* the U.S. it won't go so far as to ban a company's auditors from providing some nonaudit services.” Silvia Ascarelli & Marc Champion, “Deals & Deal Makers: U.K. to Propose New Set of Rules for Audit Industry,” Wall Street J., 29 Jan. 2003, at C5.
- “*Unlike in* the days after the election, there was no grappling for meaning last night.” Brigid Schulte, “Love Flows for Morella at Tribute to 24 Years,” Wash. Post, 30 Jan. 2003, at B1.

In those examples, there's almost an elliptical what happened after *unlike*, so that the full phrase is *unlike what happened in the primary, in the U.S., or in the
days after the election. This rationale may ultimately justify the phrasing. But careful writers will avoid it because some percentage of informed readers consider it poor usage.

As a matter of frequency in print sources, the phrase first appeared in the late 18th century, spread throughout the 19th century (especially in AmE), declined in the mid-20th century, and has undergone a resurgence since about 1970. It may yet lose any stigma attaching to it.

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 unlike in: Stage 4

*unmercilessly is a malapropism and nonword on the order of *uncategorically. It emerged and began spreading in the late 19th century. Mercilessly, of course, is the word, or unmercifully—e.g.:


• "They were joined in their crime by the 'slashers' who cut away at the film gem unmercilessly [read mercilessly], undoubtedly to make room for all the commercials in its two-hour time slot." L.A. Times, 24 Dec. 1989, TV Times §, at 2.


Cf. *uncategorically & *unrelentlessly.

Though it is a syllable longer than mercilessly, unmercifully also suffices—e.g. "And still, Stevie Wonder seemed intent on taking his sweet, soulful time, teasing us unmercifully, making us sweat for his presence." Patricia Smith, "He's Still a Wonder to Behold," Boston Globe, 4 Jan. 1995, at 53.

unmercilessly. See illegible.

unreason; unreasonableness; *unreasonability. Unreason = lack of reason; irrationality. Unreasonableness = (1) the quality of going beyond what is reasonable or equitable; or (2) an act not in accordance with reason or good sense. *Unreasonability is a needless variant of unreasonable.

*unrelentlessly is a 19th-century solemnis for either unrelentingly or relentlessly. Ironically, this nonword literally suggests just the opposite of the intended meaning—e.g.:

• "He has unrelentlessly [read relentlessly or, better, faithfully] served as a committee person involved in parks and recreation, fire prevention, police and emergency services, highway management, budget control and youth and school advisory committees." Letter of Larry E. Rice, "Change Dewitt Leader," Post-Standard (Syracuse), 19 Oct. 1995, at 15.

• "This prime minister [Benjamin Netanyahu] is still under the shadow of public opinion, and the opposition will unrelentlessly [read unreliently or relentlessly] continue to fight against him through legal, moral and political means." Amos Perlmutter, "Dodging a Mis-guided Political Fusillade," Wash. Times, 22 Apr. 1997, at A14.

Cf. *uncategorically & *unrelentlessly.

unreligious. See irreligious.

unremorsefully. See remorselessly (A).

unresponsive; nonresponsive; *irresponsive. The general, most prevalent term has been widely used since the late 19th century: unresponsive = not reacting to or affected by something. Nonresponsive, most frequently a legal term, means "(of an answer to a question, esp. while under oath) not directly answering the question asked." *Irresponsive is a needless variant of the other two.

unrevokable. See irrevocable.

unrivalled. The first has been standard AmE since about 1930. The second has been standard BrE since about 1710. See spelling (B).

unsalable; unsaleable; *unsellable. The standard spellings are unsalable in AmE and unsaleable in BrE. (See MUTE E.) *Unsellable has never been a standard spelling. Cf. salable.

unsanitary; insanitary. The first is now the usual form in AmE. Insanitary is a variant with slightly more negative connotations. That is, if a place is unsanitary it is merely dirty, but if it is insanitary it’s so dirty that it is likely to endanger health.
unsailable. See dissatisfied.

unsolvable. See insoluble.

*unsatisfactory; insubstantial. See insubstantial.

unsupportable; insupportable. Both forms are standard and have been since they were first recorded in English in the 16th century. Unsupportable is about twice as common as insupportable in American journalistic sources—e.g.: “[A]dding $212 a month for health insurance to food, transportation, and housing costs in this high-cost state might well prove an unsupportable burden.” Editorial, “What’s with This Health Law?” Boston Globe, 29 Dec. 2006, at A14.

But insupportable is about six times as common as unsupportable in World English. It appears regularly in edited text—e.g.: “[O]ne can only admire Hood for the effort she makes in this book to describe an insupportable grief.” Julie Wittes Schlack, “Learning to Live After Losing a Child,” Boston Globe, 18 Jan. 2007, at E6. For now, insupportable has the distinct edge in word frequency.

untenable; untenantable. Untenable means “indefensible” (figuratively) as well as “unable to be occupied.” Untenantable means “not capable of being occupied or lived in” <untenantable apartment units>. In speech, many people say untenantable when they mean untenable.

until. In the phrase *up until, the up is superfluous, though it’s common in speech. Use either until or up to—e.g.: “Up until [read Until] about 30 years ago, Sisters of Mercy were the teachers; today, lay teachers dominate.” Kym Soper, “St. James School Celebrating 75th Anniversary,” Hartford Courant, 7 Aug. 1997, at 1. See till.

*unthink the time when is verbose for until: “He renounced the whole of womankind until the time when” [read until] he met the sweet little daughter of the innkeeper.” Jaroslav Hasek, The Red Commissar 252 (Cecil Parrott trans., 1981). This proximity has occurred especially in BrE since the late 18th century.

untrammeled (= unfettered; free) has been predominantly so spelled in AmE from 1900. In BrE, the final consonant is doubled: untrammelled. A trammel is a restraint in the form of a net or shackle. E.g.: “When Bush leaves office . . . , the radical theory of untrammeled executive power propounded by his administration will leave, too,” Richard Just, “House Hold,” New Republic, 12 Mar. 2008, at 2.

The traditional sense can be stretched too far—e.g.: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Wilderness Act of 1964, 16 U.S.C. § 1311(c). Perhaps the drafters were thinking of untrampled. A better word choice might have been unchanged, or some such word.

Unfortunately, and perhaps because of its sanction in that statute, this new “green” sense of untrammeled is trampling on the word’s traditional sense—e.g.: • “[Sara] Thomas understands the love of untrammeled [read wilderness] spaces.” Sharon Gittleman, “Livingston County: Observers to Peek at Wilderness Habitat,” Detroit Free Press, 13 May 2007, News §, at 4.

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untrammeled misused for untrampled or unspoiled: Stage 1

untrod(den). See tread.

*untypical. See atypical.

unwed. See wed.

unwieldy, an adjective meaning “difficult to handle” <unwieldy packages>, often seems to be mistaken for an adverb ending in -by—e.g.: • “And it doesn’t require an unwieldy [read unwieldy], lengthy tournament to improve the situation.” Mark Kiszla, “Nittany Lions Left with Whine, Roses,” Denver Post, 3 Jan. 1995, at C1.

See spelling (A).

Current ratio (unwieldy vs. *unwieldy): 51:1

upmost. See utmost.


Although some will argue that the two are interchangeable and the choice is just a question of euphony, rarely will upon prove more euphonious or natural. On is the shorter, simpler, and more direct preposition. See on.

Yet upon is quite justifiable when the sense is “on the occasion of,” or “when (something) occurs”—e.g.: • “Upon disembarking from their chartered plane and boarding the team bus on the tarmac, they proceeded to have a fender bender—with a 727.” “Major League Log,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 17 July 1997, at D3.
• “Upon her return, she perused the leaderboard closely, finding she was still on top.” Michael Madden, “Harvey,
uprighteous is a portmanteau word, a combination of upright and righteous—e.g.: “You may recall the uproar over Atlanta pitcher John Rocker and his lowly opinions of New York City and its inhabitants. It was hardly an original view, but he said it to a magazine reporter, and the uprighteous sky fell on him.” Blackie Sherrod, “Athletes Can Swallow Their Feet,” Dallas Morning News, 3 May 2001, at A19. Few dictionaries recognize it, but W2 records it as an adjective and W3 as an adverb (uprightously). It’s fairly rare today.

upstairs, adj., as in upstairs bedroom, is sometimes wrongly made either *upstairs or *upstair’s. The false possessive is the more grievous error—e.g.: “Within hours of her move there, the third fire broke out in an upstairs’ [read upstairs] bedroom, authorities said.” Colin Poitras, “Prosecution Rests in Arson Case,” Hartford Courant, 19 July 1996, at B3. Cf. downstairs.

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*upstair’s bedroom for upstairs bedroom: Stage 1

up-to-date should be hyphenated as an adjective, unhyphenated as an adverb. Hence, “Once the log is brought up to date, we will have an up-to-date log.”

up to now is a comfortably idiomatic equivalent of heretofore and hitherto—e.g.:

- “So why did Gaffney, up to now a staunch supporter of the deal and a close ally of the governor, create what is likely to be three months of political pandemonium?” Rick Brand, “Gaffney’s Move Creates Fallout for Pataki,” Newsday (N.Y.), 21 Aug. 1997, at A38.
- “Up to now, looking for a rich uncle’s will was an arduous endeavor, yet many tried, some by proxy.” Ron Grossman, “A Wealth of Wills Now Available Online,” Chicago Trib., 2 Sept. 2015, News §, at 4.

*up to —— off and more. This bit of illogic crops up fairly often in print ads and store signs. At a sale touted as offering up to 50% off and more, for example, all we know is that the sale price is (1) less than 50% off, (2) 50% off, or (3) more than 50% off. The number itself, then, is meaningless and serves only as bait in an adverb up to now and more.

ups, adj., as in ups and downs. This is a comfortably idiomatic equivalent of ups and downs—e.g.: “Beyond the adjectives ups and downs, any newspaper is a chronicle of the times, and so the financial pages are a compendium of ups and downs.” Michael Kinsley, “The Grail of Reporting,” New York Times, 27 Apr. 1993, at 29.

upwards(s). Although upward has been the predominant adverb and adjective in AmE since 1870, the form ending in -s has become established in the set phrase upwards of (= more than), a phrase that became prevalent in the early 18th century. Even so, more than is usually better than upwards of—e.g.:

- “If she’s right, the stock could rise upwards of [read more than] 61% to $35 by the end of the year.” Junius Ellis, “Investing Advice from a Professional,” Money, 1 Oct. 1997, at 231.

See directional words (A).

In BrE, upwards is normally the adverb <he painted upwards> and upward the adjective <an upward trend in prices>.

Uranus. The traditional pronunciation of the planet and the mythical god is /yoor-ә-nәs/. The dominant pronunciation in AmE is /uu-ray-nәs/, even though that variant is a relative newcomer. As Charles Harrington Elster noted, “Until the middle of [the 20th] century nearly two hundred years after the planet’s discovery in 1781, the only recognized pronunciation placed the accent on the first syllable. Thus there is no precedent (other than a popular misconception, perhaps based on a false notion of how the Latin was pronounced) for stressing the second syllable.” BBBM at 480. Well, that and the occasional desire to launch sophomoric jokes.

urban; urbane. Urban = (1) of, relating to, or located in a city; or (2) characteristic of city life. Urban = suave; sophisticated; debonair. Occasionally urbane is misused for urban—e.g.: “Looking at a computer as a miracle machine is akin to spouting the glories of dense urbane [read urban] living or fossil fuels.” James Hague, “Maybe You Just Need a File Box and a Type-writer,” Countryside & Small Stock J., July 1995, at 37.

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urbane misused for urban: Stage 1

U.S.; U.S.A. As the shortened forms for United States of America, these terms retain their periods, despite the modern trend to drop the periods in most initials (see Abbreviations (A)). U.S. is best reserved for use as an adjective <U.S. foreign policy>, although its use as a noun in headlines is common. In abbreviations incorporating U.S., the periods are typically dropped <USPS> <USAF> <USNA>.

Language-Change Index (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
usable. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *use-
able. See mute e.

Current ratio: 8:1

usage generally refers to an idiom or form of speech, an occurrence of one, or forms of speech in general. E.g.:

Here, the use (not usage) of the word is poor: “My criticism is just a small one and concerns language usage [read language or usage or the use of language], rather than the argument of the editorial.” Letter of Jean Kimble, Tucson Citizen, 29 Aug. 1997, at 19.

Whenever use is possible, usage shouldn’t appear. But usage for use is not an uncommon error—e.g.: “Although reproductive-health clinics and college health services have been prescribing the ‘emergency’ Pill for more than a decade, the Food and Drug Administration sanctioned this usage [read it] only last summer.” Hallie Levine, “The 10 Myths That Stand Between You and the Pill,” Cosmopolitan, 1 Mar. 1997, at 150. Cf. misusage.


LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. usage misused for use, n.: Stage 3
2. use misused for usage: Stage 1

use; utilize; utilization. Use is the all-purpose noun and verb, ordinarily to be preferred over utilize and utilization. If Wilson Follett overstated the case against what he called “the bad habit” of using utilize, it wasn’t by much: “Exact synonyms are rare and there is always a feature in the apparent synonym, whether shade of meaning, connotation, length, or rhythm, by which it can make itself useful. Yet some words at some times and others at all times can be shown to be unnecessary. Utilize is one of the second class, . . . If utilize and utilization were to disappear tomorrow, no writer of the language would be the poorer.” MAU at 221–22. Utilize is both more abstract and more favorable connotatively than use.

used. See preowned.

used-book store. Preferably so written, not used bookstore. E.g.: “We all have this vision of the perfect used bookstore [read used-book store]: it seems to come out of a Dickens story, or maybe the film version of The Old Curiosity Shop,” Ian C. Ellis, Book Finds: How to Find, Buy, and Sell Used and Rare Books 84 (2006). Concededly, however, since about 1985 instances of used bookstore are more frequent in print sources than the more logical used-book store—by a ratio of 5 to 1.

An apologist of the illogical phrasing might argue that it involves hypallage: it’s a bookstore specializing in used stock. Then again, think about the ambiguity in its antonym: new bookstore.

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used bookstore for used-book store: Stage 2

used not to. See used to (c).

used to. A. Generally. Used to, not *use-to, is the phrase meaning “formerly”—e.g.:
• “For those who don’t know, Dagmar was a very big blond, what we use to [read used to] call in those days ‘well-endowed.’” Nick Clooney, “Hanging Out with Rosie on Early TV,” Cincinnati Post, 8 Jan. 2003, at B10. (Note that in those days produces a redundancy; changing used to call to called would eliminate it.)
• “Pilot was what we use to [read used to] call copperhead snakes.” Billy Westbrook, “Think, and You Can Link Corn to Just About Anything,” Herald (Rock Hill, S.C.), 19 Jan. 2003, Special §, at 3.

Cf. supposed to.

B. Didn’t used to; didn’t use to. The negative form—whichever you choose—doesn’t occur nearly as often as the positive. Did not use to has been in constant use throughout the English-speaking world since about 1675. Did not used to didn’t come into common use till the early 20th century—and didn’t surpass the traditional form in AmE till the mid-1970s. In BrE, did not use to remains predominant, but the two forms have vied closely since the mid-1970s.

The phrasing denotes the idea that something never happened in the past but that it now happens often or regularly. It is the informal equivalent of never used to and the rarely encountered phrase used not to. In AmE, the contracted form didn’t used to is a frequent casualism—e.g.:
• “Choosing the car of the year is getting to be a messy business. It didn’t use to be that way,” Matt Nauman, “Here’s How One Auto Writer Picks ‘Of the Year’ Nominees,” Times Union (Albany), 19 Dec. 1996, at T10.

The question whether the phrase should be written didn’t use to has stirred up some controversy among usage pundits. The argument goes that didn’t supplies the past tense, and the main verb that follows should be in the present tense, as it is in a sentence such as You didn’t have [not had] to do that. But used to can be seen as an idiomatic phrase based on an archaic meaning of use (= to be in the habit of).
On this view, the form of the verb is fixed in the positive used to and is unchanged in the far less common (and far less accepted) negative form, didn't used to.

How might we know this? After all, when the phrase is spoken, the -d of used is drowned out by the t- of to. The proponents of didn't use to make much of this, arguing that since we can't resolve the usage question by listening to speakers, we have to decide on the basis of traditional grammar. But in fact, we can draw an inference from pronunciation of the on the basis of traditional grammar. But in fact, we question by listening to speakers, we have to decide didn't used to idiomatic phrase used to be able to the late 1920s.

In modern journalistic sources, didn't used to is almost twice as common as didn't use to. When didn't use to does appear, it commonly occurs in transcribed speech—e.g.: “She was engulfed by a lake that didn't use to be there,” said Michael Foster, a case manager. Frank Stanfield & Lesley Clark, “Year's Heavy Rains Still Aren't Enough,” Orlando Sentinel, 2 Dec. 1994, at 1.

But remember the standard form that can save you headaches: never used to. It avoids the grammatical problem of did + [past tense]. It keeps used. And it doesn't reek of dialect.

Language-Change Index didn't used to: Stage 5 Current ratio (didn't used to be vs. didn't used to be): 2:1

C. Contracted Form of used not to. In Irish speech, the formal phrase used not to is sometimes contracted (rather awkwardly) to usedn't or usedn't to—e.g.: “Iry Reading, who worked there for 40 years, said: 'Saturdays we usedn't to be able to read couldn't step even for a cup of tea.’” Sarah Lonsdale, “Town Traders Crushed by Market Forces,” Sunday Telegraph, 19 Sept. 1993, at 9.

“‘Usen't we [read Didn't we used] to beat these people?’ complains Daly the bill collector.” Jim Murray, “‘Twas a Result Not Fit for Wearin’ o’ the Green,” L.A. Times, 27 Nov. 1994, at C1.

“‘I usedn't [read never used to] agree with having to go back to Wexford for every training session.’” Sean Moran, “Dillon on Inter County Stage,” Irish Times, 10 May 1996, at 16 (quoting Mick Dillon, a soccer player).

Both forms date from the early 19th century. Usern't to has consistently predominated over usedn't to since the late 1920s.

*used to could* is dialectal for used to be able to or could formerly. It appears mostly in reported speech—e.g.:

• “I was a lot stronger back then,” Webb said. ‘I used to could [read once could or used to be able to] take a 100-pound bag and lift it over my head.” Melissa Devaughn, “It Was a Grind, but Floyd County Miller Loved His Work,” Roanoke Times, 23 Oct. 1994, at 19.

• “‘You used to could [read used to be able to] read all the liner notes and see who wrote the songs and who played on whose album,’ he said.” Lori Butters, “Silver Tongues Joe Flint,” Salt Lake Trib., 23 June 1996, at J1.

• “‘I used to could [read used to be able to] rattle it off, knew the answers like the back of my hand,’ he said.” Ed Grisamore, “Longtime High School Football Coach ‘Coming to Grips’ with Dementia,” Macon Telegraph, 3 Aug. 2014, at 965.

Dating from the early 19th century in AmE, the phrase had spread to BrE by the late 1830s. It has never been standard English. See dialect & double modals.

Language-Change Index *used to could: Stage 2 user-friendly. See computerese & -friendly.

*use to. See used to.

U.S. government. See American government.

*usually always. See *generally always.

usurpation; usurpature. The former is standard in AmE and BrE alike. The latter is a needless variant.

Because usurpation begins with a /y/ sound, it takes the indefinite article a, not an—e.g.: “But, he insisted, it's not an [read a] usurpation.” Mike Dunham, “Conference Heads into Home Stretch with Elliott Yet to Speak,” Anchorage Daily News, 16 Aug. 1997, at E1. See a (A).

Current ratio: 3,395:1

Usury (/yoo-zuh-ree/) is a word whose content has changed considerably over time. Originally, usury meant “compensation for the use of money; the lending of money for interest.” By the 18th century, however, its meaning had been narrowed to what it is today: “the lending of money at an excessive interest rate.” The corresponding adjective is usurious (/yoo-zhoo-er-ee/).

Because usury and usurious begin with a consonant sound, they should be preceded by a and not an when an indefinite article is called for. See a (A).

Utahn; Utahan. These two forms vie for predominance. The first has been standard since the late 19th century; the second is a variant spelling that wasn't very common except (oddly) in the 1930s, when it prevailed in print sources for a short time, and then again in a post-2000 resurgence. We await the outcome. See denizen labels.

Current ratio (Utahan vs. Utahn): 1:1:1

utilize; utilization. See use.

utmost, adj.; upmost, adj. The usual word is utmost (= most extreme; of the greatest urgency or intensity) <an issue of the utmost importance>. Upmost (= highest; farthest up) is a fairly uncommon variant of uppermost. Yet writers have begun misusing upmost in contexts where utmost is called for—e.g.:

• “In a competitive industry where repeat visitors are of upmost [read utmost] importance, how long can Legoland focus primarily on 3- to 12-year-olds?” Mike Freeman,
**uxorial; uxorious.** The first is neutral, the second pejorative. *Uxorial* (= of, relating to, or involving a wife) is the less usual word, dating from 1800. E.g.: “Greer Garson became typecast in uxorial, middle-class roles.”

*“Greer Garson” (obit.), Daily Telegraph, 8 Apr. 1996, at 19. Uxorious (= submissive to or exceedingly fond of one’s wife) is both more common and older, dating from the 16th century. E.g.: “The New England manager is, at the time of his appointment, a notably level-headed individual, a devout Christian and uxorious husband. Should we read in four years’ time that he is checking in to a sex-addiction clinic—having been found chanting ‘God is dead!’ in a hotel room while six prostitutes tug at the elastic of his football shorts—then we will know that fame destroys.” Mark Lawson, ‘Ain’t Misbehavin’, Just Naturally Batty, *Guardian*, 6 May 1996, at 11.

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**v. vs.** Both are acceptable abbreviations of versus, but they differ in application: vs. is more common except in names of law cases, in which v. is the accepted abbreviation.

**vacuum** (= [1] a space devoid of matter, or [2] a cleaning tool that uses suctioning) predominantly forms the plural *vacuums* in both senses. In sense 1 (and its various allied subsenses in technical contexts), the Latinate plural *vacua* is also common.

**vagina; vulva.** The term *vagina* is now frequently used to denote not just the internal organ (the strict meaning), but also the external female genitals (the *vulva*, strictly speaking). The result is that *vulva* is falling into disuse, except in medical contexts.

**Valentine’s Day; *Valentines Day; *Valentine Day.** Although the formal name is *St. Valentine’s Day* (common in print till the 1970s), this is quite infrequent today. The standard term today is *Valentine’s Day*. Avoid the two variant forms.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 100:5:1

**vale of tears.** In this age-old idiom, *vale* means “world”—and the full phrase means “this world of struggles and difficulties.” But since the early 19th century, writers have sometimes mistakenly spelled it *val* of tears—e.g.:

- “Edwin C. Daly left this *veil* [read *vale*] of tears on Monday (April 15, 1996) at his home in Tamarac, FL.”
- “For my part, and I know some here will disagree, I’d like to have the right to terminate my stay in this *veil* [read *vale*] of tears and bow to no man with respect to maintaining a high measure of privacy as to my personal life,” Wright said.” James Bradshaw, “Ex-Justice Says Courts Go Too Far to Call Assisted Suicide a Right,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 25 July 1996, at C5 (no doubt mistranscribing the quotation from Craig Wright, a former justice of the Ohio Supreme Court).

Because *vale* has so commonly been confounded with *veil*, some writers have begun using the latter noun as if it referred to a stream of tears covering the face (a watery veil)—e.g.:

- “In the feature film *Humoresque* of 1946, we see Joan Crawford gazing at us through a *veil* of tears that Lyle Menendez never took the stand to repeat his Oscar-caliber performance.” *Justice for Two Killers*, *Seattle Times*, 22 Mar. 1996, at B4.
- “In the feature film *Humoresque* of 1946, we see Joan Crawford gazing at us through a *veil* of tears as she sits at home, busily drinking herself into oblivion.” Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner’s Women* 1 (Chris Walton trans., 2011).

Perhaps a pun was intended in each case, but the phrasing arouses the suspicion that the writer simply doesn’t know any better.

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**valet** is traditionally pronounced /va-let/ or /val-ay/ as a noun, or /va-lay/ as an adjective. The first was historically considered best, primarily in the sense “a gentleman’s personal attendant who looks after his clothes etc.” (*COD*). It’s primarily to this archaic sense that W2’s comment applies: “*Valet* has been anglicized since the 17th century. Dr. Johnson (1755) gives val’et, Buchanan (1766) väl’ët, Sheridan (1797) vål’ët, Smart (1836) vål’ët, and the best usage still prefers it.” Yet that “preferred” usage is almost never heard, and even /val-ay/ is rare for the noun. The standard AmE
pronunciation today for the noun is /va-lay/. But the most common AmE usage of the word is as an adjective, usually in reference to a parking attendant at a hotel or restaurant, where the accent is on the first syllable. In short, the word has been de-anglicized in AmE over the 20th century, while BrE continues with /val-it/.

valet, vb., makes valeted and valeting in both AmE and BrE.

valuable, adj.; invaluable. Valuable describes something that has measurable worth—a valuable necklace worth an estimated $20,000—or that possesses desirable qualities or characteristics—a valuable employee—<valuable information>. Despite its appearance, invaluable does not mean that something is worthless but rather that something (often intangible) is very highly valued or priceless <a dedicated employee can make invaluable contributions>.

valuation. For a fairly common redundancy, see appraisal valuation.

vane (= a device for showing wind direction) is sometimes mistakenly made vain or vein—e.g.: • “The SPM buoy’s top deck is designed to swivel, allowing a tanker to act like a weather vane [read vane] and remain head-on in the wind.” L.R. Aalund, “Hawaii Offers Challenge and Opportunity to Refiner,” Oil & Gas J., 30 May 1994, at 43. • “It seems a bit incongruous to find a store carrying Roy-all Bayrhum all purpose lotion, wind chimes, chess sets, patio grills, bocci balls, cupolas, weather veins [read vanae], and bird houses under the same roof with delicate crystal.” Rod King, “Not Your Ordinary Giftshop,” Bus. People Mag., Nov. 1994, at 28.

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vain or vein misused for vane: Stage 1

vapid (= flat, dull, and intellectually barren) makes vapidify, preferably not *vapidness (which is only one-tenth as common in print). E.g.: “Whatever was once unique and involving about its music has been usurped by synth-pop vapidity [read rapidity].” Greg Kot, “Faithful Followers,” Chicago Trib., 23 Apr. 1995, at C7. The adjective is pronounced /va-pid/, the noun /va-pid-i-tee/—preferably not with a long /ay/ in the first syllable.

variable, adj.; variant, adj.; variational; *variative. Variable = subject to variation; characterized by variations. Variant = differing in form or in details from the one named or considered, differing thus among themselves (COD). Variational = of, pertaining to, or marked or characterized by variation. *Variative shares the senses of variational; because it’s the rarer word, it might be considered a needless variant.

Variable is pronounced /va-ree-a-bal/ (in four syllables)—not, as weather forecasters frequently mouth it, /ver-a-bal/.

variation; variance; variant. n. Variation = (1) a departure from a former or normal condition, action, or amount; a departure from a standard or type; or (2) the extent of this departure. E.g.: “For those who are willing to experiment, there are as many wonderful variations of kugel as imagination will allow.” Marge Perry, “A Sweet New Year,” Record (N.J.), 24 Sept. 1997, at F1.

Variance is used in two widely divergent senses: (1) “a difference or discrepancy between two statements or documents that ought to agree”; and (2) “a waiver of or exemption from a zoning law.” At variance = (of people) in a state of discord; (of things) conflicting; in a state of disagreement or difference. E.g.: “So Gov. Wilson, championing Prop. 209 as leading to a ‘color-blind society’ in California, now wants the Legislature to repeal 35 laws he deems to be at variance with 209.” “Prop 209’s Legislative Headaches,” S.F. Examiner, 12 Sept. 1997, at A21.

Variant = a form or modification differing in some way from other types of the same thing. E.g.: “Most of the goggles purchased for military aviation are produced by ITT . . . They are variants of the F-4949 model, . . . which has a 40-degree field-of-view, both horizontally and vertically.” “Night Vision Goggles,” Tucson Citizen, 18 Sept. 1997, at A6.

variational; *variative. See variable.

variety. When the phrase a variety of means “many,” it takes a plural verb—e.g.: • “Words, songs and rituals are a few of the many things that color our experience, and a variety of them are found in religious services.” William C. Graham, “Saving Signs, Wondrous Words,” Nat’l Catholic Rptr., 9 May 1997, at 15. • “There are a variety of ‘90s-type’ bills padding the typical household budget.” “No Fed Action Expected,” Tampa Trib., 25 Sept. 1997, at 7.

In fact, it’s erroneous in that context to use a singular verb—e.g.: “There is [read are] a variety of dwelling types, including houses, row houses and apartments, so that younger and older people, singles and families, poor and the wealthy, may live there.” Steve Liewer, “Developers’ Nostalgia Reaches Homebuyers,” Sun-Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale), 7 Sept. 1997, at B1. See synecdoche.

When followed by a singular or collective noun, a variety of takes a singular verb—e.g.: “For the tests, a variety of equipment is attached to the helicopter’s hard points and dropped in flight, including 2.75-inch rocket packs, auxiliary fuel tanks and dummy Hellfire and Sidewinder missiles.” Jefferson Morris, “Upgraded Super Cobra Undergoing Stores Jettison Testing at Pax River,” Aerospace Daily, 29 Jan. 2003, at 6.
various and sundry. See sundry.

*various different* has been a fairly common redundancy since the 18th century. E.g.: “Also available is a map that lets you take a self-guided native-trail walk through various different [read various or different] parts of the gardens.” Karen C. Wilson, “Native-Plant Demonstration Gardens,” San Diego Union-Trib., 28 Sept. 1997, at H13. If *various different occasions* means “a number of different occasions,” then the better wording is *several different.*

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*various different for several different: Stage 1 Current ratio (several different vs. *various different*): 15:1

**various of (the).** Although this phrasing dates from the late 18th century, it has traditionally been disapproved because various shifts from being used as an adjective to a pronoun. Although the phrasing is roughly analogous to *several of or many of,* it is not refined usage. Some improvement, including *various alone,* is always available—e.g.:

- “Even the most casual of swing band followers 50 years ago knew various of the [read the various] soloists in their favorite band.” Philip Elwood, “A Standout Among Pianists in Swing Era,” S.F. Examiner, 13 Jan. 1995, at D7. (In that quotation, *band* should be *bands.* See *concord* (b.).)
- “Consider premarital sex, extramarital sex, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and the ordination of women as clergy. Various of [read Some or all of] these will cause the leaders of most any church to make pronouncements appropriate for another century.” Geneva Overholser, “Morals and Sexuality,” Chicago Trib, 26 July 2000, at 17.

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various used as a pronoun <various of my colleagues agree>: Stage 2

**vegan** (= someone who strictly avoids foods of animal origin), a mid-20th-century neologism, is pronounced /vee-ә-mәnt/, not /vә-hee-ә-mәnt/.

**vehicle.** The *-h* is not pronounced. Hence: /vee-i-kal/. The word itself is often a prime example of officialese, as when a police officer refers to exiting the vehicle and engaging in foot pursuit (= getting out of the car and running after a suspect). Some auto manufacturers have made their warranties easier to decipher by taking the simple step of substituting *car, truck, minivan,* or the like for the abstract *vehicle.* See *abstractive & plain language.*

**vehicular.** A. Vehicular homicide. Vehicular /vee-hik-ә-yә-lәr/, an adjective dating from the 17th century, is not objectionable per se. Several states have vehicular-homicide statutes, in which there is no ready substitute for *vehicular.*

B. Vehicular accident. The phrase is pompous police *jargon* for *traffic accident,* *car accident,* or (in BrE) *motoring accident.*

C. *Vehicular unit.* The phrase is especially absurd for *car.* “The declaration sheet seeks to provide separate coverages for uninsured motorists on three vehicular units.” If cars or automobiles were too specific, then vehicles would suffice.

D. *Pronunciation.* The *-h* is pronounced in this word: /v-eek-yә-lәr/. Cf. *vehicle.*

**veil of tears.** See *vale of tears.*

**veld** /velt/ (= an open, nearly treeless grassland) has been the standard spelling since about 1920. *Veldt* is a variant (chiefly in South African English).

Current ratio (World English): 1.5:1

**venal; venial.** Venal (= purchasable; highly mercenary; amenable to bribes; corruptible) has been the slightly more usual term since the mid-18th century. E.g.: “As the world rushes to congratulate Kabila for overthrowing Mobutu, the continent’s most spectacularly venal dictator, terrible things are happening in the deep bush of this ruined country.” “Genocide Stalks Tribal Rivalry,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 2 June 1997, at A1.

*Venial* (= slight [used of sins]; pardonable; excusable; trivial) is most easily remembered by associating the *-ial* with that in *trivial.* It most frequently appears in the phrase *venial sin.* E.g.: “The 1992 election granted a kind of absolution, at least for *venial* sins, even though Clinton lied about them during the campaign.” David Warsh, “Whitewater, Whitewater, and Munich,” Boston Globe, 11 May 1997, at C1.

Writers sometimes misuse *venal* for *venial,* a recurrent error from the mid-19th century—e.g.:


**vehement** is pronounced /vee-ә-mәnt/, not /vә-hee-ә-mәnt/.

**vehicular accident** is a needless variant. See *vehicular.*
• “At the left middle ground of the print Dürer shows the nude saint crawling on all fours as penance for his venal [read venial] sin while the woman’s nudity might be understood as showing why the ascetic saint weakened before her beauty.” Lisa Rosenthal, Gender, Politics, and Allegory in the Art of Rubens 51 (2005).

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venial misused for venal: Stage 1
Current ratio (venial sin vs. *venal sin): 39:1
veniable has been so spelled since the 17th century—not *vendable. See -able (a).
Current ratio: 15:1
vendor (= someone who sells) has been the standard spelling since the late 18th century. *Vendor is a variant. (See -er (a).) Vendor is pronounced /ven-dәr/, not /ven-der/.
Current ratio (vendor vs. *vendor): 54:1
venerable = (of people) worthy of being venerated, revered, or highly respected and esteemed, on account of character or position; commanding respect by reason of age combined with high personal character and dignity of appearance; (of things) worthy of veneration or deep respect. The word is overblown when used merely for old. E.g.: “More venerable [read Older or, perhaps, Senior] citizens may recall the days when the electric chair was trucked around the state so that executions could be carried out at parish halls.” James Gill, “Taking Executions on the Road,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 20 June 1997, at B7.

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venerable as a euphemism for old: Stage 4
venial. See venal.

venireman; venireperson; veniremember. All three denote “one of a panel of prospective jurors.” Venireman, which dates from the late 18th century, has attracted criticism, especially in AmE, that it is sexist. See sexism (c). Yet it remains by far the most frequent of the three forms in AmE and BrE alike. American legal writers have experimented with venireperson since the mid-1970s and veniremember since the 1990s, but these innovations already appear moribund. What seems to be happening instead is that the longer synonym prospective juror has supplanted them all as the predominant term—doubtless a victory for plain English. This phrase became predominant in AmE about 1920 and in BrE about 1965.

Venire (= a panel of prospective jurors) is pronounced /vo-nir/ or (less good) /va-nir/ or /va-neer/.

venue = (1) the proper or a possible place for the trial of a lawsuit; or (2) the place where an event is held <the venue will be Madison Square Garden>. In sense 2, it’s a vogue word—e.g.:

• “While large-market teams covet fancy venues [read locations] to boost revenues, small-market team executives say these buildings are sometimes vital for their mere survival in the league.” Tony Bizjak & Clint Swett, “Kings Not Alone in Subsidy Patch,” Sacramento Bee, 19 Jan. 1997, at A1. (Notice the awkward venues . . . revenues. See sound of prose.)

• “After more than 300 years, the Covent Garden piazza is still London’s most popular venue [read place] for street performers.” William A. Davis, “British Polish Up Their Reputation with Colorful, Creative Retail Shops,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 28 Sept. 1997, at K1.

Venus flytrap; *Venus’s flytrap; *Venus’ flytrap. All three were in frequent use from the mid-19th century. Not until the 1960s, in AmE and BrE alike, did the form without an apostrophe establish itself as standard. The others are variants to be avoided. See possessives (a).

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 20:1.2:1

veracity = (1) truthfulness; observance of the truth; or (2) truth; accuracy. Sense 1, denoting a quality that people have, is the traditionally correct usage. Sense 2 began as a slipshod extension in the 18th century, and still might be so considered. But it’s now common in law <the veracity of the affidavit>.

Veracity is not to be confused with voracity (= greediness in eating). See malapropisms.

veranda (= a roofed porch or portico) has been the standard spelling in AmE since 1850. *Verandah is a chiefly BrE variant that predominated in that variety of English until about 1950.

Current ratio (World English): 1.5:1

*verbage. See verbiage.

verbal; oral. Verbal = (1) of, relating to, or expressed in words, whether written or oral; or (2) of, relating to, or expressed through the spoken word. Oral = (1) of, relating to, or involving the mouth; or (2) of, relating to, or expressed through the spoken word.

Many regard sense 2 as the exclusive province of oral, preferring that verbal not be used in this way. It’s a matter, they might say, of slipshod extension. In fact, given the primary sense of verbal, the movie producer Samuel Goldwyn wasn’t really very ironic when he remarked, “A verbal contract isn’t worth the paper it’s written on.” After all, a written contract is verbal. The phrase requires oral.

The slippage is especially acute when verbal is opposed to written—e.g.: “Take care with words, verbal [read oral] and written.” Sydney Omarr, “Horoscope,” Wash. Post, 22 June 1997, at F2. Take care indeed!

In recent years, some people have said that they feel awkward using oral because of prurient connotations; that is, the word seems most often to appear in reference to oral sex. Why this should be so is hard to
verbal as a synonym for oral: Stage 4

Verbal Awareness. To keep from making unconscious gaffes or miscues—as by referring to a virgin field pregnant with possibilities—writers must be aware of all the meanings of a word because its potential meanings can sabotage the intention. Careful users of language don’t let a sign such as Ears Pierced While You Wait go unnoticed. Nor do they overlook the humor in the church bulletin that reads, All women wishing to become Young Mothers should visit the pastor in his office. Likewise, writers ought not to refer to Roe v. Wade and its progeny—though several prominent writers have done just that. Or consider how the writer must feel after seeing this in print: “[A] DNA study confirmed to the satisfaction of many that a male member of Jefferson’s family had fathered at least one child with a mulatto slave named Sally Hemings.” Anita Hamilton, “A Family Divided,” Time, 5 July 2004, at 64. (The term male member is salaciously misleading there. Male could have been omitted: most readers would have known the father’s sex.) A heightening of verbal awareness would save writers from such oddities—and potential embarrassments.

verbiage. This term has long had negative connotations, referring to language that is prolix or redundant. E.g.: “Fanatics sloughing through Stone’s pseudo-Joycean jungle of verbiage might note . . . his overuse of sentence fragments and quick, cheap imagery.” James Hannaham, “Hollywood Babble,” Village Voice, 21 Oct. 1997, at 65. Still, the SOED records a “rare” neutral sense: “diction, wording, verbal expression.” Unfortunately, this unneeded sense has been revived in recent years, so that it’s sometimes hard to say whether pejorative connotations should attach. E.g.: “In the past, Spencer’s public commentary has fallen short of the righteous, high-minded verbiage displayed in Diana’s eulogy.” Mary Voboril, “The Althorp Stories,” Newsday (N.Y.), 18 Sept. 1997, at A6.

Strictly speaking, the phrase *excess verbiage is a redundancy, given the predominant meaning of verbiage—e.g.: “None of the excess verbiage [read verbiage] would matter, of course, if ’Chasing Amy’ had no aspirations beyond the windbag coarseness of a young director.” Amy Biancolli, “’Chasing’ Worthwhile, Yet Gritty,” Times Union (Albany), 18 Apr. 1997, at D1. This phrase grew in prominence over the 20th century doubtless because the word verbiage was gradually losing its pejorative sense.

The syncopated form *verbage for verbiage is a common error dating from the 19th century. Perhaps it was spawned by the analogy of herbage. E.g.: “But too often, investors need a magnifying glass and a law degree to get through the document’s turgid, lengthy verbage [read verbiage].” David Lieberman, “Disney Overrides Shareholder Protest,” USA Today, 26 Feb. 1997, at B3. This error might result partly from the common mispronunciation: /var-bij/- rather than the correct /var-bee-ij/. Also, endings in -iage are less common in English than those in -age.

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1. verbiage misused for verbal expression (with neutral connotation): Stage 4
2. *excess verbiage for verbiage: Stage 3
3. verbiage misspelled *verbage: Stage 1

Current ratio (verbiage vs. *verbage): 122:1

Verbless Sentences. See incomplete sentences.

Verbs. See tenses.

Verdict refers to a jury’s pronouncement. It shouldn’t be used in reference to a court’s decision—e.g.: “Associate Justice Sandra Day O’Connor jerked forward in her black leather chair, visibly astonished. . . . The verdict [read decision] is expected next year.” Keith C. Epstein, “Ohio Free Speech Case Shocks Supreme Court,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 13 Oct. 1994, at A3.

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verdict in reference to a judge’s decision: Stage 2

*Vergil. See Virgil.

Vermilion. So spelled. See spelling (A).

Verses; versus. Verses (/var-siz/) are lines of a poem or song, sections of a song separated by the chorus, or subsections of chapters in books of the Bible. Versus (/var-sus/) is a preposition from the Latin, meaning “facing,” especially in law and sports. Writers sometimes misspell it verses—e.g.:

- “The use of 10W/30 verses [read versus] 5W/30 is a recommendation from the manufacturer to get the gas mileage to a higher level to comply with CAFE requirements.” “Auto Doc,” Newsday (N.Y.), 3 May 2002, at D19.

For more on versus, see v.

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verses misused for versus: Stage 1

Vertebra (= a single bone that, together with similar bones, forms the spinal column) has two plurals: the
standard *vertebrae* (/vәr-tә-brә/ or /vәr-tә-bray/) and the homegrown variant *vertebras* (/vәr-tә-brәz/). (See PLURALS (b.).) The Latinate plural (*vertebrae*) is so common that some writers mistake it for a singular—e.g.: “There were fears that he could be crippled after the fall, but an operation successfully treated a fractured *vertebra* [read *vertebrae,*]” Charles Laurence, “Death Fall: British Skydiver Flies Home,” *Daily Telegraph,* 5 July 1997, at 3.

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**vertebrae** misused as a singular for *vertebra:* Stage 1

**vertex; vortex.** A *vertex* is either (1) the apex or highest point of something, or (2) the point at which two sides of a figure meet to form an angle. (Pl. *vertices.*) A vortex is swirling matter, such as a whirlpool or a tornado. (Pl. *vortices.*) The standard phrasing is *at the vertex* but in the vortex. The two terms are confounded fairly often—e.g.:

• “Members of the purported Seattle cell have . . . made pilgrimages to the North London Central Mosque in Finsbury Park, thought to be at the *vertex* [read *vortex*] of militant Islamic recruiting in Europe.” Mike Carter et al., “Seattle Militants Investigated for Possible Ties to al-Qaida,” *Seattle Times,* 12 July 2002, at A1. (Admittedly, this sentence might also take *in the vertex.*)

• “No longer does Tom Osborne command a squad of 150 young men on national television or stand at the *vertex* [read *vortex*] of Nebraska’s football obsession.” Matt Kelley, “Osborne Is at Home in the House,” *Omaha World-Herald,* 21 July 2002, at A1. (Again, this sentence might also take *in the vertex.*)

See vortex.

**vertical,** adj., is sometimes misspelled *verticle*—e.g.:

“To achieve that goal, the companies said they will test *verticle-takeoff* [read *vertical-takeoff*] and landing technology.” “McDonnell–Boeing Aim: Cheaper Space Travel,” *Orange County Register,* 16 June 1995, at C2.

Current ratio: 3,950:1

**very.** A *weasel word.* This intensifier, which functions as both an adjective and an adverb, surfaces repeatedly in flabby writing. In almost every context in which it appears, its omission would result in at most a negligible loss. And in many contexts the idea would be more powerfully expressed without it—e.g.: “The *very* [delete *very*] outrageous statement by Earl Woods that his son would ‘do more than anyone to change humanity’ gives Woods a chance not only to survive his Miracle at the Masters, but to improve upon it.” Blaine Newnhum, “Tiger ‘Knows What He’s Doing,'” *Tulsa Trib.* & *Tulsa World,* 19 Apr. 1997, at B2. In that sentence—as in so many others—*very* actually weakens the adjective that follows. See most. Cf. clearly & obviously.

B. Very disappointed, etc. The strict, arch-conservative view is that *very* modifies adjectives (*sorry, sick,* etc.) and not, properly, past participles (*disappointed, engrossed,* etc.). In 1966, Wilson Follett wrote that “finer ears are offended by past participles modified by *very* without the intervention of the quantitative much, which respects the verbal sense of an action undergone. Such writers require very much disappointed, very much pleased, very much engrossed, very well satisfied, etc.” (MAU at 343). Four years later, Charlton Laird nodded at this stricture but suggested that it had become passé: “Half a century ago purists insisted that the past participle should never be preceded by *very* unless it was protected with an insulating much, and some of us were so imbued with this supposedly eternal truth that we still wince if we hear that anyone is *very pleased.*” *Language in America* 493 (1970).

Of course, many past-participial adjectives have now lost their verbal force. Almost no one today would hesitate over *very depressed,* *very drunk,* *very interested,* *very tired,* or *very worried.* Although Follett and Laird would probably be very much displeased to learn this, *very pleased* also belongs in this list. The principle is that when a past participle has become thoroughly established as an adjective, it can indisputably take very rather than *very much.*

If there’s any doubt about the phrasing, a good solution is to substitute *quite* or (a little more formally) *much*—or, again, possibly *very much*—for *very.* E.g.:

• “Now in their early 30s and very changed [read *very much changed*], they have a reunion.” Louis B. Parks, “Mike Leigh Movies Wring the Best from Cast, Crew,” *Houston Chron.,* 16 Aug. 1997, at 1.

• “Paul wrote in a time when women were very subjigated [read *quite subjigated*], so it was natural for him to take that point of view.” Dana Sterling, “Retired Pastor Focused on People, Not Phrases,” *Tulsa World,* 28 Nov. 1997, at A24 (quoting Roy Griggs).

C. Displaced by Other Words. See so (b) & too (b).

**very unique.** See ADJECTIVES (b) & unique.

**vestigial.** So spelled. *Vestigal* is an infrequent misspelling that has persisted since the late 19th century.

Current ratio: 100:1

**veteran.** Once a veteran, always a veteran. Hence *former veteran,* a redundancy that spread during the mid-20th century, is erroneous—e.g.:

• “Many former veterans [read *veterans*] now work in the private sector and would have good reason to fear any disclosure of their possible exposure to Agent Orange.” Shira A. Scheindlin, “Discovering the Discoverable: A Bird’s Eye View of Discovery in a Complex Multi-District Class Action Litigation,” 52 Brook. L. Rev. 397, 421 n.94 (1986).

• “Some time after World War II, the Postal Service began to develop an inbred, bloatated paramilitary culture. The ‘generals’—many of them former veterans [read *veterans*]—who ran the place administered rigid rules from the Domestic Mail Manual, a tome the size of the New...
- "The former veteran [read veteran] sentinel wondered what was in the air this night." David M. Levy, Sunsprites and Other Miracles 217 (2006).

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*former veteran* for *veteran*: Stage 2

**Veterans Affairs.** So written—without an apostrophe. The phrase is short for the Department of Veterans Affairs, created by federal statute in 1988. Its predecessor was the Veterans Administration, a federal agency established in 1930.

Although the older name was predominantly written *Veterans’ Administration* (with a plural possessive) from 1927 to 1942, from 1943 the plural was predominantly attributive in print sources—with no apostrophe.

Yet the standard form for the common-noun phrase is *veterans’ benefits*, not *veterans benefits*.

**Veterans Day; Veterans’ Day.** The spelling without the apostrophe has been predominant in AmE since the early 1960s and in BrE since the mid-1990s. In the U.S., the 1954 federal statute creating the federal holiday omitted the apostrophe and used the plural *Veterans* attributively. The former official name for the Nov. 11 holiday was *Armistice Day*. Cf. *Presidents’ Day*.

Current ratio (*Veterans Day* vs. *Veterans’ Day*): 4:1

via = (1) by way of (a place); passing through <they flew to Amarillo via Dallas>; or (2) by means of, through the agency of <we sent the letter via fax>.

Sence 2, a *casualism*, is questionable whenever a simple preposition would suffice. Ernest Gowers called it a *vulgarity* in *FMEU2*, and Wilson Follett (MAU) and Theodore Bernstein (*The Careful Writer*) concur. But like it or not—and there’s no longer any reason not to like it—*via* is now standard in sense 2. It has come to supplant *through* whenever the latter word doesn’t feel quite right—e.g.:

- “Tickets for the Knicks’ two preseason games at Madison Square Garden go on sale on noon Thursday at the Garden box office and *via* Ticketmaster (507-8900 in New Jersey).”


**viable** originally meant “capable of living; fit to live,” a sense that still applies in many phrases, such as *a viable fetus*. By acceptable extension it has come to refer figuratively to any idea or thing that might flourish. But in this use it’s a *vogue word* that can often be improved on—e.g.:


- “Mr. Montague will . . . have the responsibility of signing off commercially *viable* [read *promising*] projects before they are put out to tender.” Michael Harrison, “Montague Named PFI Head,” *Independent*, 15 July 1997, at 18.


The word has lately been the victim of *slipshod extension*, when used in the sense “*feasible, practicable*” <a viable plan>. One writer has noted that “dictionaries now give [as definitions for *viable*] *real, workable, vivid, practicable, important*,” newer definitions that seem only to confirm the critics’ complaints that the word has had the edge hopelessly ground off it.” Roy Copperud, *American Usage and Style* 405 (1980).

Hence it is sometimes hard even to know what a writer means with *viable*—e.g.:

- “Columbia Gulf estimated that it would cost $3.5 million to construct new facilities to connect South Pass to the closest *viable* [delete, or read *available or feasible*] interconnection with its East Lateral at Venice, Louisiana.”


- “The white cotton shirt is still *viable* [read *acceptable or, possibly, a possibility*], but it could also be traded for a softer, sheer-mesh top.” Valli Herman, “Sharpsuiters,” *Dallas Morning News*, 17 Sept. 1997, at E1.

Cf. *feasible*.

**vice; vise.** In AmE, a *vice* is an immoral habit or practice, and a *vise* is a tool with closable jaws for clamping things. But in BrE, the tool is spelled like the sin: *vice*.

**vicegerent; viceregent.** Both the spellings and the meanings of these two words are confusingly similar. A *vicegerent* (/vis- jer-ant/) or *viceregent* (the rarer word) is a person appointed to administer the office of another (usually a sovereign or ruler). The word often refers to the Pope as God’s representative on Earth.

A *viceregent* /vis-ree-jant/ (the rarer word) is the deputy of a regent.

**vice versa** (= the other way around; just the opposite) should be the fulcrum for reciprocal referents. That is, *Mike likes Ellen and vice versa* says that Ellen also likes Mike. The subject and the object could be switched around, leaving the verb intact—e.g.:

- “I am sure I could have taught Jeffrey a couple of tricks, and *vice versa*.” Vitali Vitaliev, “Outside Eye: Keep My Bar Stool Warm, Jeffrey,” *Guardian*, 22 Sept. 1997, at T17. (The writer means that Jeffrey could have taught him a couple of tricks.)

- “You can adjust the slide to allocate more storage at the expense of programs or *vice versa*—up to a point.” John D. Ruley, “Jog WinCE’s Memory,” *Windows Mag.*, 1 Oct.
1997, at 279. (The writer means that you can have more programs at the expense of storage.)

But some writers misuse the term in trying to imply something different from (or sometimes even analo-
gous to) what they’ve just said—e.g.:

• “They have eased restrictions to an odd—even rationing system under which residents at odd addresses can water on odd days of the month, and vice versa.” Lauren Dodge, “Battle Ground Now Ashaw in Water Issues,” Oregonian (Portland), 18 Aug. 1997, at B2. (A possible revision: residents at odd addresses can water on odd days of the month, and those at even addresses on even days.)

• “He’d rather have them beat up each other than someone else—and vice versa.” “NFL Notebook,” Times Reporter (New Philadelphia, Ohio), 20 Aug. 2015, at B3. (It’s difficult to tell here exactly what the writer intended by vice versa: no rearrangement of the nouns in this sentence makes sense.)

• “Among the day’s highlights, players said, were the inside run portions of the workout conducted on both fields (one field featured the Colts offense versus the Bears defense and vice versa).” Stephen Holder, “Colts, Bears Avoid Nastiness,” Indianapolis Star, 20 Aug. 2015, at C1. (A possible revision: each field featured one team’s offense versus the others defense.)

See ILOGIC (b).

The phrase is pronounced either /vis vәr-sә/ or (a little pedantically) /vi-sә vәr-sә/. vichysoisse (vis-cәsә) = a thick soup made with potatoes and leeks and usu. served cold) is often misspelled (vicious to) what they’ve just said—e.g.:

• “Among the day’s highlights, players said, were the inside run portions of the workout conducted on both fields (one field featured the Colts offense versus the Bears defense and vice versa).” Stephen Holder, “Colts, Bears Avoid Nastiness,” Indianapolis Star, 20 Aug. 2015, at C1. (A possible revision: each field featured one team’s offense versus the other’s defense.)

See ILOGIC (b).

The phrase is pronounced either /vis vәr-sә/ or (a little pedantically) /vi-sә vәr-sә/.

vicious; viscous. Vicious (= brutal) is sometimes confused with viscous (= gummy) —e.g.:

• “Crouching just behind the service line, Agassi ran around his backhand to take a viscous [read vicious] rip at a return off Ferrero’s timid serve.” Selena Roberts, “Agassi Out as Ferrero Capitalizes on a Break,” N.Y. Times, 17 July 1994, § 5, at 9. The word is pronounced /vish-ee-swoz/ or /vee-shee-swoz/, and remembering the /z/-sound in the final syllable should help you think of the /se/ at the end of the word.

vicious circle; vicious cycle. Both mean “a situation in which the solution to one problem gives rise to a second problem, but the solution to the second problem brings back the first problem.” Vicious circle, the traditional phrase dating from the 18th century, remains more common than vicious cycle in modern print sources.

Although vicious cycle isn’t recorded in the OED, it grew especially common in AmE during the 20th century and became slightly predominant in AmE print sources about 2000.

Current ratio (vicious circle vs. vicious cycle in World English): 1.3:1 victory. The phrase *win a victory is a common but venial redundancy—e.g.:

• “The United Auto Workers has won a victory in Northeast Ohio in its bid to unionize seat plants owned by Johnson Controls Inc. [read won in its bid to unionize seat plants in Northeast Ohio owned by Johnson Controls Inc.]” Brian Frasier, “UAW Wins Over Oberlin Plant,” Crain’s Cleveland Bus., 24 June 1996, at 9.


• “Christianity had once won a victory [read been victorious] over the Romans.” Harvey C. Mansfield, Machiavelli’s New Modes and Orders 258–59 (2001).

A simple solution is to use score or gain instead of win.

victuals, pronounced /vit-әlz/, is spelled phonetically (vittles) only in colloquial usage. Related forms are victualer (= someone who provides food and drink for payment), victualed, and victualing in AmE; these three forms double the /-l/- in BrE. Cf. chitterlings. See SPELLING (b).

videlicet. See viz.

videoconferencing. See conferencing.

videodisc. The Associated Press and New York Times stylebooks both make this and most other video- compounds one word <videotape> or <videoconference>. But when preceded by digital, the two-word form is far more common in print—no doubt because of the ubiquity of DVDs, popularly known as digital video discs (but see DvD). When the phrase appears without digital, the compound is usually made one word: videodisc.

viewpoint; point of view; standpoint. The first, which originated in the mid-19th century and became widespread in the early 20th, has been stigmatized by a few writers and grammarians who consider it inferior to point of view. Eric Partridge wrote that the term “has been deprecated by purists; not being a purist, I occasionally use it, although I perceive that it is
unnecessary” (Ué A at 307). And John Simon says that “centuries of sound tradition have hallowed point of view as preferable to the ‘Teutonism viewpoint.’” Paradigms Last 90 (1980).

Yet viewpoint, apart from being extremely common, conveniently says in one word what point of view says in three. The same holds true for standpoint. Today, no stigma should attach to either word.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index viewpoint for point of view: Stage 5

vignette (= a brief depiction) is pronounced /vin-ә-ret/, not /vin-yәt/. See PRONUNCIATION.

vilify is often misspelled *villify—e.g.: “Democrats say they may wage [an ad campaign] to villify [read vilify] Republicans who voted against the proposal.” Patrice Hill, “Dickerig Almost Kills Deal on Budget,” Wash. Times, 22 May 1997, at A1. No doubt the misspelling is influenced by villain, rather than the word’s actual cognate, vile.

Current ratio: 39:1

vinaigrette (= an oil-and-vinegar salad dressing), a French loanword dating from the early 19th century, is so spelled. In French, the word simply means “vinegar sauce.” But since the mid-19th century it has infrequently been misspelled on the model of the anglicized vinegar—e.g.: “Whisk together the red wine vinegar, olive oil, salt and pepper, and remaining mixture of fennel, rosemary, and orange zest to make a vinaigrette [read vinaigrette],” John Edward Young, “Up to Your Gills in Canned Tuna? Try Fresh,” Christian Science Monitor, 26 Jan. 2000, at 17.

Similarly, the word is often mispronounced. It should be /vin-a-gret/, not /vin-a-gә-ret/. See PRONUNCIATION.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index vinaigrette misspelled *vinaigrette: Stage 1 Current ratio: 77:1

vinaigrette mispronounced in four syllables: Stage 3

vindicable. So formed in AmE and BrE alike—not *vindicatable. See -ABLE (D) & -ATABLE.

vindicative; vindictory; *vindicative. Vindictive = given to or characterized by revenge or retribution. Vindicatory = (1) providing vindication <a vindicatory eyewitness account>; or (2) punitive, retributive <vindicatory actions against the company>. Because sense 2 verges closely on the domain of vindictive, vindicatory should be reserved for sense 1. *Vindicative is a NEEDLESS VARIANT that ill-advisedly displaces vindictive—e.g.: “Indeed, Chancellor suggests, those hostile feelings coupled with Patricia’s compulsive need for things and recognition fuel her almost vindictive [read vindictive] toyings with Stanley.” Simi Horwitz, “Deborah Findlay & Anna Chancellor Create the Muses in ‘Stanley,’” Back Stage, 21 Feb. 1997, at 19.

violable. So formed in AmE and BrE alike—not *violatable. See -ABLE (D) & -ATABLE.

Current ratio: 194:1

violate. See contravene (A).

violative. The phrase to be violative of is verbose for to violate. E.g.: “This proposal is too flagrantly violative of the First Amendment [read violates the First Amendment too flagrantly] to merit anything but condemnation.” Walter G. Markum, “Campaign Finance Reform? Don’t Bet on It,” Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk), 13 Oct. 1997, at B10. See BE-VERBS (b).

The OED records violative from 1856 at the earliest, but the word appeared more than half a century before in a famous Supreme Court case, Marbury v. Madison (1803): “To withhold the commission, therefore, is an act deemed by the court not warranted by law, but violative of a vested legal right.”

violoncello, not *violincello, is the correct spelling for the bass member of the violin family. Not surprisingly, the word has often been misspelled through association with violin—e.g.:


• “Selections will include Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Mozart’s ‘Marriage of Figaro’ and Haydn’s ‘Concerto in C Major for Violoncello [read Violoncello] and Orchestra.’” “Music Briefs,” Knoxville News-Sentinel, 12 May 2002, at G4.

Of course, the safest approach is to use the simpler and much more recognizable cello instead.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE Index violoncello misspelled *violincello: Stage 1 Current ratio: 26:1

virago (= a harsh, shrewish woman) forms the plural viragos or (as a variant) viragoes. See PLURALS (D).

Current ratio (viragos vs. viragoes): 2:1

Virgil. Since the 17th century, Virgil, not Vergil, has been the standard spelling for the Roman poet who wrote the Aeneid—this despite his full Latin name, Publius Vergilius Maro.

Current ratio (poet Virgil vs. poet Vergil): 10:1

VIRGULES. See PUNCTUATION (q).

virtual derives from the Latin root virtus (= virtue, effectiveness, strength, excellence). In its most traditional sense, the adjective means “in essence or effect, but not formally or titularly” <in Nicholas’s absence, Rasputin became a virtual tsar>. By extension, it has come to denote “almost” <traffic came to a virtual standstill> or, quite loosely, “figurative” <we’re buried in a virtual avalanche of paperwork>. Cf. LITERALLY.

In the 1980s, computer users and science-fiction writers adopted the term to describe data, software,
interfaces, and the like that exist in electronic form only <virtual reality>. That’s a handy term, filling a new need in the language. But it sets up the potential for some awkward mixed uses <the world is a virtual playground>.

**virtue of, by, *in virtue of.** By virtue of, not *in virtue of, has been the standard phrase since the 17th century. The latter is an archaism.

Current ratio: 4:1

**virtuoso.** The plural is preferably virtuosos—not virtuosi (a pedantic form that is significantly less common in journalistic print sources). Virtuosi is more common in BrE than it is in AmE. In World English today, the two forms vie closely for supremacy in printed books. See plurals (b).

Current ratio (virtuosi vs. virtuosos): 1.5:1

**virus.** Pl. viruses.

**vis-à-vis (lit., “face to face”)** is a multihued preposition and adverb in place of which a more precise term is often better. The traditional sense is adverbial, “in a position facing each other.” But the word is most often figurative. And as a preposition, vis-à-vis has been extended to the senses “opposite to; in relation to; as compared with.” Although more straightforward phrases are often available, they’re sometimes longer—e.g.:

- “This shift appears to be based partly on the assumption that private equity returns provide some diversification (vis-à-vis traditional stock market investments).”
- “That would have done far more to bolster California’s economic competitiveness vis-à-vis other Western states where income levies are considerably larger.”
- “Small, remote towns suffer from a number of deprivations—along with corresponding advantages—vis-à-vis big cities.”

But shorter substitutes are often available—e.g.:

- “A German mark sharply lower vis-à-vis [read against] the dollar and sterling has also helped boost exports.”
- “But I’ve often had this question vis-à-vis [read about] business lunches: Just how unusual and personalized can I be with them and not lose every client I’ve ever had?”
- “The present chapter delves into agencies’ accountability vis-à-vis [read to] the European Parliament and the Council of the European.”

**viscera** (= internal organs) is the plural of viscus. See plurals (b).

**viscous.** See vicious.

**vise.** See vice.

**visible; visual.** Visible means “capable of being seen; perceptible to the eye.” Visual means “of, relating to, or involving vision or sight.”

Hence the phrase for a blind or nearly blind person is *visually impaired,* not *visibly impaired,* which is something of a malapropism—e.g.:

- “Lyons also hopes to exhibit a sensory garden in Greeley Park that is accessible to the visibly [read visually] impaired and the physically challenged.”
- “Stovall is founder and president of the Narrative Television Network, which makes television accessible for blind and visibly [read visually] impaired people.”

*Visibly impaired,* however, is a phrase that police appropriately use in describing a person noticeably affected by alcohol.

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

**visibly impaired** misused for *visually impaired:* Stage 1

**visit, n.; visitation.** Dictionaries have long labeled these words synonyms, and for the most part their senses overlap. Visitation, for example, may denote simply the act or an instance of visiting—e.g.:

- “Visititation is seasonal; few guests come in winter.”

But often, the words’ connotations suggest a distinction. A visit is, in general, a casual or recreational meeting <a social visit>. Visitation connotes (1) the number of visits collectively; (2) a visit with a formal purpose or authorization, or (3) a supernatural or divine appearance. E.g.:

- Sense 1: “Daily temperatures can exceed the century mark in the summer months, when visitation is lowest.”
- Sense 2: “There is one particularly amazing moment—a tribute to the subtlety of this film’s writing, directing and acting—during his first allowed visitation at the nursing home.”
- Sense 3: “Dancers regularly trot onstage to freeze as if overtaken by a sudden visitation of imagination or vibe.”

Without some suggestion of collectivity, formality, or transcendence, visitation often just sounds like a magniloquent substitute for the simpler word—e.g.:

- “[David] Bell is a gifted director and his fluid, lovely work here is extraordinary. This is a production that deserves visitations [read visits] from Broadway
visual. See ocular & visible.

visualize does not mean “to see,” but “to see in the mind’s eye.” So it’s silly to say, as some do, that they can’t visualize very well because of the fog.

vita [L. “life”] is nearly synonymous with résumé. The difference is that vita usually refers to an academic’s accomplishments and is often longer than the typical one-page résumé. Despite the widespread notion to the contrary, the word vita /vee-ta/ is not a slangy, informal shortening of curriculum vitae [L. “course of one’s life”], in which vitae is in the genitive case. Rather, vita is a perfectly good term in itself.

vitiate /vish-ee-ayt/ = (1) to impair the quality or reduce the value of (something); (2) to invalidate in whole or in part; or (3) to corrupt morally; debase. Sense 1 is the most widely used—e.g.: “Their whole approach is vitiates by the lack of historical (as opposed to literary) insight into the true social and cultural evolution of classical translation down the centuries.” Peter Green, “The Slampam Blues,” New Republic, 19 Feb. 1996, at 37. Sense 2 is the legal sense <a contract to a place is to go there to see (as a sightseer would) or for viz. he saw also the quality of life (a new Jerusalem), viz. God would move into the city, there among the people.” Abram Sangrey, “This Is God’s House and Our Sacred Place,” Lancaster New Era, 1 Dec. 1997, at A5.

The abbreviation raises three questions. First, how does one derive viz. from videbere? The final -z in the abbreviation represents the medieval Latin symbol of contraction for et or -et (OED). Second, how does one pronounce viz.? Preferably by saying “namely.” But if you want to say the Latin term, it’s /vi-del-a-sit/. Third, how do you punctuate it? As with e.g. and i.e., the abbreviation is customarily set off from the rest of the sentence by a pair of commas (or, when it begins a sentence or a parenthetical expression, by one comma). See e.g. & i.e. Current ratio (namely vs. viz.): 5:1

vocation. See avocation.

vociferous. A. And voracious. A vociferous person is loud, noisy, and clamorous; a vociferous crowd is characterized by unrestrained yelling. A voracious person or animal, meanwhile, devours food ravenously; a voracious reader has an insatiable desire for books, magazines, and other reading materials. In short, although the two words appear similar, they apply to very different types of behavior.

Through word-swapping, they get confounded. Vociferous is sometimes misused for voracious—e.g.: “Monsignor Field [is] a nurturing mentor, with a depth that allowed him to be at once an aficionado of the opera, a vociferous [read voracious] reader and a fan of basketball.” Susan Tod, “Rev. William Field, 84, a Priest’s Priest,” Star-Ledger (Newark), 4 Dec. 2000, at 67.

• “A vociferous [read voracious] reader who tears through several books a week and loves crime thrillers, Jackson applied for her first library card when she was 6 years old.” Christina Headrick, “Nostalgia Marks Mazy Library’s Final Day,” St. Petersburg Times, 23 Mar. 2002, Clearwater §, at 1.

The opposite error is somewhat less common—e.g.:
• “Did everyone miss the target when the men’s 4x100-meter relay team was so voraciously [read vociferously] condemned for its post-race antics?” David Steele, “At Least Olympics Seek Fix for Drugs,” S.F. Chron., 19 Oct. 2000, at E2.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. vociferous misused for voracious: Stage 1
   Current ratio (voracious reader vs. *vociferous reader): 185:1
2. voracious misused for vociferous: Stage 1

B. And *vociferant. Vociferous (in the sense given in (A)) has always (since the 18th century) been the standard term; *vociferant is a needless variant.

Vogue Words. In the mid-1990s, colorful hair dye became all the rage. Teenagers used it. Thirty-something used it—and applied it to their young children’s hair. Women of all ages used it. Even many middle-aged men used it. By 2001, the craze had long since spread over the globe. For example, in the summer of that year, it was difficult to spot, among hordes of young people at various places in Japan, a single undyed pate: seemingly everyone had light-brown or blond hair (if not some bolder color).

That’s the way fads are. People latch on to them to make a statement about themselves. But the statement truly has little to do with individuality: it’s all about groupism. You adopt a fad to show that you’re with it, hip, or young at heart. You don’t want to be left out or left behind. That’s the essence of it.

Linguistic fads are much the same, but they often work at a less conscious level. Words and phrases sprinkled into conversation—as well as certain syntactic habits—have an effect that’s somewhat analogous to that of ostentatiously dyed hair. Usage critics have traditionally grouped these phrases under the rubric of “Vogue Words.”

Not surprisingly, various types of vogue words are used as badges to show that you belong to a certain group. If, in 2001, you wanted (subliminally or consciously) to show that you were sensitive to psychology, you'd have said that someone cannot bring closure to issues about codependency or dysfunctional mentoring or parenting or partnering; that a 12-step program will empower recovering addicts (or abusers, etc.) through validation and transparency. If you wanted to show that you were astute in business, you'd make a mantra of growing the business through solutions and workable solutions, especially e-solutions of various kinds. If you wanted to show that you were a cool person under the age of 25, you'd turn old laudatory expressions into exclamatory nouns ending in -ness (Coolness! Awesomeness! Greatness!). If you didn't want to discuss something—or really did but wanted to add to the salaciousness of the discussion—you'd say, Don't even go there! or I'm not even going to go there! If you wanted to dismiss something—or really did but wanted to add to the salaciousness of the discussion—you'd say, Whatever! (with the accent on the second syllable). (See whatever (b).) But if you were grateful for some small thing that someone had done for you, you'd exclaim Whatever! (with the accent on the second syllable). (See whatever (a).)

Current ratio: 43:1

**voluptuous** (= sexy; sensually gratifying) has occasionally been misspelled *voluptious* since the late 18th century. E.g.: “It is a big wine, yet soft, *voluptious* [read *voluptuous*], and very fruity with fat, berrylike fruity flavors.” Robert M. Parker Jr., “The Harvest of 1983,” Wash. Post, 2 Nov. 1983, at E1.

Current ratio: 2,478:1

**voracious.** See vociferous.

**voracity.** See malapropisms & veracity.

**vortex.** Pl. vortices or vortexes. Although there is much to be said for the second of these as a homegrown plural, vortices is significantly more common in print. See plurals (b) & vertex.

Current ratio (vortices vs. vortexes): 12:1

**votable.** So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *vote-able*. See mute e.

**votary; ✳votarist.** The former has been standard since the 16th century. The latter is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 51:1

**vouch; ✳avouch.** The first is the word in current use. *Avouch* is obsolete, having been replaced by *vouch for* in the sense “to provide proof, to give a guarantee” *<I’ll vouch for her honesty>. Vouch itself is now almost always intransitive in this way (followed by for). As a transitive verb meaning “to call upon, rely on, or cite as authority,” *vouch* is archaic.

**vouchsafe** ordinarily denotes “to grant something in a condescending way,” or, more neutrally, “to grant something as a special favor.” The word is often mildly sarcastic—e.g.: “Gen. Powell’s opinions, as he has been *vouchsafing* them, were unfounded or, where formed, oddly out of date.” “America’s Son,” Nat’l Rev., 27 Nov. 1995, at 12.

The term is sometimes misused in two ways. First, it’s sometimes used as if it were equivalent to *grant, bestow on,* or provide—e.g.: “Last week, MTV *vouched* [read *bestowed on*] him its Video Vanguard award, shortly after his sitcom, ‘In the House,’ went into its third season.” Thomas Goetz, “Sell Sell,” Village Voice, 16 Sept. 1997. Second, it’s sometimes misused for *vouch for* (= to provide assurance of)—e.g.: “What do your other dealer friends and collectors think about it? Has a reliable restorer *vouched* [read *vouched for*] its condition?” Edward Lewine, “How Not to Look Like a Dope in an Art Gallery,” N.Y. Times, 14 Sept. 1997, § 13, at 1.

When you put it all together, of course, it’s ludicrous: “Language-wise, I am, like, majorly bummed by the way people abuse the mother tongue. This one’s a no-brainer. Yo, I’ve got issues here, and this is my bottom line.” Thomas B. Harrison, “Slang, Jargon Are Linguistic High Crimes,” Montgomery Advertiser, 12 Jan. 1997, at C1.

**voicemail.** One word. The OED dates it back to 1980.

**void, adj.** See adjectives (b).

**volitional; ✳volitive.** Volitional (= of or belonging to volition [i.e., an act of willing or resolving]; pertaining to the action of willing) has been the standard term since the late 18th century. E.g.: “Mary Ann Sandoval . . . testified that she believed Stuart’s memory loss and behavioral problems were self-serving and volitional.”

Current ratio: 3:1
Vowel Clusters are not indigenous to the English language, although one finds them in our imported vocabulary, in words such as *giaour (= one outside the Muslim faith), maieutic (= Socratic), moueing (= making a pouting face), onomatopoeia (= the use of imitative or echoic words, such as *click, *fizz, *plop, and *splash), and queuing (AmE) or *queueing (BrE).

In forming neologisms, especially by agglutination, one should be wary of clumping vowels together in a way that would strike readers as un-English. Even three consecutive vowels may have this effect, as in *antiaircraft, which is better hyphenated: *anti-aircraft.

voyage; passage. A slight differentiation is possible. Voyage denotes a journey, especially by sea. Passage is almost synonymous with voyage in that sense, but it does not have as much connotation of returning. That is, passage usually denotes some sort of one-way change, such as (1) a progression from one place or state to another <life passages>; (2) a route from one place to another <Northwest Passage>; (3) a ticket or other right to transportation <passage to Hawaii>; (4) part of a written work, esp. one read or cited <a passage from *Hamlet>; or (5) the act of voting to enact a law <passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Law>.

vs. See v.

vulva. See vagina.

W

W. For the pronunciation, see *Duby*a.

waft (= [vb.] to float or be carried lightly) is pronounced /wahft/ or /waft/ (rhyming with *raft).

wage; wages. The word can be indifferently singular <he earns a good wage> or plural <she earns good wages>, but the latter form has always predominated in all varieties of English. The plural, of course, is construed with a plural verb <your wages are now subject to a garnishment order>. The biblical phrasing *The wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23) is regarded as a linguistic anomaly—and a set phrase.

wagon; *waggon. The first has been standard AmE since about 1830 and standard BrE since about 1920. The second is a chiefly BrE variant.

wainscoting (= wood paneling lining an interior wall) has been the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike since about 1820s. *Wainscoting is a variant. Current ratio: 10:1

waist; waste. Substituting *waste for waist is most often a pun—e.g.: “County Is Waste-Deep in Reduction/Recycling Assistance” (headline), *Tampa Trib., 9 Nov. 2008, Local News §, at 3. But not always—e.g.: • “Johnny Campbell, 22, tied a tow chain around his *waste [read *waist] and waded through *waist-deep [read *waist-deep] water to Guerrero’s car, but as he touched her hand, a rush of water pushed the car out of his reach.” Alex Branch & Scott Streeter, “Flood Kills Mother, Child,” *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram, 2 May 2004, at A1, A23. • “A prime spot for picture-taking is the fifth-floor rooftop of the City View Cafe on Dinh Tien Hoang Street, a few doors from the Thang Long Puppet Theatre where puppeteers stand *waist-deep [read *waist-deep] in water while manipulating fire-breathing dragons with bamboo sticks.” Carol Pucci, “Hello, Hanoi,” *Seattle Times, 24 Feb. 2008, at L11.

• “While crossing a swollen, waste-deep [read waist-deep] creek linked arm-in-arm 45 minutes earlier, one member of the Sammamish teen’s party had slipped and pulled two others underwater.” Craig Hill, “Personal Locators Can Be a Lifesaver,” *Mobile Register, 14 Aug. 2008, Z §, at 9.

waistband is sometimes, in a gross error, written *wasteband (sporadic through the 20th century)—e.g.: • “The women sucked in their breath and tried to push their belly-buttons into fleshy balloons over their *waistbands [read wastebands].” Rebecca Walsh, “Dancers at Fest Bare Their Bellies, Escape Daily Grind,” *Salt Lake Trib., 28 Aug. 1994, at B1. • “He allegedly pulled a gun from his *waistband [read waste-band] and pointed it at Fuller’s head.” “Kamiah Man Faces Two Assault Counts,” *Lewiston Morning Trib. (Idaho), 4 Feb. 2003, at A11.

For more on this curiosity, see Garner on Language and Writing 259–60, 283 (2009). Current ratio: 6,891:1

waistcoat (= [in BrE] a vest) is traditionally and best pronounced not as it’s spelled, but instead /wes-kat/.

wait. See await.

waiter. If women can be actors and sculptors, then surely they can be waiters. Yet in looking for nonsexist alternatives to *waitress, various groups have championed the silly terms *waitperson and *waitron. Let waiter (or, if need be, *server) do for either sex. See sexism (d).

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waiter as a gender-neutral term: Stage 5

wait in line; wait on line. The former is the standard AmE expression. The latter is a regionalism in the Northeast, especially in New York. Although some might think that it’s the product of the computer age

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

(i.e., being *online*), in fact it dates back to the 19th century and became a common regionalism during the late 1960s. Cf. *stand in line*.

Current ratio (*wait in line* vs. *wait on line*): 29:1

**waitperson**; *waitron*. See *waiter*.

**waive. A. Narrowing of Sense.** This word has undergone what linguists call “specialization,” its primary sense having gotten narrower with time. Originally, *waive* was just as broad as *abandon* (<the fleeing thief waived the stolen goods>). But today, *waive* means “to relinquish voluntarily (something that one has the right to expect)” <the popular entertainer waived her usual fee>.

**B. Confused with *wave*.** *Waive* sometimes occurs where *wave* (= to move to and fro, esp. with the hand) belongs—e.g.:• “The wife sat down and the presiding priest, *waiving* [read *waving*] aside the husband’s lawyer as he had the wife’s, asked to hear the husband’s side of the case.” John R. Allison, “Five Ways to Keep Disputes Out of Court,” *Harv. Bus. Rev.*, Jan.–Feb. 1990, at 166.

• “But a new bidder—the Blockbuster Bowl, sponsored by the video store chain—threw the deal into doubt by *waiving* [read *waving*] a few extra dollars before the noses of our institutions of higher learning.” Frederick C. Klein, “Who Cares Who’s No. 1?” *Wall Street J.*, 3 Jan. 1992, at A5.

• “[Bobby] Cox thought it was better than borderline, and he let home plate umpire Chris Guccione know it with *waived* [read *waiver*] of his hand as he went to the mound to pull [Ron] Mahay for Tyler Yates.” Vic Feuerherd, “Late Revival Meeting,” *Wis. State J.*, 22 Sept. 2007, at C3.

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| *waive* misused for *wave*: Stage 1 |
| Current ratio (*wave* vs. *waive*): 5:1 |

**waiver.** *Waiver* (= voluntary relinquishment of a right or advantage) is primarily a noun; *waiver* (= to vacillate) is primarily a verb. It is a fairly common solecism to misuse *waiver* for *waver*—e.g.:• “Mayor Koch . . . *waivered* [read *wavered*] between silence and support for months.” “Bess Myerson Accused of Stealing $44 in Goods,” *N.Y. Times*, 28 May 1988, at 9.

• “But when the defense lawyer found out the judge was *waivering* [read *waivering*], Mr. Polanski left the country.” Caryn James, “A Life in Exile from America, from Memory,” *N.Y. Times*, 17 Nov. 1993, at B1, B2.

• “We continue our gentle adventure together. Our vows to disappear and our promises never to write another book have held for years . . . but sometimes they *waver* [read *waiver*]:” Walter Scott, “Personality Parade,” *Parade*, 3 July 1994, at 2 (quoting Richard Bach, the author of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, on being married to the actress Leslie Parrish-Bach).

• “They get sensitive and uncomfortable, and *waiver* [read *waver*].” Julie Steelman, *The Effortless Yes* 29 (2011).

When *waivered* is not misused for *wavered*, it often displaces the more straightforward verb *waived*—e.g.: “While none have been approved by EPA, the three ‘tertiary’ ethers are chemically similar to MTBE and would probably be *waivered* [read *waived*] by the EPA.” George H. Unzelman, “U.S. Clean Air Act Expands Role for Oxygenates,” *Oil & Gas J.*, 15 Apr. 1991, at 44.

Finally, *waver* occasionally ousts *waiver* from its rightful position—e.g.: “Out of the school’s 575 students, 38 have signed *wavers* [read *waivers*] to allow them not to wear the uniform.” Brian Hall, “Reaching Out,” *Orange County Register*, 1 Feb. 1996, at 3.

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1. *waiver* misused for *waver*: Stage 1

| Current ratio (*waver* between vs. *waiver between*): 21:1 |

2. *waver* misused for *waiver*: Stage 1

| Current ratio (*sign a waiver* vs. *sign a waver*): 109:1 |

**wake; awake; awaken.** The past-tense and past-participial forms of *wake* and its various siblings are perhaps the most vexing in the language. Following are the preferred declensions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>waved</em></th>
<th><em>waived</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wake &gt; woke &gt; waked (or woken)</td>
<td>awake &gt; awoke &gt; awakened (or awoken)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>awakened &gt; awakened</td>
<td>waked up &gt; woke up &gt; waked up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See **irregular verbs**. For the past participle, AmE prefers *waked*; BrE prefers *woken*.

**wallet; billfold.** The traditional distinction is that a *wallet* holds paper money unfolded and contains compartments for coins and the like, whereas a *billfold* (as the name suggests) holds it folded and does not contain extra compartments. But *wallets* now fold, so most people use the words interchangeably. And *billfold* is largely seen as sex-specific for males.

**wallop (= to hit someone or something very hard, esp. either with one’s hand or with something in one’s hand) is inflected *walloped* and *walloping*. See spelling (b).**

**walrus, pl. *walruses*.**

**wane; wax.** *Wane* = to decrease in strength or importance. *Wax* (= [1] to increase in strength or importance; or [2] to become) is used primarily (in sense 1) as a correlative of *wane* (<her influence waxed and waned>). In sense 2, it appears in such hackneyed expressions as to *wax poetic*, *eloquent*, etc.

**wangle.** See *wrangle*.

**want, n.** The usual sense, of course, is “something desired” or “a desire.” But *want* has a long history as a **formal word** meaning “lack,” especially in the phrase *for want of*. Though this sense formerly had a literary cast, today it is fairly common even in informal writing—e.g.:


• “The kids are killing their parents at home for *want* of something to do, a place to go where they can be kids

The corresponding participle wanting (= lacking) is somewhat more common—e.g.:

- “It was not the intellectual gifts or probity of the three that the ABA found particularly wanting.” Harvey Berelman, “ABA’s ‘Unqualified’ Judges Doing Well,” Nat’l L.J., 13 Jan. 1996, at A1.

wanton; reckless. In law, the word wanton usually denotes a greater degree of culpability than reckless does. A reckless person is generally fully aware of the risks and may even be trying and hoping to avoid harm. A wanton person may be risking no more harm than the reckless person, but he or she is not trying to avoid the harm and is indifferent about whether it results. In criminal law, wanton usually connotes malice, but reckless does not.

In nonlegal contexts, a reckless person is careless and irresponsible but may not have considered the possible consequences (<a reckless skateboard rider>). And a wanton person is someone who is sexually unrestrained (<a wanton lover>, or acts capriciously, cruelly, or maliciously (<a wanton bully>). See reckless.

-ward(s). See directional words (A) & toward (A).

warrant, v.t. Today, warrant most commonly means “to justify.” And in modern idiom, one naturally says that acts or beliefs are warranted, but not so naturally that people are warranted. Thus Such a conclusion warrants federal regulators in substituting their views for those of local officials reads better this way: Such a conclusion warrants federal regulators’ substituting their views for those of local officials. (On the possessive in that revision, see fused participles.) Nevertheless, the OED contains examples of warrant used with personal objects from the 17th century. This usage remains current mostly in law, though sometimes it appears in other contexts—e.g. “I wanted to hear what the reasons were, what could possibly warrant a woman to decide to do this.” Renee Lynn Glembin, “Mothers and Motherhood,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 11 May 1997, at 1.

Current ratio (warranted his vs. warranted him): 2:1

wary; weary. To be weary of something is to be on one’s guard against it: cautious, watchful, and perhaps worried. E.g.: “Consumers remain wary of anthrax sent through the mail.” Stephanie Miles, “Apparel E-tailers to Spruce Up for Holidays,” Wall Street J., 6 Nov. 2001, at B6.

To be weary is to be physically fatigued or, by extension, “sick and tired” of something and ready for it to end. E.g.: “Maryland players are apparently growing weary about being asked questions about Duke guard Jason Williams.” Michael Murphy, “Final Four Summary,” Houston Chron., 31 Mar. 2001, at 8.

Doubtless by false association with wary and perhaps with leery (= suspicious and careful), writers sometimes misuse weary—e.g.:

- “As a general principle, Congress should be weary [read wary] of trading tax cuts for expensive new entitlements.” A Deal Republicans Must Refuse, Wash. Times, 29 June 2000, at A22.

Washington’s Birthday. See Presidents’ Day.

waste, to lay. See lay waste.

*waistband. See waistband.

wastebasket; wastepaper basket. Both terms came into use in the 1850s. For about a century, the shorter form wastebasket was regarded as an Americanism by speakers of BrE. But English speakers universally like economy of expression—anything to minimize syllables—and beginning about 1960 wastebasket rose rapidly in BrE, overtaking the longer form in frequency of use by 1990. Both terms are still in frequent BrE use, probably by different generations of speakers. In AmE, trash can appears more frequently even than wastebasket—but trash can may refer to a small receptacle within a house or office, to the larger receptacle within those places, or to the even larger receptacle put outside for collection (also, in this latter use, called a garbage can in AmE or dustbin or litter bin in BrE).

wastewater. One word.

watermark; water-mark; water mark. Watermark = (1) a line made by a body of water at its surface (as in a flood) and used to gauge the water’s depth; or (2) a faint identifying mark pressed into fine paper during manufacture, or an analogous identifier embedded in a computer file by software. The word in sense 2 is
always written as a single compound, while in sense 1 it may also be hyphenated or made two words. When sense 1 is modified by adjectives such as high and low, the compound noun must be split since the adjective specifically modifies water, forming a phrasal adjective that in turn modifies mark <the high-water mark of her career>. To write of a *high water mark is to invite miscues because the reader may think of a paper-company logo too near the top of a page—e.g.: -  

• "In between, though, the Dukes managed to overcome droughts (nothing in a half-dozen possessions en route to that low-water mark [read low-water mark] 17-point deficit) and poor shooting (32 percent the first half)." Chuck Finder, "Hard by the Hocking River," Pitt. Post-Gaz., 30 Nov. 2001, at B1.  


• "In today's Information Age, work is accomplished—or should be—through a series of linked processes where client service, flexibility and cost containment have replaced volume as the high watermark for [read high-water mark of] success." John A. Uzzi, "What It Takes for Agencies to Thrive in the Information Age," Nat'l Underwriter—Life & Health, 30 Sept. 2002, at 29. (Unfortunately, correcting *high watermark hardly improves this commercialese.)

**water under the bridge:** water over the dam. Both phrases allude to time gone by and events passed. Both water over the dam adds is the connotation of missed opportunities—e.g.:  

• Whether other prosecutions should have taken place under the Intelligence Identities Protection Act is another question, and it appears at this point to be water over the dam unless Mr. Fitzgerald and the Department of Justice have further plans in mind." Editorial, "Libby's Fate," Pitt. Post-Gaz., 7 June 2007, at B6.  

• "After a one-year hiatus—and a whole lot of water under the bridge since then—the World Bank is bringing back the office Christmas party." Amy Argetsinger & Roxanne Roberts, "Banking on Holiday Cheer," Wash. Post, 3 Dec. 2007, at C3.  

The two expressions occasionally get mangled—e.g.: "As I've said before, Newark never should have dumped $210 million into the arena . . . . That, however, is water over the bridge [read water under the bridge or water over the dam] and into the sewer." Joan Whitlow, "Around Arena, Rubble, Rubble, Toil and Trouble," Star-Ledger (Newark), 5 Oct. 2007, Editorial §, at 19.  

wave. See waive (B).  

waver. See waiver.  

wax. See wane.  

**waylay** > **waylaid** > **waylaid**. Occasionally the past tense or past participle is misspelled *waylaid—e.g.:

• "Keggi's career was waylaid [read waylaid] in 1993 when she drank some bad water and was stricken with lingering symptoms from E.-Coli bacteria," Paul Harber, "They're Going the Distance," Boston Globe, 24 Apr. 1997, at C10.  


• "Within the first three hours of the 26.2-mile event, hundreds of runners had been waylaid [read waylaid] by the heat and medical tents were filled with participants requiring treatment for dehydration and heat exhaustion." Michael Tsai, "Honolulu Marathon Feels Chicago's Heat," Honolulu Advertiser, 10 Oct. 2007, at D1.  

**Current ratio (waylaid vs. *waylaid): 400:1**  

**way(s).** In the sense "the length of a course or distance," way has long been considered the standard term <a long way>. In a singular sense, ways occurs frequently in AmE <quite a ways to go> but rarely in BrE. One might be tempted to call it dialectal, but the singular use in a ways to go actually occurs in AmE print sources about half as often as a way to go. E.g.: "This is premature, of course; Fox still has a ways to go [read some way to go?] before it's a full-fledged network." Larry Reibstein & Nancy Hass, "Rupert's Power Play," Newsweek, 6 June 1994, at 46. See dialect.  

**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**  

*ways to go: Stage 3 (read high-water mark)

**way which** is typically erroneous for way in which. E.g.: "This column has as its main goal the empowerment of you, the reader, about ways which [read way in which] you can become more informed and thereby take more responsibility for your own health." Glenn Ellis, "Using Herbs as a Method of Preventive Medicine," Phil. Trib., 14 Jan. 1997, at B8.  

But it's often quite natural and idiomatic to use that in place of in which, or even to omit the relative pronoun altogether. These phrasings are much more relaxed—e.g.:  

• "Ways that they can help include volunteering to tutor." Letter of Janie Moore, "Parents' Help at Schools Is Good for Children," Columbus Dispatch, 7 Nov. 1997, at A10.  


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**  

*way which for way in which: Stage 1 (read high-water mark)

**Current ratio (way in which vs. *way which): 11:1**

we. See first person & pronouns.  

weal. See wield.  

**wean** means either "to cause (a child or young animal) to become accustomed to food other than the mother's milk" or, by extension, "to withdraw (a person) gradually from a source of dependence." Hence a person is typically weaned off something—e.g.:  

• "Skeptics have claimed this decline in caseload would slow and then halt once the most employable welfare recipients were weaned off the rolls." Robert Rector, "Don't Listen to

But *weaned on*—used illogically in the sense “raised on, brought up with”—is a spreading contagion. E.g.:

• “For a culture *weaned on* [read *brought up on*] Hollywood’s interpretation of romance, the very notion that any healthy, intelligent, attractive male might desire a woman over 35 is a radical concept.” Shari Graydon, “There’s Powerful Appeal in the Wrinkles of Age,” Vancouver Sun, 25 May 1996, at D6.

• “We women were *weaned on* [read *nurtured on or brought up on*] tales of princes and princesses, fairy godmothers, ugly villains and comely heroes of noble character winning against the odds at every turn.” Bea Perry, “The Dream Is Over,” Denver Post, 12 Oct. 1997, at D5.

• “Brought up on a familial feed of Emersonian and Unitarian principles and then, Frank tells us, *weaned on* [read *nurtured by*] Sullivan’s critical comments, the theory became Wright’s touchstone.” Donald Leslie Johnson, On Frank Lloyd Wright’s Concrete Adobe 31 (2013).

See illogic. See also overweaning.

**Language-Change Index**

*weaned on for raised on: Stage 2*

**weaponize.** For a long time—probably beginning in the 1950s—this *-ize* neologism was in the exclusive domain of military and international-relations jargon. Uses were infrequent, but the word occurred in popular sources as early as 1984—e.g.:


• “Iran also is very unlikely to ‘weaponize’ a missile with chemical or nuclear material,” a U.S. official said.” Robin Wright, “U.S. Won’t Halt Drive for Iran Ties,” L.A. Times, 24 July 1998, at A12.

After September 11, 2001, when terrorists brought down the World Trade Center in New York and attacked the Pentagon, the general public became more aware of biological warfare and bioterrorism. Shortly after that event, cases of anthrax started appearing in cities scattered throughout the U.S., and the word sprang into general use—e.g.:


• “Not only did the incident lift the curtain on the Soviet Union’s decades-long program to *weaponize* disease—hundreds of tons of anthrax, and a few dozen tons of plague and smallpox, were stored around the country for potential deployment in bombs and missiles—but it brought home how vulnerable crowded urban areas are to biological warfare.” Ken Alibek & Stephen Handelman, “Bioterror: A Very Real Threat,” Wall Street J., 11 Oct. 2001, at A22.

• “Because of the difficulty in ‘weaponizing’ biological agents, she [Claudine McCarthy] concludes that even if the Florida incident does turn out to be some sort of attack, Americans have no reason to panic.” Ronald Bailey, “Bioterrorism,” S.F. Chron., 14 Oct. 2001, at D3.

Although many neologisms ending in *-ize* are considered ugly and undesirable, the very thing that *weaponize* (as well as *weaponization*) denotes is horrific. And there’s no other word for it. So this is a word whose coinage almost no one objects to: all the right-minded objections focus on the thing that the word denotes. See *-ize*.

**wear > wore > worn.** So infused—since the mid-18th century. The simple-past *wore* is sometimes mistakenly used as a past participle—e.g.:

• “And Imler turned out to be a pleasant surprise, using his quickness to create shots and gaining confidence at the point as the season has *wore* [read worn] on.” John C. Cotey, “The 2 Faces of Pirates Series,” St. Petersburg Times, 11 Dec. 1998, at 4.


• “Bulls teammate Steve Kerr had said recently he thought the pressure of stardom and the grind of celebrity has *wore* [read worn] Michael down until he had nothing left.” Brian Schmitz, “Bad News, NBA: No More Mike,” Orlando Sentinel, 12 Jan. 1999, at C1.

See irregular verbs.

**Language-Change Index**

*wore* as a past participle for *worn*: Stage 1

Current ratio (*had worn vs. *had wore*): 308:1

we aren’t. See we’re not.

weary. See wary.

**Weasel Words.** Theodore Roosevelt said, in a speech in St. Louis on May 31, 1916: “One of our defects as a nation is a tendency to use what have been called weasal words. When a weasel sucks eggs it sucks the meat out of the egg and leaves it an empty shell. If you use a weasel word after another there is nothing left of the other.” Some writers have incorrectly assumed that the metaphor suggested itself because of the wriggling, evasive character of the weasel. In any event, sensitive writers are aware of how supposed intensives (e.g., *very*) actually have the effect of weakening a statement. Many other words merely have the effect of rendering uncertain or hollow the statements in which they appear. Among these are candidly, clearly, compelling, dully, frankly, if practicable, manifestly, meaningful, obviously, perfectly, quite, rather, reasonable, seriously, significantly, somewhat,
substantially, undue, and virtually. See clearly, obviously, somewhat & very.

weatherman. See meteorologist & sexism (c).

weave > wove > woven. Weaved is correct only in the sense “moved in a winding or zigzag way”—e.g.: “Like scores of Saturday shoppers, Potter found himself in the middle of a 40-minute foot chase that began near the Capitol, weaved in and out of State Street buildings, and ended with the arrest of Shanett Washington, 19.” Gwen Carleton, “Foot Chase on State St.,” Wis. State J., 30 Dec. 1996, at A3. Otherwise, the past tense is wove, and the past participle woven—e.g.:


See irregular verbs.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. weaved misused for wove: Stage 2
   Current ratio (wove together vs. *weaved together): 6:1
2. weaved misused for woven: Stage 1
   Current ratio (had woven vs. *had weaved in most senses): 26:1


Current ratio (web page vs. webpage): 6:1

website. One word, lowercase. Although The Chicago Manual of Style and the AP Stylebook both make it one word, lowercase, some style sheets and dictionaries still specify *Web site (a clunker). Cf. World Wide Web.

Current ratio (website vs. *Web site): 1:1:1

we’d = (1) we would; or (2) we had. Sense 2 has not held as much favor as sense 1, but it is common and typically doesn’t cause any confusion because the past participle follows closely—e.g.: “We’d just arrived in Colorado. . . . Wèd gone to sleep gliding through the farmlands of Missouri.” Sue Wunder, "Perfect, Thanks to Mulligan," Christian Science Monitor, 21 Aug. 1997, at 16.

wed. This verb is traditionally inflected wed > wedded > wedded. As a past-tense form, wed is a variant that W2 labels “dialectal.” It has become especially widespread since the mid-1970s. Stick to wedded—e.g.: “Last year, the singer [Dan Fogelberg] wed [read wedded] his longtime fiancée, Anastasia Savage, who shares his love of oil painting,” Walter Scott, “Personality Parade,” Parade, 3 Jan. 1993, at 4.

• “In one corner is lawyer Sanford Asher, who last month wed [read wedded] the ex-stripper convicted of plotting to kill his former wife and frame him for the crime.” Larry Celona, “Doctor Sues Swiss Miss Hubby,” N.Y. Post, 4 Feb. 2003, at 22.

In the negative, the proper adjective is unwed <unwed mothers>. That has been so since about 1920. Before that time, *unwedded was the standard term.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
wed as past tense for wedded: Stage 4
Current ratio (has wedded vs. *has wed): 2:1

we’d better; *we better. See better (A).

wedding. See marriage.

Wedgwood. So spelled (for the fine pottery)—not *Wedgewood.

Wednesday is pronounced /wenz-dee/ or /wenz-day/. But some precisians want to—and do—say /wed-naz-day/, which is simply incorrect. The first -d- has long been silent.

weep > wept > wept. So inflected. The archaic form *weeped, more common in the 18th century than today, should be regarded as erroneous—e.g.:


• “We should have known it was a blunder that day, when [Cedric] Benson weeped [read wept] openly and then ripped other NFL teams who had questioned his character.” Jay Mariotti, “The Joke’s on Us, Chicago,” Chicago Sun-Times, 8 June 2008, Sports §, at A78.

See irregular verbs.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*weeped for wept: Stage 1
Current ratio (I wept vs. *I weeped): 926:1

weigh. For the mistaken use of *under weigh for underway, see underway.

weight, vb.; weigh. “For purposes of calculating the scores, the questions are weighted for their difficulty.” Should the word be weight or weigh? The answer is that weight (= to give value or assign importance to) is correct. To weigh something is to ascertain its weight (literally or metaphorically), not to establish it arbitrarily.

weird. So spelled. See spelling (A).

welcher. See welsher.

welder. So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *weldor.
well, when forming an adjective with a past-participle verb, is hyphenated if placed before the noun (e.g., a well-known person, a well-written book), but it's typically not hyphenated if the phrase follows what it modifies (e.g., a person who is well known, a book that is well written). See phrasal adjectives (g).

well-being is hyphenated, not spelled as one word.

wellerisms. A wellerism (after Sam Weller or his father, two noted characters in Charles Dickens's Pickwick Papers [1836–1837]), is a statement, especially a proverbial or allusive one, in which the speaker puts the words in a new light or a surprising setting, often by means of punning. E.g.:

- “That's food for reflection,” as the goat said when it swallowed a mirror.
- “Spit is such a horrid word,” said the pig, as he was about to be barbecued.

For the definitive work, see Wolfgang Mieder & Stewart A. Kingsbury, A Dictionary of Wellerisms (1994).

welsher; welcher. The former is traditional in the sense "someone who shirks his or her responsibility." It most commonly refers to someone who does not pay gambling debts. E.g.: “But I don't suppose he had a fermenting punter after him shouting 'Welsher!' at the top of his voice.” P.G. Wodehouse, The Return of Jeeves 22 (1954). (A punter is a wagerer; the speaker here is a bookmaker unable to pay off a winning bet.)

Many natives of Wales consider the word insulting, though there is no etymological evidence supporting a connection with Welsh (= of, relating to, or hailing from Wales). Even so, the popular mind makes this connection, and the careful writer must be heedful.

Current ratio (welshed on a bet vs. welched on a bet): 30:1

Welsh rabbit; Welsh rarebit. For the term denoting a dish of melted cheese on toast or crackers, Welsh rabbit has long been considered standard. It seems, however, that some 18th-century literalist, noting the absence of bunny meat in the dish, corrupted the term through false etymology to rarebit. Welsh rarebit didn't gain any real currency until about 1860 and didn't contend seriously with Welsh rabbit until about 1910. Today, both terms are still found, but unfortunately Welsh rarebit has been more common in print since the 1960s in BrE and the 1970s in AmE—perhaps to avoid offending the Welsh. But few have complained about this dish's name either way. See etymology (d).

Current ratio (Welsh rarebit vs. Welsh rabbit): 2:1

wench. See winch.

went missing. See go missing.

were. For the use of were in such expressions as if it were and I wish I were, see subjunctives.

wet > wet(ted) > wet(ted). Since the 18th century, this verb has had both a regular and an irregular past and past participle form. In most contexts, wet is the predominant form—e.g.:

- “And there are those other side effects: waking up to find your toddler has wet the bed, or waking up to the sound of puke hitting the bedspread.” Deanna Weniger, “Bed-Sharing Charm Is Wearing Off,” Times Herald, 28 Jan. 2003, at B4.

Wetted is used mostly in passive constructions <was wetted>, perhaps to eliminate the possible ambiguity that wet, in a phrase such as was wet, might be functioning as a predicate adjective and not as part of the verb phrase. The regular past form prevents any ambiguity—e.g.: “Cyanobacteria just beneath the surface apparented on the surface within minutes after the soil was wetted, and disappeared as the soil dried out.” “Following the Water,” Tulsa World, 7 Oct. 2002, at 7. See irregular verbs.

For the misuse of wet for whet, see whet.

we the people. Many seem to consider these words a set phrase—even if the phrasing is hiding information from we [read us] the people. In the best English, we the people is always a subject or a predicate nominative, but never the object of a verb or preposition. If the syntax calls for us the people, don't be afraid to use it.

From the 19th century on, such phrases as for us the people and with us the people have been standard. Only since 2000 has there been a serious upsurge in the ungrammatical phrases *for the people and *with the people.

wharf. The standard plural has been wharves—not *wharfs—in AmE since the 18th century and in BrE since about 1860. The archaic form *wharfs
predominated in BrE print sources from about 1700 to 1855 or so. See plurals (c). Cf. dwarf.

what. Eric Partridge opined that what, as the subject of a clause, generally takes a singular (third-person) verb regardless of what follows (not what follow) (Uc-A at 362). Thus:

- “What she wants is a new house.”
- “What we need in this company is more type-A personalities.”
- “What is at issue is assertions, not facts.”
- “He put on what is called his trousers.”
- “The two sides fear a deterioration in what has been amicable negotiations.”

Those sentences reflect the most conservative usage. The last three sound pedantic, though, and good usage allows more variety than Partridge’s streetjacketing advice. In fact, when used as a pronoun, what may be either singular or plural. The possibilities are several.

A. Singular what in the Noun Clause Followed by a Singular Predicate Noun. This construction is the easiest: what means “the thing that” and takes a singular verb. E.g.: “Unfortunately, what is needed is a return to terms and manners now maybe almost lost to our society.” Elliott Brack, “Phone Manners Show We’re Losing War for Civility,” Atlanta J.-Const., 27 Jan. 1997, at J2.

B. Singular what in the Noun Clause Followed by a Plural Predicate Noun. In this construction, as in (A), what means “the thing that.” But the main verb is governed by the plural noun that follows it. That is, the construction exemplifies inversion—e.g.:

- “But what worries restaurateurs more are customers like Eric Wyka.” Molly O’Neill, “Recession and Guilt Pare Dining Trade and Menus,” N.Y. Times, 31 Mar. 1991, at 1. (This could also be rendered without the inversion: Customers like Eric Wyka are what worries restaurateurs more.)
- “But what is puzzling are the complaints of some—most notably ABC’s Ted Koppel—that the conventions are so stage-managed as to be worthless from a news standpoint.” Peter Callaghan, “A Managed Convention Still Beats the Old Insider Game,” Morning News Trib. (Tacoma), 25 Aug. 1996, at G1. (This could also be rendered without the inversion: The complaints of some . . . are what is puzzling.)
- “Unfortunately, what’s needed are more working senators who will support it.” “Only Congress Can Plug Campaign Cash Loopholes,” San Antonio Express-News, 22 Mar. 1997, at B6. (This could also be rendered without the inversion: More working senators who will support it are what is needed.)

H.W. Fowler would have recommended rewriting the first of those sentences in this way: What worries restaurateurs more is customers like Eric Wyka. (FMEU1 at 705–06.) That, in Fowler’s view, would have been better because customers is a predicate noun that, despite being plural, shouldn’t affect the verb preceding it. But neither version can be called wrong today, and O’Neill’s original sentence typifies modern usage more than the Fowlerian revision does.

C. Plural what in the Noun Clause Followed by a Plural Predicate. In this construction, what means “the things that”—e.g.:

- “What the judge principally wants to hear are the relevant cases.” Glanville Williams, Learning the Law 163 (11th ed. 1982).
- “Ebullience and eccentricity are to be found on every page but what are harder to discover are the depths of the Hailsham character.” John Mortimer, “High Court Jester,” Sunday Times (London), 8 July 1990, § 8, at 1.

Although some would say that the following sentence is just as acceptable as the two preceding ones, it probably violates idiom in changing the set phrase what matters most: “What matter [read What matters] most in the exercise of focusing a collection are a lively imagination and an open mind.” Nicholas A. Basbanes, “Preserving the Creative Past,” Bibli, May 1997, at 8.

D. Undetermined what Followed by a Plural Predicate. In many contexts, what is the object in a noun clause; when that is so, the plural is three times as frequent as the singular. The what is hard to resolve into phrases such as “things that.” E.g.:

- “Many places in Ohio, including Guernsey County, have what are considered naturally elevated levels of radon.” Mike Lafferty, “Cleanup of Radioactive Slag Is Nearly Complete;” Columbus Dispatch, 25 Aug. 1997, at C1.

E. Plural what from Inverted that-Clause. Sometimes what signals an inverted relative clause, and when the inverted phrase has a plural subject, the construction what have (or what are, etc.) is called for—e.g.: “Japan and South Korea yesterday opened the way for an improvement in what have been frosty relations by announcing they will hold a summit next week.” William Dawkins & John Burton, “S. Korea, Japan Aim to Defrost Relations Summit;” Fin. Times, 13 June 1996, at 12. The what-clause is resolvable into relations that have been frosty, but with the inversion the that is changed to what.

whatever; whatsoever. A. Intensive Use. As an intensive (meaning “at all”), whatsoever is standard in AmE <he had no reason whatsoever>, though in all uses it is less frequent than whatever. Many American stylists prefer the shorter word, whatever—e.g.: “OPIC provides no grants or free benefits of any kind to any company or individual. None whatever.” Stuart E. Eizenstat, “ ‘Corporate Welfare’ or Savvy Policy?” Wash. Times, 23 July 1997, at A15. In fact, in AmE and BrE print sources alike, none whatever occurred with much greater frequency than none whatsoever until the last two decades of the 20th century.

On phrases such as what nature soever, see tmesis.

B. Whatever as an Intercurrence. Whatever has become a “Valley Girl” epithet for Whatever you say or I couldn’t care less. See VOGUE WORDS.
what it is is. Sentences with this ungainly construction have been much on the rise since the beginning of the 20th century. E.g.: "What the O'Rourke study really is is simply a glorified set of examinations in grammar." Janet Rankin Aiken, Commonsense Grammar 244 (1936). Dating from the mid-19th century, the phrasing had become common by the 1960s—e.g.: "What it is is a judicious mixing of standard English with a large number of 'Scotchifications.'" Stanley Rundle, "Language and Dialect," in A Linguistics Reader 86, 88 (Graham Wilson ed., 1967).

Notice that neither of those writers put a comma before the second is. That's the way to punctuate it—with nothing at all. Only the last of these three more recent examples got the punctuation right:

- "Clearly, this is no high-level policy debate. What it is, is [delete the comma] payback time for middle-class voters." "Shaking the Washington Goody Tree," Chicago Trib., 18 June 1997, at 20. (A possible revision: Clearly, this is no high-level policy debate. Instead, it's payback time for middle-class voters.)
- "The movie is not about stripping, and it's not likely to be among the top 10 or even 20 sexy movies you've ever seen. What it is is very funny, and what it's about, strangely enough, is self-respect and believing in yourself." Bob Fischbach, "Nudity Not Main Point of Funny 'Monty,'" Omaha World-Herald, 15 Sept. 1997, at 35. (A possible revision: you've ever seen. It's very funny, and strangely enough, it's about self-respect . . . .)

What happens is that the noun clause (what it is) needs a verb (the second is). But a better method in many contexts is to avoid the what-construction altogether and make the sentence more direct. The suggested revisions show only a few of the myriad ways to do that. Cf. is is.

what kind of. See kind of (b).

whatevery. See whatever.

what with. This phrase—meaning "in view of," "in consequence of," or "considering (one or more specified things)"—dates back to Old English. It began an adverbial phrase—e.g.:

- "This is a city in perpetual health crisis, what with drugs, AIDS, and teenage pregnancy, not to mention the occasional appearance of the West Nile virus or sewage spill into the Jones Falls." Michael Ollove, "Dr. Baltimore," Baltimore Sun, 1 Oct. 2000, at E9.
- "You wouldn't want to give the vice president the morning drive shift, what with the danger of him causing freeway commutes to fall asleep at the wheel." Steve Harvey, "Has Rush Limbaugh Heard?" L.A. Times, 9 Dec. 2000, at B4. (On the question whether him should be his in the final part of that sentence, see fused participles.)

- "Once, Mussina was told, the Yankees were a difficult sell, what with a wild card of an owner and instability on the roster and in the managerial and coaching ranks." Tom Verducci, "Winning Pitch Sure," Sports Illustrated, 11 Dec. 2000, at 60.

when and if. See if and when (b).

whence (= from where; from which; from what source) is an especially formal word that some readers consider stilted. Rudolf Flesch prematurely called it "obsolete," perhaps to reinforce his absolute recommendation to use from where instead. (See The ABC of Style 294 [1964].) But from where would hardly work in every context, and whence retains some vigor—e.g.: "If his method is to work at all, it must at least work in the sorts of economic cases whence it sprang." True, the writer might have said cases from which it sprang, but surely not cases from where it sprang.

From whence is technically redundant—because whence implies from—but the locution has appeared continually in the great writing from the 16th century: Shakespeare, Dryden, and Dickens all used the phrase. Still, it has seen a sharp decline in use since the early 18th century, just as whence has. From whence is less stilted than whence alone, which requires a greater literary knowledge for it to be immediately understandable. E.g.: "They cast the body into the water from whence it could not be reclaimed." Some people object to this usage, however well established; no one would object to from which. See from hence, hence & whence.

whenever; when ever. The usual expression is the solid whenever (= [1] at any time, or [2] every time that a specified thing happens). The two-word version is used as an emphatic extension of when in a question «When ever did you say such a thing?».

where. A. *Where it's at. The phrase *where it's at and its variants have long set up parents' and teachers' classic grammatical correction: "Where's my lunchbox at?" "Between the a and the i." Besides the faux "sin" of ending a sentence with a preposition (see prepositions (b)), the at is redundant, adding nothing to "where it is" or "where is it?" The usage is notoriously illiterate.

But the rebellious 1960s saw the phrase *where it's at reborn in several new senses: "the truth" <the guru really knows where it's at>, "the current fad" <the Nehru jacket's dead; tie-dye is where it's at now>, or "the most important or current thing" <in racecar design, aerodynamics is where it's at>. These senses have stuck and remain common as casualisms.

The idiom has become such a catchphrase that today it's once again used in the literal sense that parents and teachers have scolded children about, especially as a heading. An Internet search for the phrase returned thousands of hits, largely for sites giving directions to a place or listing an area's restaurants, clubs, and the like.
But it’s no more grammatical today than it ever was, and when not used with a wink and a nudge, it’s still a badge of non-U speech. See CLASS DISTINCTIONS.

In AmE and BrE print sources, instances of the query *Where is it at? are extremely rare in comparison with Where is it?—and have always been so. The at was added in dialectal AmE in the 1860s and gradually spread. But it has always been stigmatized as nonstandard.

Current ratio (Where is it? vs. *Where is it at?): 414:1

B. For in which. In formal prose, where should not be used as a relative pronoun instead of as a locative—hence not *case where but case in which. But if you want a relaxed tone, where may be more suitable. In the following example, the contraction I’ve might not comfortably fit in the same sentence as in which—hence where. I’ve deliberately chosen an example where this unspeakable cluster did not stand out.” Richard A. Lanham, Revising Prose (1979).

C. For when. Sometimes the locative where is misused for the temporal when—e.g.: “If ever there was a year where [read when] athletes burned and raged at close of day, it was this one.” David Steele, “Aging with Grace, Success,” S. F. Chron., 24 Dec. 2001, at C1.

whereabout(s). In all uses, whereabouts is the predominant form in AmE and BrE alike—as a noun I don’t know her whereabouts>, as an adverb <Whereabouts is the house?>, and as a conjunctive adverb <I don’t know whereabouts he lives>. The use as a noun is most common—e.g.: “The silver BMW was discovered after authorities, checking a tip on the suspect’s whereabouts, fanned out in the neighborhood.” Robert Rudolph, “Suspect Surfaces in Search,” Star-Ledger (Newark), 23 Sept. 1997, at 1.

The noun may take either a singular or a plural verb—e.g.: • “Vicky (last name unknown) is Tom’s girlfriend; her whereabouts is unknown.” J. R. Hunter, Over the Edge 202 (2013).

• “The advantage of such a program is that the offender’s whereabouts are known in a more real-time manner.” Robert D. Hanser, Introduction to Corrections 147 (2012).

From 1850 to 1950 or so, the singular and plural uses vied closely for predominance, but beginning in the mid-20th century the plural uses took a decided advantage in both BrE (before 1950) and AmE (beginning in the 1960s). The plural use is now five times as common in print as the singular in modern sources. Cf. *thereabout.

Current ratio (his whereabouts are vs. his whereabouts is): 5:1

whereas has a cluster of literary senses, namely, “although; while on the one hand; on the contrary; but by contrast.” These literary uses are a part of the general writer’s idiom—e.g.: “Whereas both his parents have black hair, he has blond.”

One usage critic has stated: “Whereas sounds stuffy. In spite of the objections of some grammarians, the common word is now while.” Rudolf Flesch, The ABC of Style 294 (1964). Yet whereas is better than while if the latter ambiguously suggests a time element, especially a clashing time element—e.g.: “While [read Whereas or Although] I brought her to the office, George took her home.” See while.

whereby (= by means of which), though sometimes overworked, is more concise than alternatives such as through which. So it can be a useful word—e.g.: “Republican Congressman Ralph Regula of Ohio, chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee in charge of federal parks, is brokering a deal whereby Congress will appropriate $5 million and give it to California, which will in turn give it to the Reagans for the 100-year-old adobe house and grounds they paid $480,000 for in 1974.” Margaret Carlson, “Lake Lucky, Here We Come!” Time, 29 Sept. 1997, at 19.

whet (= to sharpen or stimulate) commonly appears in the expression whet the appetite. Unfortunately, though, whet is often confused with wet (= to moisten, dampen, or drench)—e.g.: • “More importantly, he wet [read whetted] the appetite of Atlanta and presumably much of the country for an Olympics that, at least in distances under a mile, could carry a red, white and blue tint.” Jeff Metcalfe, “Johnson Breaks Record,” Ariz. Republic, 24 June 1996, at D1.


The error might occur in part because people tend to salivate when their appetites are stimulated; that is, the mouth becomes wet. But it’s still the wrong word. The opposite error (whet for wet) also sometimes occurs—e.g.: “To wet [read whet] the whistle, Glazer’s of New Orleans provided local libations, including a martini bar, spiced Cajun tea, and ambulance chasers.” Tara McElwan, “Hospital Puts On Nighttime Fundraiser,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 8 June 2008, Slidell §, at 13.

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1. wet misused for whet: Stage 1
   Current ratio (whet your appetite vs. *wet your appetite): 28:1
   2. whet misused for wet: Stage 1
   Current ratio (wet my whistle vs. *whet my whistle): 15:1

whether. A. Whether or not. Despite the superstition to the contrary, the words or not are usually superfluous, since whether implies or not—e.g.:

• “Yet he seemed troubled by having to decide whether or not [read whether] to show the film at Venice.” Ken Auletta, “Beauty and the Beast,” New Yorker, 16 Dec. 2002, at 65, 68.
• “[It depends on whether or not [read whether] the winds favor us, and whether or not [read whether there’s any trouble]” Gary Blackwood, Year of the Hangman 27 (2002).

For a histrionic discussion of whether or not—and its variations, including whether or not . . . or not—see James Joseph Duane, “Avoiding the Curse of Whether-or-not,” 6 Scribes J. Legal Writing 41 (1996–1997).

But the or not is necessary when whether or not means “regardless of whether” <the meeting will go on whether or not it rains>. E.g.: “You can tap many of these resources whether or not you have an account with that fund company,” Keith Kirkpatrick, “Picking Funds? Web Sites Can Help You Hit the Mark,” Home PC, 1 Oct. 1997, at 181. If you add the word regardless, however, either it or or not is superfluous—e.g.: “[Who can use IRAs:] Couples with AGIs up to $150,000, singles to $95,000, regardless of whether or not [read regardless of whether or not] they have retirement plans.” Lisa Reilly Cullen, “How the New Breed of IRA Eases Retirement Saving,” Money, 1 Oct. 1997, at 26.

B. As to whether. In The King’s English 344 (3d ed. 1931), the Fowler brothers describe this phrasing as “seldom necessary.” That judgment still stands—e.g.: • “Surprisingly, most folks have never taken the time to learn this skill . . . , [which] may mean the difference as to whether [read determine whether] someone with no pulse or respiration will live or die.” David Jennings, “We’re All Obligated to Learn Basic Life-Saving Techniques,” Cincinnati Post, 10 July 1997, at A20.


See as to (b) & question whether.

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As to whether: Stage 2

C. Of whether. Whether usually directly follows the noun whose dilemma it denotes: decision whether, issue whether, question whether. (See question whether.) But regardless, an adverb, makes regardless of whether. See *regardless of whether.

Although issue whether is typically better than issue of whether, the latter phrase has certain justifiable uses in which of is obligatory, usually when issue is modified by an adjective. E.g.: • “Thompson [referred to . . . the narrow legal issue of whether fund-raising calls made by either Clinton or Gore violated a federal law barring solicitation on federal property.” “Fund-Raising Law Not Broken, Clinton Says,” Chicago Trib., 23 Sept. 1997, at 11.

• “It also allowed trustees to avert the broader issue of whether the industrial park should become a residential area in the future.” Donna Kiesling, “Condos Rejected for Industrial Park Area,” Chicago Trib., 28 Sept. 1997, at 13.

D. And if. See if (a).

which. A. Generally. This word, used immoderately, is possibly responsible for more bad sentences than any other in the language. Small wonder that James Thurber wrote: “Most people don’t realize that is one ‘which’ leads to another . . . Your inveterate whichever . . . is not welcome in the best company.” “Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Guide to Modern English Usage,” in The Ways of Language: A Reader 142, 143 (Raymond J. Pflug ed., 1967). E.B. White was like-minded: “Careful writers, watchful for small conveniences, give which-hunting, remove the defining whiches, and by so improving improve their work.” William Strunk Jr. & E.B. White, The Elements of Style 59 (4th ed. 2000).

For a full explanation of which vs. that, see that (A). Suffice it to say here that if you see a which with neither a preposition nor a comma, dash, or parenthesis before it, it should probably be a that.

B. Wrongly Applied to People. Unlike that—which can apply to either things or people—which applies only to things. If people are referred to, the nonrestrictive relative pronoun is who—e.g.: “Rights advocates and officials in Zaire protested the treatment of the illegal immigrants, some of which [read whom] were reportedly bound with tape.” Youssef M. Ibrahim, “A Wary France Cracks Down on Its Muslims,” N.Y. Times, 7 Sept. 1995, at A3. See that (f). Cf. who (d).

There is, of course, an exception for traditional usages. For example, in Early Modern English, it was possible to cast the original version of the Lord’s Prayer with a personal which <Our Father, which art in Heaven>.

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which wrongly applied to people: Stage 1

Current ratio (people who vs. people that vs. *people which): 119:15:1

C. Beginning Sentences with. Increasingly in modern prose, Which is being used to begin an incomplete sentence. Is this permissible? Yes, the answer must be—primarily in three instances. First, the introductory Which can be not only appropriate but also effective when the preceding sentence is long and the conclusion is so important that it shouldn’t be a mere appendage—e.g.: “An audience thus captivated will surely come to marvel at Shakespeare’s genius, but the hook that has skewed them is the dynamic of the narrative and the irresistible magnetism of his protagonists. Which is why ‘Hamlet’ generally fills theatres and Pericles empties them.”

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(For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)

Theories, “Edwin Rose’s Palate Is Working Overtime on His Pet Cans with Tabby, or with the guests. Judith Valente, people want to spread a table cloth and share a few. ‘Mr. Rose says.‘It’s pasteurized, sterilized and every other ized, ‘ he drafted this fall and which he has long criticized as bleak, cruel and gruesome—is his greatest influence.”

Samara Kalk, “Direct, but Not to the Point,” Wis. State J., 18 Dec. 1997, at A1. (A possible revision: He gladly revealed that Philadelphia (where he attended art school)—a city he has long criticized as bleak, cruel, and gruesome—is his greatest influence.)

“The piece is a Brown original, a blues song that the MJQ has included as a primary entry in its repertoire for decades (and which served as the title track for a classic 1960 album).” Don Heckman, “Jazz Spotlight,” L.A. Times, 28 Dec. 1997, at 65. (Change and which to either and that or it.)

“How else to account for the explosive story Kirkham told the Voice from his cell at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn—and which he repeated in a ‘Dear Judge’ letter he says he sent to Johnson.” Frank Owen, “Club Buster,” Village Voice, 30 Dec. 1997, at 49. (Insert that after story and change which to and that.)

See that (A) & PARALLELISM.

E. For who or whom. See who (e).

F. The Remote which. See remote relatives.

while for although or whereas is permissible and often all but necessary, despite what purists sometimes say about the word’s inherent element of time. (See although & whereas.) While is a more relaxed and conversational term than although or whereas, and it works nicely when introducing a contrast—e.g.:

“But while vertical malls like Manhattan Mall and nearby Herald Center have struggled, multi-story shops are becoming de rigueur for many big-name retailers from Barnes & Noble to Banana Republic.” Amy Feldman, “Manhattan Mall on Sale Now,” Crain’s N.Y. Bus., 17 Feb. 1997, at 1.

“While police have no suspects, the owner said she heard two males laughing just before the mailbox exploded.” Sara Olkon, “Homemade Bombs Set Off in a Roadside Mailbox,” Providence J.-Bull., 23 May 1997, at C1.

“Five of the nine Dallas school board members are white, while only 11 percent of Dallas’ schoolchildren are white.” Chris Newton, “Turnmoil Continues in Dallas Schools,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 18 Sept. 1997, at A9.

The OED traces this use back to Shakespeare in 1588 (Love’s Labour’s Lost).

Though the use is quite proper, writers must be on guard for the occasional ambiguity. For instance, does it denote time or contrast in the following sentence? “[The] former spokeswoman . . . claim[s] she was fired in April because she is white, while the hospital’s management was seeking to build bridges to Tampa’s black community.” “Cigar Maker From Spain to Purchase Havatampa,” Tampa Bay Bus. J., 19 Sept. 1997, at 4. The sense is surely a contrasting one, but the sentence undesirably causes the reader to hesitate.

Further, while shouldn’t be used merely for and—e.g.: “Her father, J. Frank McKenna III, is a lawyer, while [read and] her mother, Colleen O’Shaughnessy McKenna, is the author of 17 children’s books, many

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*while* used in nontemporal sense: Stage 5

*while at the same time* is a common redundancy. Having first appeared in the late 1600s, it remained infrequent until the 19th century. Its rise has been fairly steady ever since. Yet editors typically remove the last four words as verbiage—e.g.:

- “Motivate them to keep selling the company while at the same time [read while] taking credit for their particular accomplishment.” Mark H. McCormack, *What They Don’t Teach You at Harvard Business School* 194 (1984).
- “He would not be the first national leader to talk peace while at the same time [read while] encouraging those who persist in terrorism.” Alan Dershowitz, “Arafat Speaks of Peace as He Uses Terrorism,” Buffalo News, 31 Oct. 1994, at B3.
- “The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union offer unparalleled opportunities for democracy worldwide, while at the same time, [read at a time when] the level of ethnic and regional conflicts has never been greater.” Ann Dale, *At the Edge* ix (2007).

**While away; wile away.** The phrase *while away (= to spend [time] idly)* dates from the early 17th century and remains current—e.g.: “Guitarist Martin Barre doesn’t *while away* his time listening to old Jethro Tull albums.” Gene Stout, “Guitarist Barre Goes Beyond Jethro Tull,” Chicago Trib., 22 Nov. 1996, at 37.

*Wile away*, a synonymous phrase dating from about 1800, began as a corrupt form but is included in modern dictionaries such as *W11* and *AHD* without any cautionary note. Most commonly, of course, *wile* is a noun meaning “a stratagem intended to deceive” or “trickery”: it may also function as a verb in the corresponding sense “to lure or entice.” However old the mistaken form *wile away is—and never mind that Charles Dickens used it—it is still inferior to *while away* and has always been significantly less frequent in print sources. E.g.: “Before Kim Peek saw *Rain Man*, the 1988 award-winning movie loosely based on his life, he stayed home and *wiled* [read *whiled*] away the time working and reading books.” Rhonda Smith, “Into the World,” *Austin Am.-Statesman*, 28 Apr. 1994, at D1.

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*while away for while: Stage 1*  
Current ratio (while away vs. *wile away*: 14:1

**Whilom.** See erstwhile.

**Whilst.** Long characteristic of formal BrE, this conjunction fell into disuse in AmE over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries and became virtually obsolete, reaching its low point about 1990. Sentences like this one struck many American readers as reeking with pretension unless the source was British: "*Whilst* [read *While*] I was on vacation last week, it seems the Bethlehem Police Force got off the hook for killing a young man, John Hirko, in April.” Paul Carpenter, “Just Makes You Feel Warm All Over,” Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.), 21 Sept. 1997, at B1. But the word predominates in BrE—e.g.: “*Whilst* president of the Royal Statistical Society, he told statisticians that government is about asking questions.” Ray Thomas, “Working Out the Figures,” *Guardian*, 22 Sept. 1997, at 16.

But since the mid-1990s, the word has enjoyed a resurgence in AmE. See AMERICANISMS AND BRITICISMS (c). Still, it has not yet lost its odor of affectation.

Like its sibling *while*, it may be used for *although* or *whereas*. But again, this isn't entirely good usage in AmE. For *amongst*, see *among* (A).

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*whilst for while in AmE*: Stage 2

**Whimsy (= fanciful or capricious humor)** has been the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike since about 1900. *Whimsey* is a variant.

Current ratio: 24:1

**Whinge (= to keep complaining in a bothersome way), a Briticism, predominantly forms the present participle whinging—not *whinging*.**

Current ratio: 2:1

**Whiny, adj.** So spelled in AmE and BrE alike—not *whiney*. Though dating from the 19th century, the term didn't emerge into widespread use until around the time of World War I.

Current ratio: 5:1

**Whir, n. & vb., has long been considered the standard spelling. *Whirr* is a variant for both parts of speech. But the inflected forms, naturally, are *whirred* and *whirring*.**

**Whisky; whiskey.** If the liquor originated in Scotland, it's *whisky*. If it originated in the United States, it's *whiskey* <Kentucky whiskey>. To write *Scotch whisky* is a serious gaffe in the eyes of a Scot. In both AmE and BrE, however, the spelling *Irish whiskey* has predominated over *Irish whisky* since about 1950.

**Whither.** See hither.

**Whitish; whity; whitey.** Both *whitish* (so spelled) and *whity*, as adjectives, mean “somewhat white.” But *whitish* predominates in all varieties of English—perhaps because of the secondary contender’s derogatory homophone, *Whitey* (= a white person or white society—thought of in an offensive way).

**Whitsunday; *Whit Sunday; Whitsun Day; Whit-sundite.** The first three denote the seventh Sunday
after Easter, on which the Christian festival of Pentecost is celebrated, commemorating the Holy Spirit’s descent upon the apostles. Whitsunday is the standard spelling in AmE and BrE alike. *Whit Sunday and *Whitsun Day are chiefly BrE variants. Whitsuntide is either the full week beginning with Whitsunday or the first three days of that week.

**whity.** See whitish.

**whiz,** vb; **whizz,** vb. In the sense “to move quickly,” *whiz* is standard AmE (since about 1950), *whizz* standard BrE (since about 1920). But both are inflected *whizzes,* *whizzed,* and *whizzing.*

**whiz-bang; whizz-bang.** Dating from the early 20th century and meaning “something resembling fireworks for its conspicuous flash, noise, and startling effect,” this term has varied in its spelling over time. The predominant forms are *whiz-bang* in AmE and *whizz-bang* in BrE—so hyphenated. Although W11 lists only the solid forms *whizbang* and *whizzbang,* they occur in print sources much less often.

**whiz kid** (= a highly skillful or successful young person), dating from the mid-20th century, is so spelled in AmE and BrE alike. The variant spelling *whizz kid* was common in BrE from about 1960 to 1990, but it has steadily fallen in frequency since then. Today in BrE *whiz kid* predominates by a 3-to-1 ratio. The one-word variants (*whizkid* and *whizzkid*) are to be avoided.

Current ratio (whiz kid vs. *whizkid* vs. *whizzkid* in World English): 37:1:4:1

**who; whom. A Generally.** Edward Sapir, the philosopher of language, prophesied that “within a couple of hundred years from to-day not even the most learned jurist will be saying ‘Whom did you see?’” By that time the *whom* will be as delightfully archaic as the Elizabethan *his* for its. No logical or historical argument will avail to save this hapless *whom.* Language 156–57 (1921; repr. 1949). A safer bet might be that no one will be spelling *to-day* with a hyphen. In any event, writers in the 21st century ought to understand how the words *who* and *whom* are correctly used.

*Who,* the nominative pronoun, is used (1) as the subject of a verb *<it was Kate who rescued the dog>*; and (2) as the complement of a linking verb, i.e., as a predicate nominative *<they know who you are>*. *Whom,* the objective pronoun, is used (1) as the object of a verb *<whom did you see?>*; and (2) as the object of a preposition *<the person to whom we’re indebted>*.

It’s true that in certain contexts, *whom* is stilted. That has long been so: “Every sensible English speaker on both sides of the Atlantic says *Who were you talking to?* [—not *Whom*—] and the sooner we begin to write it the better.” J.Y.T. Greig, *Breaking Priscian’s Head 23* ([n.d.—ca. 1930]). But there are other constructions in which *whom* remains strong—and more so in AmE than in BrE. Although writers have announced the demise of *whom,* it persists in AmE—e.g.,

- “Even if things do come down to *whom* you know in this world, luck definitely figures in *whom* you meet.” Jacyln Fierman, “What’s Luck Got to Do with It?” *Fortune,* 16 Oct. 1995, at 149, 150. (This is a little shaky: the modern bromide, a *casualism,* is *It’s not what you know; it’s who you know.*)
- “He was implicated in the murder of a man *whom* his workers caught tampering with some stone blocks.” Manuela Hoelterhoff, “Inconspicuous Consumer; *Smart-Money,*” 1 Oct. 1997, at 183. (*That* might work more naturally in this sentence.)

The correct uses of *who* are sometimes tricky. But if the pronoun acts as the subject of a clause, it must be *who,* never *whom*—e.g.: “Alan Alda, *who* you quickly realize *is* sorely missed on TV, stars as Dan Cutler, a type-A personality advertising executive.” Tom Jicha, “White Mile Shows How Men Will Be Boys,” *Sun-Sentinel* (Ft. Lauderdale), 20 May 1994, at E6. (*Who* is the subject of *is.*)

While the subject of a finite verb is nominative (*I know she is good,* the subject of an infinitive is in the objective case (*I know her to be good,* the subject of *to.*)

The same is true of *who* and *whom.* But that brings us to the next section.

**B. The Objective *who.*** *Whom* is always the object of a verb, the object of a preposition, or the subject of an infinitive. E.g.：“Do all you can to develop your intuition—this will help you to know when to act and when to wait, *whom* to be cautious about and *whom* to trust.” Susannah Rohland, “Today’s Birthday,” *Wash. Times,* 9 July 1997, at C16. If a horoscope writer like Rohland can get it right, then you’d think that other journalists would as well. But often they don’t, perhaps because they consider the word stumpy—e.g.:

- “A polite, helpful 11-year-old *who* [read *whom*] everybody called Jake was fatally shot in his bedroom in this small rural town on Thursday, and a 13-year-old friend was charged hours later with killing him.” Robert Hanley, “New Jersey Boy, 13, Is Charged with Killing 11-Year-Old Friend,” *N.Y. Times,* 3 Sept. 1994, at 1. (*That* would also work naturally here.)
- “Voters have a vital interest in learning the views of those who seek to govern them, for only through learning these views can the voter intelligently decide *who* [read *whom*] to vote for.” [One of the justices] wrote for the court. Phillip Carrizosa, “Political Flier Sponsors Must Identify Themselves,” *S.F. Daily J.,* 29 Nov. 1994, at 1 (quoting the California Supreme Court’s decision in *Griset v. Fair Political Practices Commission.*). (The article accurately quotes the California Supreme Court’s misuse of *who for whom* in a sentence so central to the holding that it was predictably quoted widely.)

In the examples just listed, who is defensible as a caseus-alism. But the objective who is not idiomatically nor- mal after a preposition. For example, one of whom is something of a set phrase—e.g.: • “That sits well with local leaders, one of who [read one of whom] drew upon his own analogy to describe the party.” Nancy Cook Lauer, “Maddox Named State Democratic Party Chief,” Tallahassee Democrat, 5 Jan. 2003, at A1. • “Parents proudly whooped it up for the players, not one of who [read one of whom] wore shoulder pads.” Skip Wood, “San Diego Is Lukewarm to Hype of NFL Title Game,” USA Today, 27 Jan. 2003, at C7.

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1. who as an object not following a preposition: Stage 4
2. who as an object following a preposition: Stage 2

C. The Mistaken Nominative whom. Among the toughest contexts in which to get the pronouns right are those involving linking verbs. We say, for example, who it is for the same reason we say This is he, but some very good writers have nodded. In any event, whom shouldn’t be used as the subject of any finite verb—e.g.: • “The distinguished political and social philosopher Russell Kirk used the word ‘energumen’ to describe . . . whom [read who] it is I agitate against.” William F. Buckley, The Jeweler’s Eye 284 (1969). (Who is needed as the inverted subject of it is he, as in it is he.) • “The side I saw was a kind, caring, loving man,” said Woodrich, who admitted that many people criticized him for fraternizing with a man whom [read who] they thought was the enemy.” Lynn Bronikowski, “Lorenzo the Taskmaster Ultimately ‘Burned Out,’” Rocky Mountain News, 10 Aug. 1990, at 74. (Who is needed as the subject of was.) • “Police went to several addresses looking for a 17-year-old whom [read who] they thought was staying with his aunt.” Phillip Matier et al., “S.F.’s ‘Dirty Dozen’ Teenagers Elude Police Trackers,” S.F. Chron., 20 Apr. 1994, at A15. (Who is needed as the subject of was.) • “In the other corner are the anti-Stratfordians, the heretics and conspiracy theorists of literature, most of them devoted amateurs whose dogged sleuthing and amassing of evi-dence (albeit mostly circumstantial) continues to enlarge the body of contention that Shakespeare wasn’t himself. But if not he, then whom [read who]” Don Oldenburg, “Shakespeare’s Raging Identity Crisis,” Wash. Post, 17 May 1994, at C5. (Who is needed in a parallel phrasing with he.) • “A free-lancer I knew once wrote what almost amounted to an obituary for a crusty old female journalist whom [read who] everyone thought was dying.” Al Martinez, “A Street Named Merideth,” L.A. Times, 13 Sept. 1994, at B3. (Who is needed as the subject of was.) • “There are a number of people who might have wanted to kill Robert Nachtsheim in his Minneapolis flower shop early one morning in 1973, but the intervening two decades have failed to reveal whom [read who].” Kevin Diaz, “$4 Million Award’s a Start Toward a Clean Slate,” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 22 Oct. 1994, at A1. (Although whom might seem to be the object of reveal, in fact the relative pronoun is the subject of an implied verb—failed to reveal whom [might have wanted to kill Robert Nachtsheim]. Therefore, who is correct.) • “A tense encounter with sheriff’s deputies ended with the arrests of seven armed freemen whom [read who] authorities believed were bent on kidnapping a neighboring county prosecutor, and death threats from around the country directed at Bohlman and other county officials.” Tom Kenworthy, “Standoff in Montana Tests Resolve to Avoid Bloodshed,” Wash. Post, 19 Sept. 1995, at A1. (Who is needed as the subject of were.) • “But [Chip] Beck ought to serve as an inspiration for a host of other superb golfers whom [read who] naysayers claim ‘can’t win the big ones.”’ Michael Konik, “Birdies & Gentlemen: Some Memorable Moments in Ryder Cup Play,” Sky, Sept. 1995, at 52, 57. (Who is needed as the subject of can’t win.) • “Sam married in 1969, and is survived by his son, Sam III, his wife, Angela, and their daughter, Samantha, of Clarksville, Tennessee; his daughter, Marguerite; the mother of Matthew and Grace, whom [read who] all lived with Sam in Austin.” Sam R. Baker Jr. (obit.), Austin Am.-Statesman, 10 Feb. 1996, at B4. (Who is needed as the subject of lived.) • “The phrase ‘natural-born citizen’ should be given a meaning consistent with our transcendent right to select those whom [read who] we believe are most fit to govern.” Michael I. Meyerson, “Citizen McCain,” N.Y. Times, 17 July 2008, at A23. (Who is needed as the subject of are.) See HYPERCORRECTION (f).

William Safire takes an interesting approach for those who fear seeming pedantic (by using whom) or being incorrect (by using who for whom): “When whom is correct, recast the sentence.” “On Language,” N.Y. Times, 4 Oct. 1992, § 6, at 12. So Whom do you trust? becomes, in a political campaign, Which candidate do you trust? The relative pronoun that can also substitute in many situations. For those who hesitate over these questions of case, this approach might seem quite sensible. See PRONOUNS (b).

But one commentator, Steven Pinker, calls Safire’s suggestion an “unacceptable pseudo-compromise.” The Language Instinct 389 (1994). And Pinker has a point: “Telling people to avoid a problematic construction sounds like common sense, but in the case of object questions with who, it demands an intolerable sacrifice. People ask questions about the objects of verbs and prepositions a lot.” Ibid. Moreover, a phrase such as which person is wordier and slightly narrower than who or whom. So realistically, we’re stuck with the continuing struggle between who and whom.

Perhaps the most sensible approach was the one taken by Robert C. Pooley in 1974: “Considering the importance some people place on mastery of [the text-book rules for whom], the schoolbooks may be justified in distinguishing the case forms for the relative pronouns for literary usage. But to insist that these literary partitions are languages, not words. For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, i-ii.)

and formal distinctions be made in informal writing and speech as necessary to achieve 'correctness' is to do
violence to the readily observed facts of current usage." The Teaching of English Usage 72 (2d ed. 1974).

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whom misused as a subject: Stage 1

D. Who in Reference to Nonhumans (i.e., for that or which). Who is the relative pronoun for
human beings (though that is also acceptable); that and which are the relative pronouns for anything
other than humans, including entities created by humans. But writers too often forget this elementary
point—for example:
• "Many companies, I believe, who [read that] are busy
buying new businesses and bringing in new management
teams haven't even tested the outside edge of their profit-
• "The best borrowers are grabbed by the banks and financial
institutions who [read that] are in a position now to
offer finer rates." "NBFCs Enter Cul-de-Sac," Bus. Stan-

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who in reference to nonhumans: Stage 2
Current ratio (companies that vs. *companies who): 8:1

E. Which for who or whom. Some inattentive writ-
ers use which in referring to human beings—for example:
• "The bakery employs 11 people, two of which [read whom]
are English (non-Amish) women, and one who
is a salesman." Faith Whitcomb, "Bakery Relies on Gener-
ations of Amish Recipes," Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 13
• "Most of the students, which [read who] are evenly split
between corporate clients and consumers, have taken the
free course." Laura Castaneda, "Netting an Education," S.F.
• "The driver of the first car, which [read who] was the only
occupant, also died at the scene." "2 Killed in 3-Vehicle
Crash on Highway 360," Dallas Morning News, 7 July
2003, at B2. (Because the writer used which instead of
who, it seems at first as if the car was its own passenger
and died in the accident.)

See which (n).
That, of course, is permissible when referring to
humans: the people that were present or the people who
were present. Editors tend, however, to prefer the lat-
ter phrasing.

F. Placement of the Relative Pronoun. See remote
relatives.

whodunit (= a book, film, game, etc. about a murder
case in which the culprit isn't revealed until the end) is
an altered form of the dialectal question Who done it?
Dating from the 1920s, this Americanism has always
been predominantly spelled whodunit in AmE. When
the term caught on in BrE, it was originally spelled
the AmE way, but in the 1970s and 1980s the variant
spelling *whodunit vied for predominance in BrE.
Today in World English generally, including BrE, the
settled spelling is whodunit.

Current ratio: 4:1

who else's. See else's & possessives (1).

whoever; whomever. Here's the traditional rule about
the nominative whoever and the objective whomever.
If the word that completes the syntax after -ever is a
verb, the correct choice is whoever <they praise whoever
performs well>—even if there are a few inter-
vening words <whoever, under these conditions, can
deliver the goods on time will win the contract>. If the
word that syntactically follows the -ever isn't a verb,
the correct choice is whomever <she criticizes whomever
he dislikes>—once again, even if there are a few inter-
vening words <we'll help whomever, among the
class members, the teachers recommend>. If you're
un sure of the correct word, choose whoever; even
when the objective whomever would be strictly cor-
rect, the whoever is at worst a casualism (in other
words, not bad except in formal contexts).

Like who and whom, this pair is subject to more
than occasional hypercorrection—e.g.:
• “Both teams want to run, so whomever [read whoever]
controls the boards and doesn't throw the ball away too
much will win." David Dupree, "Western Conference
• "But bringing religion into the schools, whomever [read
originates it, opens a floodgate of problems.
"Debate Heats Up on School Prayer," Amarillo Daily News,
• "Whomever [read Whoever] the opposing pitcher was, the
Sox never were at a disadvantage with Billy Pierce on the
mound." Mike Imrem, "Sox' Pierce Was a Special Person
2015, at 1.

See pronouns (b) & who (c).

You can always be sure that the form *whomever's is
wrong. If it's intended as a possessive form, it's wrong
for whomever; if it's intended as a contraction of whomever
is, then the objective form whomever is wrongly
acting as the subject of is. Yet this poor form often
appears. Notice that in each of the following sentences,
whomever looks like an object of a preposition or verb,
but in fact it's simply part of a noun clause that should
function as an object—e.g.:  
• “It's up to the agent to get a copy of the contract to whomever's [read whoever's] going to close the sale" Julie Elman,
"Ready, Set, Buy," Virginian-Pilot & Ledger Star (Norfolk),
1 June 2002, Real Estate 8, at 1.
• “You can trust whomever's [read whoever's] behind the
turntables." Eric Brace, "Deepflyte, House with 'Nooks
• “He tells whomever's [read whoever's] in charge that he
wants to bring his wife by to look at the house—but never

The slightly less common error is to make *whomever's
a possessive, where whoever (traditionally) should
appear. (See who(soever) (c).) If you're going to be
formal enough to use a form of whom, though, it's
probably better to stick to whoever—e.g.:
• “Whomever's [read Whoever] team wins in football
has to play bailiff in open court for a day." Julie Kay,

- “If the public is not satisfied, they have every right to ask for an inquiry into any City Judge, elected official, or who(whose) [read whoever] record is in question.” Letter of Diann Sams, “Sams Says Luster, Journal Are Real Demagogues,” Ithaca J. (N.Y.), 22 July 2002, at A9.

whole, adj. See adjectives (b).

*whole entire. This has been a fairly common redundancy since the 17th century—e.g.:
- “Her sister, Doris G. Roupe, . . . was by her sister's side the whole entire time of [read throughout] her illness.” “Cleits Opal Gibson Johnson” (obit.), Roanoke Times, 13 Nov. 1997, at B2.
- “Like snowflakes, there is only one you in this whole entire [read the whole] universe.” Joel Goldman, Yoga on the Moon and Beyond 50 (2009).

*wholistic. See holistic.

whom. See who.

whomever. See whoever.

whoop-de-do originated in the 1920s as a noun to denote either a lively social affair or a heated public debate. Today it is primarily an interjection used (without an exclamation mark) to show sarcastically that something isn't as impressive as someone else has suggested it would be. “Well, we're here. Whoop-de-do.” Although the original spelling was whoop-de-do, the variant spellings *whoop-de-do and *hoop-de-doo became predominant for a time in the 1930s. Since the late 1930s, however, the standard spelling has been do in the final syllable. Whoop-de-do.

who’s, whose. See whose (b).

whose. A. Meaning “of which.” Whose may usefully refer to things <an idea whose time has come>. This use of whose, formerly decried by some 19th-century grammarians and their predecessors, is often an inescapable way of avoiding clumsiness—e.g.:

whosoever, whomsoever. A. Meaning of which. Whosoever (b) is typically cumbersome. E.g.: “Western reluctance to intervene militarily in every foreign conflict is understandable. But it is disputable in the case of Bosnia, where fighting long ago turned from ethnic strife into a war of foreign aggression, the continuation of which [read whose continuation] would jeopardize European stability.” Gideon Rafael, “NATO Plus Russia: A Humanitarian Relief Force,” Int’l Herald Trib., 19 July 1995, at 8.

whosoever’s, whomsoever’s. Whereas whose is the possessive form, who’s is a contraction for who is. But writers often confuse the two—e.g.:
- “Veteran comedian Richard Pryor was one of many who’s [read whose] humor was considered rapid, rude, crude, and political.” Charles Reeves, “The Changing Face of Comedy,” Phil. Trib. (Mag.), 30 Apr. 1996, at 12.
- “To learn nothing from the second half of the first Cleveland game—and that is certainly evident after being outscored, 55–13, in the past six quarters—points to a failure in preparation. Either that, or the players aren’t very good, and who’s [read whose] fault is that?” Gerry Dulac, “Report Card,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 14 Oct. 2014, at E3.


**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
C. Possessives. Whoever is the traditionally correct form, but it’s very much on the wane. Whoever’s is now the preferred colloquial form—e.g.:

- “Whoever’s bullpen does better is the team that’s going to win that West.” Chuck Ashmun, “Sideline Chatter,” Seattle Times, 29 May 1997, at C2 (quoting Bip Roberts of the Kansas City Royals).
- “This is the kind of place, a coffin corner to kick off his patent-leather pumps after a good night’s labors at whoever’s jugular, feed the bats, loss his fangs and sigh. ‘Be it ever so humble, there’s no disgrace like home.’” Bud Collins, “Spooky Cellar Hides Burgundies to Die For,” Houston Chron., 19 Oct. 1997, at 2.
- “And as for calling it Flockstars, well, let’s just say whoever’s job it is to dream up pun-based names based on other shows’ titles must be working overtime right now.” Mike Ward, “Critic’s Choice,” Express (UK), 25 July 2015, at 47.

For examples of whomever used for whoever, see whoever.

Most strictly, whoever’s is a contraction of whoever is (or, less commonly, whoever has)—e.g.: “One or two members work on equipment, whoever’s left keeps the weapon close and an eye out for any 1,500-pound ursid wearing a white coat.” Peter N. Spotts, “Arctic Scientists Tread Softly Around Natives,” Christian Science Monitor, 23 Oct. 1997, at 3.

who’s who is a shortened form of who is who (the second who being correct as a predicate nominative). But some writers—despite the popularity of various widely touted books called Who’s Who—mangle the phrase into *who’s whom. E.g.:

- “Since so many of Tampa’s servants of the people have been face down in the public trough for so long, pretty soon the only identifying feature one has to work with in figuring out when one glad-hander’s term ended and another’s commenced is [to try ascertaining] who’s whom [read who’s who] from the line-up of ever-expanding posteriors.” Daniel Ruth, “Mr. Joey Corrects the Record,” Tampa Trib., 18 Mar. 1997, at 1.

The error sprang up in the early 20th century and spread especially after 1960. It apparently resulted from the mistaken sense that the final word is the verb’s “object” (as opposed to a subjective complement, which it is). Writers who make this error have perhaps temporarily forgotten what’s what.

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*who’s whom for who’s who: Stage 1 widely regarded. See regard (b).

widespread was, until the early 20th century, spelled as two words, but now it should always be one. For *widespreadly, see adverbs (b).

widow, n.; widower. A widow is a woman whose spouse has died; a widower is a man similarly bereft. Do the terms still apply when the surviving spouse remarries? No.

widow, vb., can make a past-participial adjective widowed, which may apply to either sex. Although widowed man may seem unnatural, it is common and unobjectionable—e.g.: “Schmidt himself is no less persnickety; once widowed, he asks his daughter . . . to tend him, telling her precisely how to make his lunch as if instructing troops in the loading of a gun.” Anthony Lane, “Looking Back,” New Yorker, 16 Dec. 2002, at 106.

widower. See widow, n.

wield; weald. The former is the verb meaning “to control; handle; hold and use” <he wields his power with good judgment>. The latter is the noun meaning “a forest” or “an uncultivated upland region.”

wife. Pl. wives. See plurals (c).

Wi-Fi, a portmanteau word from wireless fidelity, came to prominence in the late 1990s. It is predominantly so spelled in all varieties of English, variants being *WiFi, *wi-fi, *wifi, and *Wi-Fi. The hyphen and perhaps the second capital seem destined to disappear.

*wildly regarded. See regard (b).

wild oats, sowing. See sow (b).

*wile away. See while away.

will. See shall.

willful; wilful. Willful is the standard spelling in AmE, wilful in BrE. Curiously, the American spelling was not fully established in AmE until the 1940s. *Willfull, a misspelling, occasionally appears. Cf. skillful.

willy-nilly, adv. & adj., = (1) by compulsion <he forced his brother to accompany him willy-nilly>; or (2) in a haphazard, unplanned way <so far, all our meetings have occurred willy-nilly>. The phrase is sometimes, as the OED remarks, erroneously used for “undecided, shilly-shally” <a willy-nilly disposition>.
Wimbledon /wim-bal-dan/ is often mispronounced /wim-bal-tan/—and not just by simpletons.

* win a victory. See victory.

winch (= a cranking device that helps pull or haul) is sometimes confused with wench (= a young woman, esp. one with lewd propensities). The results are truly bizarre—e.g.:  
- “By using a 1/4” steel cable on the wench [read winch] and over the pulley, I was able to hoist up the logs and beams and maneuver them into place.” Dick Sellers, “I Built a Log Cabin from Scratch for Under $11,000,” Mother Earth News, Apr. 1993, at 34.
- “He slips the rope into a hydraulic wench [read winch], which hoists the 60-pound, wood-slatted box to the surface.” Jerry Shriver, "Catching the Maine Attraction," USA Today, 14 July 1995, at D5.
- “Most drivers made it through the mud pit but some got stuck and had to be helped out with a wench [read winch],” Ryan Severance, “Some 75 Cars and Trucks Bring Rolling Thunder to Race,” Pueblo Chieftain (Colo.), 2 Aug. 2015, Sport §.

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wench misused for winch: Stage 1

wind, vb.; wound, vb.; winded. In most senses that are pronounced /wänd/[, the preferred past-tense and past-participial forms of wind are wound (/wound/) <the road wound through the countryside> <she hadn't wound the clock> <the luggage wound up <the road wound through the countryside> <she wandered into the house>. In most senses pronounced /wənd/ and related to breathing, airflow, and the sense of smell, the verb takes regular -ed endings <she became winded early in the race>. One uncommon sense defies this generalization, though: the preferred pronunciation of wind meaning “to blow a horn” is /wənd/[, and the preferred inflections are both wound. See irregular verbs.

wintery; *wintery. The former is the older and the standard spelling for the adjective meaning “of or like winter.” It is much more common than the latter in modern print sources—e.g.: “The crowd of about 50 . . . mill about, sipping coffee and commenting on the wintry weather.” Gay Jervey, “Workaholics Anonymous,” Fortune, 3 Mar. 2003, at 150.

Current ratio: 31:1


Current ratio: 327:1

-wise. Generally, avoid -wise words or compounds when the suffix means “regarding” or some other frame of reference. They typically displace a more direct wording, and they’re invariably graceless and inelegant—e.g.:  
- “McCaskey (0–8) is the biggest school population-wise, but the smallest when it comes to youth soccer turnout.” Eric Stark, “L-L Girls’ Soccer ’97,” Lancaster New Era, 14 Apr. 1997, at C1. (A possible revision: Although McCaskey (0–8) has the most students, it has the smallest turnout for youth soccer.)
- “Content-wise, the slacker story reveals what other mass-minded magazines revealed long ago: Slackers are not really job-averse at all.” Bill Steigerwald, “Internet Can Satisfy a News Junkie Who Isn’t Fussy About Convenience,” Commercial Appeal (Memphis), 13 June 1997, at C4. (The best approach to revising that sentence is to delete content-wise.)

But some recent neologisms seem to be earning their way. For example, taxwise is often better than from the point of view of taxes or some similar phrase—e.g.: “You can’t fund an education IRA in any year you contribute to a prepaid tuition plan, now offered by 14 states. Taxwise, IRAs are better.” Jane Bryan Quinn, “Dollars in, Dollars Out,” Newsweek, 18 Aug. 1997, at 51. See taxwise.

Finally, some writers use the suffix playfully—e.g.: “In fact, sex-wise we are practically the weirdest creatures in the animal kingdom.” Michael Thompson-Noel, “A Species of Sexual Weirdos,” Fin. Times, 30 Aug. 1997, at 5.

wisteria; wistaria. Americans are often surprised to learn that the word for the flowery vine was once spelled wistaria (after Caspar Wistar, an anatomist), not wisteria. A prominent etymologist calls the change in spelling “apparently a misprint” in 1819. Robert K. Barnhart, Dictionary of Etymology 885 (1995). The original does still show up in American print sources, but usually in proper nouns—e.g.: “Last month they celebrated the annual Wistaria Festival in honor of a sprawling 114-year-old vine that is recognized as one of the world’s largest blossoming plants.” Joe Mozingo, “Fire Looms over Sierra Madre,” L.A. Times, 29 Apr. 2008, at B3. Even when California papers are reporting on the Wistaria Festival, though, they spell the plant name wisteria.

Although the OED favors wistaria, American dictionaries list it as a variant spelling. It is so uncommon in AmE that some writers feel compelled to comment on it—e.g.: “[W.D.] Rose promised that the drink

The newer spelling with the medial -e- took awhile to catch on: it became predominant in AmE print sources in the 1940s and in BrE print sources in the 1970s.

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wisteria so spelled: Stage 5

Current ratio (wisteria vs. wisteria): 6:1

wit, to. See to(-)wit.

witenagemot, the historical term referring to the Anglo-Saxon council of nobles and officials who advised the king on administrative and judicial matters, has been predominantly so spelled since about 1800. The variant spelling *witenagemote* flourished for a time in the 18th century but hasn't been widely used in print sources since then. Whatever the spelling, the word is pronounced /wit-әn-ә-yә-moht/ or /wit-әn-ә-ya-moht/.

To complicate spelling matters, a member of this council was called a witan, from the Old English verb of the same spelling (*witan* = to know). Note that the fourth character is an a, not an e in the longer compound. Hence the council term was also sometimes spelled *witanagemot*, but this form of the word never became standard.

with. A. As a Quasi-Conjunction. With is increasingly being used as a quasi-conjunction to introduce a tag-on idea at the end of a sentence. The sense is close to and <John went to Houston and Sarah went to Minneapolis, with me going to Chicago>. Avoid this sloppy construction—e.g.:

- “Labor also has an edge on unemployment and welfare and social issues, with the Coalition considered better able to handle the environment, interest rates and taxation.” Michael Gordon, “Voters Swing Back to ALP on Issues,” *Weekend Australian*, 20–21 Jan. 1996, at 1. (A possible revision: Labor also has an edge on unemployment and welfare and social issues; the Coalition is considered better able to handle the environment, interest rates, and taxation.)

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with as a quasi-conjunction: Stage 3

B. In Absolute Constructions. See absolute constructions.

*withal* is an archaism for besides, nevertheless, still, with, or therewith. Having gradually fallen into disuse over the 19th and 20th centuries, it only occasionally appears today, always with an antique sound—e.g.:

- “There is, withal [read nevertheless], much to admire in these memoirs and in the diplomacy they recount.” David C. Hendrickson, “White House Years,” *Foreign Affairs*, 19 Sept. 1997, at 223.

withe (= a slender, flexible shoot, branch, or twig), a Middle English term traceable to the 12th century, has long predominated in print sources over its variant withy (/with-ee/). The plurals are withes (/withz/) and withies (/with-eez/). Withy has an additional sense as a synonym of willow or osier.

wither is misused for whither in the following title: John Darnton, “In Tory Vote, It’s Not Just ‘Wither Majority?’” but ‘Wither Britain?” N.Y. Times, 2 July 1995, at 6. Because Britain was, at the time the article appeared, withering under an unusual heat wave—the worst since 1976—this might have seemed to be a joke. But the misusage was in 24-point type. See *liether*.

within sometimes leads to illogic in announcing scores—e.g.: “The play set up Michael Reeder’s fourth field goal to bring TCU to within 20–19.” Suzanne Halliburton, “Welcome Back,” *Austin Am.-Statesman*, 19 Nov. 1995, at C8. TCU was not within 20–19, but right at it. Within (not to within) would work in that sentence if the preposition had a different object, e.g., *within a field goal*, or (to avoid the repetition) *within a single point*.

*without hardly. See hardly.*

*without impunity. See impunity (A).*

*without scarcely. This phrasing is an optical illusion: something of a redundancy while something of an oxymoron. Whatever it is, though, it’s illogical—e.g.:


The same can be said of *without hardly*. Both phrases have been dialectal since the 18th century.

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*without scarcely for without or scarcely: Stage 1 with regard to. See regard (A).*

with respect to. See respect.

*with the exception of*, a popular phrasing in the 19th century, is verbose for except, except for, aside from, or apart from—e.g.:

- “European Union Members, with the exception of [read except for] Greece, recalled their envoys to Iran for

**with the object of [ + vb. + -ing]** is verbose for a simple infinitive—e.g., with the object of preventing in place of to prevent.

**witness** predominantly forms the possessive witness's in AmE, witness' in BrE. The BrE preference is anomalous, however, because BrE print sources show a decided preference for the singular possessive Jones's over Jones'. See possessives (A).

**woke; woken.** See wake.

**wolf.** Pl. wolves. See plurals (c).

**wolfish; *wolvish.** The first has been standard since the 18th century; the second is a NEEDLESS VARIANT. Current ratio: 50:1

**wolverine; *wolverene.** The latter is a NEEDLESS VARIANT. See animal adjectives. Current ratio: 22:1

* *wolvish.** See wolfish.

**-woman.** See sexism (c).

**woman.** See lady.

**womankind; *womenkind.** The latter is erroneous, since -kind includes all the members of the sex. E.g.:

• “Now she feels she's pressured about what her roles will say to all of womankind [read womankind],” Matthew Gilbert, “Fiorentino Sees ‘Jade’ Role as Reward, Not Selling Out,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 16 Oct. 1995, at D1.

• “In the Neil Labute film, . . . two angry white men decide to avenge every wrong they think womenkind [read womankind] has inflicted on them by dating the same woman with the intent of emotionally traumatizing her.” Duane Dudek, “Movie Stars Also Fight for Equality,” Milwaukee J. Sentinel, 14 May 1997, at 8.

The analogous error would be *menkind for mankind.** See humankind & sexism (c).

**womankind.** See sexism (c).

**womyn.** See sexism (c).

**wont.** Although Samuel Johnson reported in 1755 that this word had slipped from use, it hangs on today as a slightly whimsical way of expressing customary behavior. It is used almost exclusively as a predicate adjective <as he is wont to> or as a noun <as is her wont>, although other forms do exist. The dominant pronunciations are /wahnt/ and /wawnt/, although /wohnt/ and /wont/ are also accepted. Probably because it is usually a homophone for want, and because its meaning intertwines with that simpler term (someone who is want to do something wants to do it), it is occasionally misspelled want—e.g.:

• “Montgomerie had been the target of catcalls from American fans all week. As is his want [read wont], he exacerbated the situation by letting the fans know how much they irritated him.” Paul Kenyon, “Death Deals Golf a Cruel Blow,” Providence J.-Bull., 26 Oct. 1999, at D1.


• “He was skinny all his life. But, as a body is want [read wont] to do, it’s acquired an extra pound, or two or three, in its sunset years.” Lisa Gutierrez, “Shawnee ‘Santa Hands Out Toys, Hands Down Art,” Kansas City Star, 13 Dec. 2000, at Fl.

The adjective wanted (= habitual), which invariably appears before the noun that it modifies <his wonted practice>, is archaic and literary. But it sometimes appears in popular writing—e.g.:


• “Paul Plishka, however, demonstrated the meaning of the term veteran in the most respectful and complimentary sense as a droll Bartolo, despite his wonted vocal wobble.” Anne Midgette, “Two Debuts, Planned and Unplanned,” N.Y. Times, 12 Jan. 2002, at B13.

• “He has also claimed to have farmed out complaints to inattentive helpers—an act at variance with his wonted heavy hands-on approach to his pastoral duties.” Editorial, “Why Is Cardinal Law Still in Office?” Wash. Post, 23 June 2002, at B7.

**woolliness** is the quality of being confused, hazy, indefinite, and indistinct in expression. Excessive cross-references, as in the Internal Revenue Code, are perhaps the apotheosis of woolliness—e.g.: “For purposes of paragraph (3), an organization described in paragraph (2) shall be deemed to include an organization described in section 501(c)(4), (5), or (6) which would be described in paragraph (2) if it were an organization described in section 501(c)(3).” I.R.C. § 509(a) (1984). See obscurity.

**woolen, adj.; woollen, adj.** Whereas BrE has always had woollen as the standard spelling, AmE adopted woolen as its standard spelling shortly after 1900. Clothes made from wool are woolens in BrE but woolens in AmE. Yet woolly is the standard spelling of the related adjective in AmE and BrE alike—*woolly* being a nonstandard variant in AmE.

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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX**

*want* misused for wont: Stage 1

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Wordiness. See redundancy.

Word Order. See inversion.

Word Patronage is "the tendency to take out one's words and look at them, to apologize for expressions that either need no apology or should be quietly refrained from" (FMEU1 at 733). A flourishing example today is no pun intended. But others are ready at hand as well—e.g.: "Hopefully—to use an ugly word—the dilemma will be solved by the proposed legislation."

In his preface to FMEU2, Ernest Gowers indulged mildly in word patronage when he wrote: "This was indeed an epoch-making book in the strict sense of that overworked phrase" (p. iii). The tendency is not at all uncommon:

- "The Bloomsberries were also relentlessly elitist, in the true sense of that much-misused word." "Time to Decry Woolf and All Her Bloomsbury Snobs," Daily Telegraph, 14 Sept. 1995, at 14.
- "Ruth is meant to go through changes that give her some hint of—pardon this ghastly word—empowerment." Liz Braun, "Ruth Walks Line Between Laughter and Tragedy," Toronto Sun, 7 Feb. 1997, at 57.
- "In future, I'll explore alternative officing (don't you hate all the new words?) with an open mind." Lynette Evans, "Alternative Officing or How to Live Without People," S.F. Examiner, 3 Sept. 1997, at 1.
- "It is, to use a term now in vogue in feminist art discourse, a deeply gendered object, but it isn't feminist at all." Paul Richard, "Homer's Debut on Display in D.C.,” Portland Press Herald, 7 Sept. 1997, at G1.

See coin a phrase & if you will.

Word processing. n. Two words. But as a phrasal adjective, the term is hyphenated <word-processing equipment>. The phrase once looked as if it might become solid, but the one-word form has fallen off in recent years. See spelling (b).

Word-Swapping. It's something like a Murphy's Law of language: two words that can be confused will be confused. Sometimes the more popular word will encroach on the less popular (as when demeans took over the sense demean [= to make base or low; degrade]). At other times, the less well-known word encroaches on the better-known one. The following pairs are illustrative:

- affect gets used for effect
- alternate gets used for alternative
- adverse gets used for adverse
- bazaar gets used for compose
- contemptuous gets used for contemptible
- continuous gets used for continual
- corollary gets used for correlation
- effete gets used for effeminacy, elite
- expedient gets used for expeditious
- foreboding gets used for forbidding
- formidable gets used for formative
- fortuitous gets used for fortunate
- incredulous gets used for incredible
- inflammable gets used for inflammatory
- inhere gets used for inure
- laudatory gets used for laudable
- luxurious gets used for luxuriant
- masterful gets used for masterly
- observance gets used for observation
- precipitous gets used for precipitate
- proscription gets used for prescription
- recant gets used for recount
- recur gets used for recoup
- recuperate gets used for recoup
- resource gets used for recourse
- reticent gets used for reluctant
- sparse gets used for spartan
- viscous gets used for vicarious
- voracious gets used for vociferous
- vortex gets used for vertex

This book records hundreds of other examples.

How does this happen? Because people enjoy experimenting with words—not going so far as to engage in true sesquipedality, but merely using slightly offbeat words that everyone has heard before—they'll replace an "expected" word with one that strikes them as more genteel. And they'll do this without ever bothering to look the word up in a dictionary.

In the old days, this psychological impulse probably didn't have a great effect on the language. But in an age of mass communications—when millions of people can be simultaneously exposed to a barbarous error in speech—the effect can be almost immediate. One speaker's carelessness with the language spreads as never before.

And because writing follows speech—as it must—these confusions, over time, get embedded in the language. The dictionaries record that infer sometimes means imply; that precipitous sometimes means precipitate (adj.); and that regretfully sometimes means regrettably. It's the lexicographer's duty to record what's happening in the language; if various words are in flux, then the dictionaries will reflect it.

That's where a good dictionary of usage comes in: it helps people understand which words are worth continuing the struggle to preserve in their traditional senses; which words are all but lost in the short term (skunked terms); and which words, though once confused, have undergone semantic changes that can't be objected to any longer. In any given age, various sets of words belong at different places on that continuum.

Rarely do the preservationists—the ones who want to keep traditional distinctions—prevail. Sometimes they do; more often they don't. But that doesn't mean the struggle is in vain. To the contrary: it means that these speakers and writers will be better equipped, among their contemporaries, to avoid stumbling and thrusting about in the language. Among astute listeners and readers, they'll have a higher degree of credibility. There's much to be said for that.

Wordy does not mean "sesquipedalian," as many seem to suppose; it means, rather, "verbose, prolix."
workaholic. See -aholic & morphological deformities.

workaround, n., = a roundabout technique to accomplish something that can't easily be done more directly. First popular in the late 1980s, the word appears most often in computer contexts to denote a way of doing something that software doesn't specifically provide for. While the hyphenated form still occasionally appears (work-around), especially outside computer contexts, the word is most often a closed compound—e.g.: “Symantec, which makes the programs, has posted four workarounds to the problem, one more complicated than the next.” “Subscription Glitch,” San Diego Union-Trib., 10 Mar. 2003, at E4.

As a phrasal verb, work around is always two words—e.g.: “Before deciding on a notice system, board members discussed a variety of other ideas, though legally questionable, to work around the sunshine law.” Kelly Yamanouchi, “Tourism Board Sets Up War Meeting Plan,” Honolulu Advertiser, 14 Mar. 2003, at C1.

worker; *workman; *workingman. Because of the growing awareness of sexism, worker is the best choice. It has vastly predominated over the others in print sources from 1910 to the present day.

Current ratio (in order of headwords): 91:7:1

workers' compensation; workmen's compensation. These words contain a plural possessive, hence workers' and workmen's—not worker's and workman's. (See possessives (A).) Workers' compensation now vastly predominates, doubtless because of a sensitivity to the sexism of the other. Another erroneously punctuated form is *workers compensation.

workforce; workload. Each is one word.

working. Radio announcers throughout the Southwest commonly say that an accident is “working” at (say) Walnut Hill and Preston Road and that another is “working” on LBJ Freeway east of Midway. What they apparently mean is that a police officer or an emergency crew is at the scene and working to clear the way. The usage seems to have originated in police JARGON.

working class denotes “the class of people who work for wages to earn a living.” The term usually refers to manual laborers and is often used pejoratively. But even doctors, lawyers, and the like work for a living.

So where does the phrase come from? Originally, working class was used in contrast to leisure class—people who, because of their independent means, can while away their time. But the leisure class is now virtually nonexistent. And although working class doesn't make much literal sense anymore, it's probably here to stay as a close synonym for proletariat.

workload. See workforce.

workman; workingman. See worker.

workmen's compensation. See workers' compensation.

workout, n.; work out, v.i. & v.t. Although the noun is one word <a good workout>, the verb should be two—e.g.: “The Longhorns will workout [read work out] once today, at 4:35 p.m.” “Extra Points,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 22 Aug. 1995, at C3. See phrasal verbs. For more on work out in its intransitive use, see calculate out.

workplace. One word.

worksite. One word. Cf. jobsite.

workstation. One word.

World Wide Web is a proper noun, capitalized when written out in full and when shortened to the Web. When combined into compound form, though, it is usually lowercase <website>. Cf. webpage & website.

Because the Web is just one protocol (way of exchanging information) on the Internet—separate from mail and news protocols, for example—the terms Web and Internet are not interchangeable—e.g.:

- “Internet users have characterized spam as one of the biggest annoyances of using the Web [read Internet].” AOL Eyes Spam Legislation,” San Diego Union-Trib., 24 Feb. 2003, at E3.

worrisome; worrying, adj. In AmE, something that provokes worry is worrisome, but in BrE it's worrying—e.g.: “Most worrying for the Conservatives, the MORI poll shows Labour making more rapid gains among middle class and southern voters—key groups who have been solid Conservative supporters since 1979 and whom the party needs to win back to retain power.” Stephen Bates & Martin Linton, “Tory Gallop at the End,” The Independent, 13 June 1997, at 6. This BrE usage, an example of HYPALLAGE, has begun to creep into AmE.

worse; worst; *worsers. Writers seldom have trouble with the adjectives bad > worse > worst. But sometimes they yield to temptation with a little harmless wordplay—e.g.:

- “He beat his supposed betters, and worsers, clearly if not handily, taking the lead at the top of the homestretch and holding off by a length a rush by the 14-to-1 shot Victory Gallop at the end.” Frederick C. Klein, “Long Course Favors Long Shot,” Wall Street J., 4 May 1998, at A20.
worse comes to worst

The traditional idiom, evidenced in the OED consistently from the 16th century, is worse comes to (the) worst (= [if] things turn out as badly as possible). But the more modern and more logical idiom, worse comes to worst—with its progression from comparative to superlative—became predominant in the 1970s and has remained so. Except in BrE where both forms are frequent, worse comes to worst now outnumbers the traditional phrase in print sources—e.g.:


Cf. *least worst.

Current ratio (worse comes to worst vs. worst comes to worst in World English): 1:1:1

worsen, vb., traceable to the 19th century, was once only a transitive verb because of its transitive use as well as its intransitive use. See spelling (a). Today, in other words, worsen is an ERGATIVE VERB. Interestingly, the word wasn’t used much in print until the 1930s—and it has climbed steadily ever since.

worst. A. For most. Worst is a CASUALISM when used as an equivalent of most <what they need worst is food>. It is related to badly in need. It occurs chiefly in reported speech—e.g.:

- "The library is the place that needs me the worst,” she said,” Joy Murphy, "Library Volunteer, 71, Enjoys Books," Ledger (Lakeland, Fla.), 27 Sept. 1995, at F6 (quoting Dot Hart).
- "These reforms would help schools that need them worst—failing urban ones—where children have no alternatives.” Tony Lang, "Entertainment ‘Neighborhoods,” Cincinnati Enquirer, 25 July 1997, at A18.

B. Two worst; *worst two. The first, which is more logical than the second, has always predominated in print. *Worst two is loose phrasing—e.g.: “Their worst two [read two worst] positions for offensive production have been catcher and third base.” Phil Rogers, “Help Needed: Where Do Sox Turn?” Chicago Trib., 26 June 1997, Sports §, at 10.

Current ratio (two worst vs. *worst two): 4:1

C. *Least worst. See *least worst.

worth. When this word is used with an amount, the preceding term denoting the amount should be possessive. E.g.: “He bought a few dollars’ worth of golf tees.” See POSSESSIVES (1).

Current ratio (dollars’ worth vs. *dollars worth): 1:3:1

worthwhile. One word.

-WORTHY. This combining form means (1) “fit or safe for” <a seaworthy vessel> <a crashworthy minivan>; or (2) “deserving of” <a praiseworthy effort> <a creditworthy loan applicant>. As in the preceding examples, the form is almost always closed up with its root, not hyphenated. Only a few newfangled -worthy terms <can article-worthy celebrity> have hyphens.

-wot (= to know) is an archaisms that H.W. Fowler called a “Wardour Street” term, i.e., an “oddment” calculated to establish (in the eyes of some readers) the writer’s claim to be someone of taste and the source of beautiful English. Today, it’s an affectation unless ironic (and probably even then)—e.g.: “News is now at hand that for reasons I wot [read know] not, the White House kitchens will serve free-range chickens only.” John Gould, "Pent-Up Pullets and White House Fowl," Christian Science Monitor, 20 May 1994, at 17. Even as an archaisms, the word has experienced such a serious decline that many readers will not wot what you mean.

would. Writers often use would to condition statements that really ought to be straightforward—e.g.:

- “I would submit to you [read submit to you] that very few presentations end with the audience saying. ‘Well, that
• "If the trial judge would have [read had] allowed impeachment with a limiting instruction . . . , Robinson would be before this court arguing that this alternative solution was error." United States v. Robinson, 783 F.2d 64, 68 (7th Cir. 1986).

• "It would have been more eventful today if we would have [read had] won." Mike Cochran, "Four's a Crowd: TCU Tops Tech, Shares in SWC Crown," Austin Am.-Statesman, 26 Nov. 1994, at C2 (quoting Spike Dikes, Texas Tech's coach).

Would have [+ p.pl.] for had [+ p.pl.] is especially common in the Southwest, probably from contamination by could have [+ p.pl.]. See TENSES (b).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
*if I would have for if I had: Stage 2
Current ratio (if I had gone vs. *if I would have gone): 26:1

would have liked. This phrase should invariably be followed by a present-tense infinitive—hence would have liked to go, would have liked to read, not *would have liked to have gone, *would have liked to have read. The erroneous phrasings are becoming common—e.g.:

• "One would have liked to have been [read would have liked to be] present at the meeting in which the introduction of this equipment was ratified," Giles Smith, "Replay Ends Dispute over Hurst's Goal," Daily Telegraph, 16 Aug. 1997, at 21.

• "Clapp said he would have liked to have seen [read would have liked to see] more teams involved in postseason play," Richard Obert, "Expanded Playoffs Rejected," Ariz. Republic, 29 Aug. 1997, at C12.

Nor is it correct to say *would like to have done, because the sequence of events is then off. See TENSES (b).

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would have liked followed by perfect infinitive: Stage 4

wouldn't be surprised. Generally, a negative shouldn't appear after this phrase. That is, I wouldn't be surprised if Ratliff has retired means that I think Ratliff has retired; I wouldn't be surprised if Ratliff hasn't retired means, literally, that I suspect Ratliff is still working. But many people use the double-negative form, which is especially common in reported speech—e.g.:

• "Ethan Johnson... plan recorder for the Holden Arboretum in Kirtland, noted that one of the rhododendrons was blooming, and 'I wouldn't be surprised if others didn't have [read had] flowers on them.'" Suzanne Hively, "Topsy-Turvy Winter Weather Unsettling to Sleeping Plants," Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 15 Jan. 2000, Your Home §, at 3.


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wouldn't be surprised followed by a negative: Stage 2

*would of. See of (d).

would rather. See had rather.

wound. See wind.

wounds, nursing. See nursing one's wounds.

wove(n). See weave.

wrack; rack, vb. See rack.

*wrang. See wring.

wrangle; wangle. The two are occasionally confused. Wrangle = to argue noisily or angrily. Wangle = (1) vt., to accomplish or obtain in a clever way; (2) vt., to manage (a thing) despite difficulties; or (3) vi., to use indirect methods to accomplish some end. E.g.:


This confusion was all but unknown before the mid-1950s, but it has become common since 2000.

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wrangle misused for wangle: Stage 4
Current ratio (wangle an invitation vs. *wrangle an invitation): 2:1

*wrapt. See rapt.

*wrapture. See rapture.

wrathful; wroth. Both these literary adjectives mean "extremely angry," but wroth can be used predicatively only <waxed wroth> <he was wroth>. It would be wrong to speak of a *wroth man, though wrathful man is perfectly acceptable. The words are pronounced /rath-fal/ and /roth/. Wrathful is somewhat the more common of the two terms in print sources.

Both adjectives are formal words, and wroth in particular smacks of archaism—e.g.:

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l–li.)
Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
• “Ms. Eckert seemed to be quite wroth [read angry] with me, though if her theory ... is accurate, she should be delighted with my work.” Jack Kenny, “Mean-Spirited Columnist! Hopes to Take Own Advice of Lightening Up,” Union Leader (Manchester, N.H.), 25 July 2001, at A4.

• “Hosts at the on-air salon that is WSCR-AM are so wreath [read get's angry] they have urged fans to vandalize the screens and shoot down with BB guns any other sight-line obstructions the Cubs might float.” Eric Zorn, “It’s OK to Not See Eye to Eye About Screens,” Chicago Trib., 9 Apr. 2002, at 1.

The word is most often seen in the set phrase wax wroth (= to become angry), which can be easily simplified—e.g.: “Pfeifer has a ropy vein at her left temple that, when she waxes wroth [read gets angry], throbs noticeably.” Leah Rozen, “Picks & Pans: Screen,” People, 21 Oct. 2002, at 43.

Current ratio (wraithful vs. wraith): 1.2:1

wreak A. Inflection: wreak > wreaked > wreaked. The past tense is not wrought (also wroth). See wretch.

B. Pronunciation. Wreck is pronounced /reek/—not /rek/.

C. Wreck havoc. The phrase wreck havoc (= to bring about difficulty, confusion, or chaos) is the established idiom in AmE and BrE alike. (In BrE, another traditional idiom is play havoc.) But wreck havoc has two variants to be avoided: *wreck havoc and *work havoc. E.g.:


• “Food intolerances to wheat or grains, as well as sugar, can promote inflammation, which can wreak havoc [read wreak havoc] on the body’s joints.” Angela McManus, “Any Tips to Deal with Arthritis?” Evening Times (Glasgow), 13 Aug. 2015, at 32.

The phrase wreck havoc, by the way, came into vogue only as recently as the 1970s. Before that time, such phrases as wreak vengeance and wreak revenge (both still used) were just as common as wreak havoc.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. *wreck havoc for wreak havoc: Stage 1
   Current ratio (wreck havoc vs. *wreck havoc): 23:1
2. *work havoc for wreak havoc: Stage 1
   Current ratio (wreck havoc vs. *work havoc): 33:1

D. And reek. For the confusion of wreak with reek, see reek.

wreath; wreath. Wreath is the noun <a Christmas wreath>, wreath the verb <they plan to wreath the door in garlands>.

wreck and ruin. See rack.

*wreckless. See reckless.

wretch. For an interesting mistake involving this word, see retch.

wrier; wriest. See wry.

wring. A. Inflection: wring > wrung > wrung. The past-tense and past-participial forms of wring (= to squeeze or twist) are sometimes erroneously written rung—e.g.:

• “On market days, it is possible to see a small boy grab a live chicken by the head and whip its body round and round in an arc until its neck is rung [read wrung].” Linda Greider, “Learning to Talk Turkey in French,” Wash. Post, 16 Nov. 1978, at E1.


• “Cathy Turner had to guard the gold medal around her neck closely last night. If she wasn’t careful, someone might have rung [read wrung] her neck with it.” Mary Kay Cabot, “Turner’s Gold Draws Heat,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 25 Feb. 1994, at D1.

The erroneous past form *wringed sometimes appears—e.g.:

• “For the federal budget to be wringed [read wrung] clean of red ink near the start of the next millennium, the economy will have to continue a stretch of low inflation.” Mike Meyers, “Seven Years? Ha! Try Seven Months!” Star Trib. (Minneapolis), 25 Jan. 1996, at A18.

• “[Willie] Nelson slowed it down and wringed [read wrung] it out when the world expected its outlaw to be wired to the gills.” Michael Corcoran, “The 25 Best Austin Albums of All Time,” Austin Am.-Statesman, 1 May 1997, at 32.

• “She wringed [read wrung] her hands as she prepared for the piercing.” Lisa Jones Townsel, “Third Time’s the Charm,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 12 Sept. 1998, at 40.

Still another erroneous form, always as the past tense and not as a past participle, is *wring—e.g.:

• “After she wrung [read wrung] out the clothes, Grandma hung them on the line to dry.” Margaret Wente, “They’ll Never Go Home Again,” Globe & Mail (Toronto), 20 July 1996, at D7.


• “The moment he wrang [read wrung] from the shirt that was drenched with sweat and tears and celebration was not the single in the eighth inning that eased last night’s conclusion.” Steve Jacobson, “Brosius Hits the Heights,” Newsday (N.Y.), 22 Oct. 1998, at A105.

See irregular verbs.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX
1. rung misused for wrung: Stage 1
   Current ratio (wring its neck vs. *rung its neck): 29:1
2. *wringed for wrung: Stage 1
3. *wrang for wrung: Stage 1
   Current ratio (wring his hands vs. *wrang his hands): 209:1
B. Hand-wringing. This phrase, in common use since the 1960s, is sometimes mangled into *hand-ring—e.g.:

- “Mary Tyler Moore now gets by without the haunting, hand-ring [read hand-wringing] insecutry that once dogged her everywhere she went.” Bob Thompson, “Rediscovering Mary,” Toronto Sun, 10 Mar. 1996, at S3.

Wrongly; wrongful. The distinction is important. Wrong = (1) incorrect; unsuitable <the quoted figures were simply wrong> <it was wrong of us to expect them so soon>; or (2) contrary to law or morality; wicked <cloning just to get human organs is wrong>. Wrongful = (1) characterized by unfairness or injustice; contrary to law <Iraq’s wrongful aggression against Kuwait>; or (2) (of a person) not entitled to the position occupied <the wrongful officeholder>.

Wrongly; wrong, adv. Both are proper adverbs; wrongly, which is less common, appears before the verb modified <the suspects were wrongly detained>; wrong follows the noun <he answered the question wrong>.

wroth, adj. See wrathful.

wrought. See wreak (A).

wrought with ——. See fraught (B).

wrung. See wring (A).

wry (= drily humorous, sardonic) presents all lexicographers with a conundrum. Throughout the English-speaking world, wrier is more common as the comparative adjective than wryer—and has been since the early 19th century in all varieties of English print sources. Yet wryest predominates over wriest and has done so over the same period (except during the years 1940 to 1960). Very strange.

What’s a dictionary to do? Recommend wrier but wryest? None seem to have made that choice. But they all list exclusively the adverb wryly. Doubtless for the sake of consistency, American dictionaries tend to recommend wrier–wriest (W11 being an exception). British dictionaries tend to recommend wryer–wryest. My recommendation: use the -y- forms for consistency, and do so wryly.

Current ratio (wrier vs. wryer): 3:1
Current ratio (wryest vs. wriest): 2:1

X

Xmas. This 16th-century abbreviation for Christmas spread into popular usage in the late 19th century. Today it is popular in advertising. The prejudice against it is unfounded and unfortunate. The X is not a Roman X but a Greek chi—the first letter in Christmas. Xmas has no connection with Generation X, X-ray, or X as an algebraic variable.

According to the late poet and philologist John Ciardi, “Though commonly frowned upon by grammarians as slovenly and by the pious as profane, X has ancient antecedents as the symbol of Christ and the cross, so much so that illiterate Jews at Ellis Island

X mas, 977

Should you write a Xmas gift or an Xmas gift? The answer depends on how readers hear the word in the mind’s ear. If readers hear “Christmas,” then a is the correct indefinite article. If readers hear “Eksmas,” then an would be correct. An informal survey suggests that most people say Xmas as “Christmas”; so a is probably the safer bet.

X-ray; x-ray. Either form is correct, although the first has predominated in both AmE and BrE in print sources since the late 19th century—the margin between the two being much less in AmE. Although W11 suggests that the term is hyphenated as an adjective and verb (X-ray) but not as a noun (X ray), most other dictionaries hyphenate the term in all parts of speech. That makes good sense, and it’s an easy rule to follow.

Current ratio (X-ray vs. x-ray): 2:1

Y

-Y. See diminutives (g).

y'all. A. Spelling. Dating back to the early 19th century, this sturdy Southernism is most logically y'all, not *y'all, and the better form is vastly predominant in print sources. Only the you of you all is contracted. And in modern print sources, y'all is five times as common. So *yall (which misleadingly resembles he'll, she'll, and we'll) deserves an edit—e.g.:

- “If y'all [read y'all] want to stink up your breath and your clothes and start forest fires and make other people sick and get heart disease and cancer . . . well, you just go right ahead.” Jim Jenkins, “Thank Goodness Smoking Was Not Addictive,” News & Observer (Raleigh), 26 May 1994, at A18.
- “‘Y'all [read y'all] have got to help me a lot,’ Bentley, a registered nurse at Chalmette Medical Center, told the students about class planning.” Cassandra Lane, “Nunez Nurse Students Back in Classroom,” Times-Picayune (New Orleans), 25 Feb. 1997, at A1.

In the late 20th century, some writers began spelling the term without an apostrophe: *y'all. See Jan Tillery & Guy Bailey, “Yall in Oklahoma,” 73 Am. Speech 257 (1998). This spelling is not yet widespread (and not recommended).

Why has the spelling been so much trouble? Y'all is the only contraction in English in which a stressed syllable is five times as common as the unstressed one. See Michael B. Montgomery, “A Note on Y'all,” 64 Am. Speech 273, 274 (1989). See also 5 DARE at 1132–34.

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*y'all for y'all: Stage 2
Current ratio (y'all vs. *y'all): 5:1

B. Number. Although the traditional use of *y'all is plural, and although many Southerners have stoutly rejected the idea that it's ever used as a singular, there does seem to be strong evidence that it can refer to a single person—for example, *y'all later spoken to someone without a companion. One possibility is that the speaker means “you and anyone else who may be with you” or “you and anyone else who comes along.” Another possibility is that y'all may in fact refer to one person. Getting at the truth depends on understanding the speaker’s state of mind. For good summaries of the debates over this point—they have sometimes been heated—see Nancy J. Spencer, “Singular Y’all,” 50 Am. Speech 315 (1975); and Marvin K.L. Ching, “Plural You/Y’All by a Court Judge,” 76 Am. Speech 115 (2001). For an argument that y'all can be singular, see Jan Tillery & Guy Bailey, “Yall in Oklahoma,” 73 Am. Speech 257 (1998); for an opposing (and more persuasive) point of view, see Ronald R. Butters, “Data Concerning Putative Singular Y’All,” 76 Am. Speech 335 (2001).

C. You all. Many speakers in the South and Southwest, even highly educated ones, use the uncontracted you all as the plural form of you. This is a convenient usage, since you alone can be either singular or plural—and therefore is sometimes ambiguous. (See pronouns (A.).) True, you all is unlikely to spread beyond regional usage. But speakers who (like the author of this book) grew up with the phrase won’t be easily dispossessed of it. It’s handy, and it’s less susceptible to raised eyebrows than y'all.

There is, however, a noticeable tendency in urban areas to replace this phrase with you guys, even if those addressed include females. One Texas writer calls you guys a “horrid Yankee construction.” Steve Blow, “What’s Up with Y’all?” Dallas Morning News, 27 Sept. 2002, at A25. This may have resulted from the great influx of a geographically diverse population in major cities such as Dallas throughout the 1980s and 1990s, coupled with a growing sense among natives that you all and y'all signal provincialism.

Yaws. See frambesia.

Yay. See yea.

Yclept (= called, by the name of) is an archaism still sometimes encountered—e.g.: “A World War II British codebreaker (many at Bletchley Park were female) would have been appropriately yclept Sadie O. Rylane [a spoonerism of radio silence].” Don Hauptman, “More Original Spoonerisms and Transposition Puns,” 48 Word Ways 192 (1 Aug. 2015). It’s the past participle
of the long-obsolete verb clepe (= to call by the name of). As a revival of an Old English term attested from the 10th century, according to the OED, ycleft was "much affected as a literary archaism by Elizabethan and subsequent poets," and "in less dignified writing [it was] often used for the sake of quaintness or with serio-comic intention." In recent centuries, it reached the height of its popularity in the 19th. The word has steadily declined in print sources since 1900.

**ye. A. As Article Meaning “the.”** In phrases such as Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese (Samuel Johnson’s favorite pub in London) and Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe, the word ye is simply a variant spelling of the. The Middle English thorn (þ) represented the sound now represented in English by th. By 1500 or so, its form was identical to that of y. Hence the "proper" pronunciation of ye as a definite article is /thee/—not /yee/.

**yea; yay; yeah.** The first is an expression of assent, esp. in a vote. The second is an exuberant exclamation. The third is a casualism for "yes."

**year.** For the possessive form in five years’ imprisonment, etc., see possessives (1).

**yeoman service; *yeoman’s service.** The form yeo-

man service (= stalwart help and support in some endeavor) has been predominant in English-language print sources throughout the world since about 1900. Before that, *yeoman’s service* was the standard term. Current ratio: 3:1

**yes.** This word has two possible plurals: yeses and yesses. The better plural for the noun is yeses because, like buses, it follows the usual rule for nouns ending in -s. See PLURALS (A). Cf. no.

But the verb yes is inflected yessed, yessing. Therefore, the third-person singular verb is yesses <he’s so uxurious that he yesses her constantly>.

**yet. A. Beginning Sentences with.** Like other coordinating conjunctions, yet is perfectly acceptable as a sentence-starter. It’s a rank superstition to believe otherwise. E.g.:

- “Yet if a student can—and this is most difficult and unusual—draw back, get a critical distance on what he clings to, come to doubt the ultimate value of what he loves, he has taken the first and most difficult step toward the philosophic conversion,” Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* 71 (1987).
- “Yet God must by now be hardened to blasphemous bulls.” Christopher Ricks, *Beckett’s Dying Words* 170 (1993).

Cf. but (A).

**B. Idioms Involving yet.** There are two common negative phrases revolving around this word: no person has yet done something and the person has yet to do something. Some writers have ill-advisedly conflated the two idioms to come up with their own brand of illogic—e.g.: “No artist has yet to capture the essence of the Thai sea.” Advertisement of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, *Island* (Mag.), Fall 1995, at 7. The writer has inadvertently suggested that every artist has already captured the essence of the Thai sea.

**C. Other Phrases.** See although . . . yet, as yet & *but yet.

**yodel, vb., makes yodeled and yodeling in AmE, but yodelled and yodelling in BrE.**

**yogurt; yoghurt.** The Turkish loanword yogurt (= a thick cultured dairy product) is so spelled. Yoghurt, a variant spelling common (but not dominant) in BrE, is rare in AmE. In fact, yogurt is more than 23 times as common as yoghurt in American print sources. *Yog-

hurt* (predominant in BrE only during the 1950s) and *yogurt* are likewise variant spellings best avoided. Current ratio (yogurt vs. yoghurt in World English): 5:1

**yoke; yolk.** *Yoke* = (1) a twice-curved, usu. wooden beam with U-shaped brackets beneath to enclose the necks of two oxen or other draft animals <after a struggle, the oxen were fitted into the yoke>; or (2) a pair of animals suitable for yoking <a yoke of oxen>. *Yolk* = the yellow center of an egg <he liked omelettes made with egg whites—he didn't miss the yolks>. *Yokes* is sometimes a verb; yolk never is.

With this pair, word-swapping is fairly common. Sometimes yolk is misused for yoke—e.g.:


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**LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX** (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, 1-li.)


Invariably inferior forms marked by asterisk (*). • Ratios represent frequency of prevalent forms vs. variants in current books.
Language-Change Index

1. yolk misused for yoke: Stage 1
   Current ratio (yoked together vs. *yolked together): 283:1
2. yoke misused for yokel: Stage 1
   Current ratio (egg yolks vs. *egg yokes): 236:1

You. A. Used in an Exclusive Way. The point here is to be aware of your audience. If you're writing for the New England Journal of Medicine, it's probably safe to use you to mean "doctors." But consider how this opening paragraph of a news story would read to a person who isn't African-American: "The ever-changing black experience in America is being assessed with a new intensity. Skin color, how you talk, more specifically what you say and how you live your life, are examples of the tests used to determine what it means to be black in the 1990s." Lena Williams, "In a 90's Quest for Black Identity, Intense Doubts and Disagreement," N.Y. Times, 30 Nov. 1991, at 1. See superstitions (k).

B. In Legal Documents. The second-person pronoun is invaluable in drafting consumer contracts that are meant to be generally intelligible. Consider the difference between the following versions of a lease provision:

Resident shall promptly reimburse owner for loss, damage, or cost of repairs or service caused in the apartment or community by improper use or negligence of resident or resident's guests or occupants.

vs.

You must promptly reimburse us for loss, damage, or cost of repairs or service caused anywhere in the apartment community by your or any guest's or occupant's improper use.

Of course, the drafter must carefully define you and us, but doing so is usually a straightforward matter.

C. As an Informal Alternative to one, n. See one (a).

You all. See y'all (c).

You and I. For the mistaken phrase *between you and I, see between (c).

You can't eat your cake and have it too; you can't have your cake and eat it too. The second phrasing, now the more common one, is sometimes stigmatized: "The first form makes sense: once you've eaten the damned thing, you can no longer have it. Not so the later, corrupt form: you can have your cake—enjoy looking at it, or keep it in the freezer, or have it set aside for you at the bakery—and then, at the proper moment, eat it, too. But some dolt somewhere along the line reversed the order, and it stuck." John Simon, Book Rev., The New Criterion, Mar. 1997, at 66, 69. In fact, though, it's not clear that the second form is illogical—much less impossible. Assume that the phrase were you cannot spend your money and save it too; why couldn't you just as easily say you can't save your money and spend it too? Essentially, that idea is perfectly analogous to the one involving cake. Note too that one sense of have is "to partake of" (<I'll have the scallops>.

But Simon is right that the eat–have sequence is the traditional one. That's the phrasing given both in Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (14th ed. 1989) and in Bartlett's Familiar Quotations (16th ed. 1992). The latter book traces a form of the phrase back to John Heywood's collection of colloquial Elizabethan sayings: "Would ye both eat your cake and have your cake?" Heywood, Proverbs pt. 1, ch. 9 (1546). The OED gives examples from 1562, 1711, 1815—all in the order that Simon prefers.

Yet the have–eat sequence has been the dominant one since about 1940—e.g.: "I want to have my cake and eat it too," Paul Gallico, "Mainly Autobiographical" (1946), in A Reader for Writers 30, 53 (William Targ ed., 1951). "Still wanting to have your cake and eat it, too, Gregory?" Patricia Wrede, Mairelon the Magician 244 (1991). "A theory that promises liberty as part of equality seems to allow us to have our cake and eat it too." K. Anthony Appiah, "Equality of What?" N.Y. Rev. of Books, 26 Apr. 2001, at 63.

Due to a recent change in law, you can keep working after reaching retirement age and not lose a penny of your Social Security retirement benefits. It's almost like having your cake and eating it, too." Jerry Freeman, "You Can Work and Get Benefits," Fla. Today, 9 Sept. 2002. People §, at 3.

Meanwhile, the eat–have sequence has steadily declined since the 1940s, so much so that many speakers of English have never encountered it.

Language-Change Index

you can't have your cake and eat it too: Stage 5
Current ratio (have your cake and eat vs. eat your cake and have): 6:1

You'd better; *you better. See better (a).

You guys. See y'all (c) & guy.

You know. For an early alarm against the spread of this linguistic virus, see James Thurber, "The Spreading You Know," in Lanterns & Lances 31–34 (1961).
you know what I’m saying? This has become a non-U catchphrase. See class distinctions.

your, the possessive form of the second person, is sometimes misused for you’re, the contraction of you are. Often, as in the second and third examples below, the error is that of the journalist who reports speech:

• “Just saying your [read you’re] going to get fit this year doesn’t mean you will unless you define what you mean by the term ‘fit’ and establish some step-by-step goals to help you accomplish your fitness resolution,” Lareta M. Tabor, “Have You Already Given Up Your New Year’s Resolutions?” Kansas City Star, 15 Jan. 1994, at 19.


The opposite error also occurs, somewhat less commonly, but again most often in recorded speech—e.g.:


• “‘In boxing you don’t have that kind of luxury or time. If you mess up in a fight or two, you’re [read your] career could be over.’” Maureen Landis, “Arroyo Wins Gold Gloves Title,” Lancaster New Era, 29 May 1996, at 9 (quoting Ernie Arroyo).

See spelling (a).

yours, an absolute possessive, is sometimes wrongly written *your’s (an 18th-century throwback that was effectively eradicated from standard English during the first half of the 19th century)—e.g.:


Sometimes, too, it displaces the simple possessive your—e.g.:

• “With the many attractions now calling for your’s [read your] and your family’s attention, chances are you may have very little time left to visit the park.” Cathy Summerslin, “The Mountains’ Wild Side,” Tennessean, 27 Aug. 2000, at G1.

• “Thanks, Dad . . . . It was through your’s [read your] and Mom’s hard work and guidance that I have come this far.” Ginny Rudy, “Traveling in Memory of Dad,” Pitt. Post-Gaz., 26 Dec. 2000, at E3.

See possessives (c), (e).

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX

1. *your’s for yours: Stage 1
Current ratio (letter of yours vs. letter of your’s): 142:1
2. *your’s for your: Stage 1

*yous, *youse. These dialectal or low-prestige versions of the plural pronoun you have been attested in most parts of the English-speaking world. The spelling *yous has been common for representing dialect since about 1700, and *youse since the mid-19th century. The spelling *youse gained predominance in AmE during the first half of the 20th century, but since then the two spellings have been about equally common. The low Americanism *youse guys is universally so spelled. Cf. *y'all.

Current ratio (y'all vs. *yous vs. *youse): 6:1.2:1

youth. Although this word can refer to a young person of either sex <several youths in the community>, it has traditionally had strong connotations of maleness. W2 adds to its definition “esp., a young man,” and Burchfield says of BrE that “its primary sense is a young male person” (FMEU3 at 862). That has never been its primary sense in AmE, though any correct understanding of the word is heavily context-specific. The plural is preferably pronounced /yooths/—not /yooth/.

Youth can also be a collective term for the young men and women of a country <all the youth in the land>. In this sense, of course, there is no plural. It would be hard to say youths of the world in the way that we might say peoples of the world, because in the plural form youth simply takes on the abstract sense of young people generally.

yuck; yuk. The standard words for expressing distaste are yuck and yucky, not the yuckier forms yuks and *yukky. But yuk is a casualism meaning (as a noun) a laugh <did it for the yuks> or (as a verb) “to jest or laugh” <yukking it up>.

LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX (For the full key, see front matter pp. xxxi, l-ll.)

zeitgeist. Though often capitalized as a German noun, this word may be treated as fully naturalized and therefore lowercased and printed in roman type. BrE sources tend to capitalize and italicize the term more than AmE sources.

zero. When used as an adjective (as it rarely is), zero should modify a plural noun, not a singular one. The only number that takes a singular noun is one. E.g.: "In 1985, New York City had 71 days that were out of compliance with the EPA standard for carbon monoxide; that number declined to two days in 1991 and zero day [read zero days or no days] last year." Gregg Easterbrook, "Winning the War on Smog," Newsweek, 23 Aug. 1993, at 29.

The plural is zeros, not *zeroes—although zeroes is the correct verb form. See PLURALS (d).

zetetic. *zetetic. The adjective meaning "proceeding by inquiry or investigation" is preferably spelled zetetic in AmE and BrE alike. The Center for Scientific Anomalies at Eastern Michigan University publishes a journal called The Zetetic Scholar, devoted to the skeptical analysis of paranormal claims.

Zeugma. This figure of speech, literally a "yoking together," involves a word's being a part of two constructions. Sometimes it results in a grammatical error, but sometimes it's simply a felicitous way of phrasing an idea. For example, sometimes a verb or preposition is applied to two other words in different senses, often figuratively in one sense and literally in the other, as in she took her oath and her seat. Often, the phrasing is both purposeful and humorous—e.g.:

- "Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana." Groucho Marx, as quoted in Jim Shea, "Groucho Speaks," Hartford Courant, 18 Aug. 1997, at E1. (Flies is used in two senses; so is like.)
- "I just blew my nose, a fuse, and three circuit breakers." (A character on "The Jim Henson Hour," 16 July 1989.)
- "We would venture out into the Gulf of Mexico off Port Aransas, where we found king mackerel and serenity." Cactus Pryor, "He Called Me Puddin," Tex. Monthly, Feb. 1992, at 101, 134.
- "You held your breath and the door for me." Alanis Morisette, "Head Over Feet" [song] (1995).
- "He turned my life and this old car around." Sara Evans, "Three Chords and the Truth" [song] (1997).

For another good example, see NO OBJECT.

But sometimes zeugma is a kind of grammatical error, as when a single word refers to two or more words in the sentence when it properly applies to only one of them. One type, the nontransferable auxiliary, plagues writers who habitually try to express their ideas in the alternative—e.g.:

- "At the same time, the number of people magnets Disney has or will put on its property has multiplied." Tom Brinkmoeller, "Warren Key in a Whole New Competitive World," Orlando Bus. J., 9 Feb. 1996, at 24. (Put is made both a past-tense and a present-tense verb; insert another put after has.)
- "Although outside professionals have and will be called in to work on the station, firefighters will do most of the work." "Congrats Achievements," Cincinnati Enquirer, 18 July 1996, at B3. (Insert been after have; otherwise, called is nonsensically made both active and passive.)
- "U.S. policy toward Latin America has and will continue to be held hostage to the whims of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and its chairman." Denise Dresser, "Helm's Opposition Makes Weld Look Fine to Mexico," Houston Chron., 6 Aug. 1997, at 29. (Has doesn't match up with be held; insert been after has.)

Although commentators have historically tried to distinguish between zeugma and syllepsis, the distinctions have been confusing and contradictory: "even today agreement on definitions in the rhetorical handbooks is virtually nil." The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics 1383 (Alex Preminger & T.V.F. Brogan eds., 1993). We're better off using zeugma in its broadest sense and not confusing matters by introducing syllepsis, a little-known term whose meaning not even the experts agree on.

Zibeline (= of, relating to, or involving sables) has predominated since the early 19th century in both AmE and BrE. *Zibelline is a variant. The word is pronounced /zib-ə-lin/ or /-leen/. See ANIMAL ADJECTIVES.

Current ratio: 18:1

Zinc, vb. (= to coat with zinc), varicillates in its inflected forms. The predominant spellings in AmE and BrE alike are the anomalous zined and zinking (pronounced with a -k- sound), variants being *zinked and *zinking, as well as the willful misspellings *zinked and *zingking. See -nika-.

Current ratio (zined vs. *zinked): 2:1

Zither (= a type of stringed instrument) has always been the standard spelling since the word was first imported from German in the 18th century. *Zithern is a variant.

Current ratio: 118:1

Zombie; *zombi. The first spelling so predominates today—500-to-1 in a 2008 Nexis search of AmE—that the original term is almost a lifeless corpse. *Zombi derives from nzambi, the Bantu name of a West African python deity thought to raise the dead. A generally disparaging term in common use (in the sense "a dullard"), zombie was, for example, what Canadian army regulars called draftees in World War II. The notion of a zombie as a brain-eating monster evolved from
horror movies, starting with *White Zombie* (1932), starring Bela Lugosi.

Current ratio (World English): 54:1

Zombie Nouns. Jargonmongers call them “nominalizations,” i.e., verbs that have been changed into nouns. Without the jargon, one might say that a verb has been buried in a longer noun—usually a noun ending in one of the following suffixes: -tion, -sion, -ment, -ence, -ance, -ity. Today such nouns are commonly called “zombie nouns.” It is hardly an exaggeration (make that one hardly exaggerates) to say that when the verb will work in context, the better choice is almost always to use it instead of a zombie noun. Thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Zombie Noun</th>
<th>The Verb Uncovered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>arbitration</td>
<td>arbitrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compulsion</td>
<td>compel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>computerization</td>
<td>computerize</td>
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<tr>
<td>conformity, -ance</td>
<td>conform</td>
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<tr>
<td>contravention</td>
<td>contravene</td>
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<tr>
<td>dependence</td>
<td>depend</td>
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<td>enablement</td>
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<td>enforcement</td>
<td>enforce</td>
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<td>hospitalization</td>
<td>hospitalize</td>
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<td>incorporation</td>
<td>incorporate</td>
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<tr>
<td>knowledge</td>
<td>know</td>
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<tr>
<td>maximization</td>
<td>maximize</td>
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<td>mediation</td>
<td>mediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minimization</td>
<td>minimize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obligation</td>
<td>obligate, oblige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opposition</td>
<td>oppose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>penalization</td>
<td>penalize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perpetration</td>
<td>perpetrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perpetuation</td>
<td>reduce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reduction</td>
<td>utilize, use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilization</td>
<td>violate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Naturally, you will sometimes need to refer to competition or litigation or regulation as a procedure, and when that is so you must say *competition* or *litigation* or *regulation*. But if a first draft says the insurance industry’s attempts at regulation of doctors, you would be well advised to change that to the insurance industry’s attempts to regulate doctors.

Why eliminate zombie nouns? Three reasons are detectable to the naked eye: first, you generally eliminate prepositions in the process (*perform an analysis of* becomes *analyze*); second, you often eliminate be-verbs by replacing them with so-called action verbs (*is in violation of* becomes *violates*); and third, you humanize the text by saying who does what—something often obscured by zombie nouns (*upon inspection of the letters* might become *when I inspected the letters*).

A fourth reason is not detectable to the naked eye, though. It is the sum of the three reasons already mentioned. For example, I might write this: “After the transformation of nominalizations, the text has fewer abstractions, so readers’ visualization of the discussion finds enhancement.” Or I could make the readers’ job far more pleasant by writing this: “Uncovering zombie nouns makes writing more concrete, so readers can more easily see what you’re talking about.” See *abstractitis*.

Though long neglected in books about writing, zombie nouns ought to be a sworn enemy of every serious writer. In technical writing, they often constitute an even more serious problem than passive voice.

zonal; zonary. In AmE and BrE alike, the adjective corresponding to *zone* is *zonal* in all but medical (obstetric) senses.

zonate (= arranged in zones) is the standard spelling in both AmE and BrE. *Zonated* is a variant.

Current ratio: 3:1

zoology is preferably pronounced /zoh-әl-ә-jee/—not /zoo-әl-ә-jee/. See *pronunciation* (b).

Zoroastrianism; *Zoroastrism.* For the pre-Islamic religion in Persia, *Zoroastrianism* is the standard term in AmE and BrE alike. *Zoroastrism* is a needless variant.

Current ratio: 195:1

zwieback (= a sweetened bread that is baked and then sliced and toasted) is sometimes misspelled *zweiback*, and has been since the late 19th century in both AmE and BrE. E.g.: “At his school, *zwieback* [read *zwieback*], a type of German bread, was the preferred snack.” Jane Tinsley Swope, “Calvert and Hillyer, ” *Baltimore Sun*, 26 Oct. 1994, at A15. The word is pronounced /swee-bak/ or /swt-bak/.

Current ratio: 16:1
GLOSSARY OF GRAMMATICAL, RHETORICAL, AND OTHER LANGUAGE-RELATED TERMS

abbreviation. 1. A shortened form of a word or phrase, created by omitting certain letters or words <New York = N.Y.> <received = rec’d.>, or by substituting a symbol for a word <and = &>. • Common types of abbreviations include contractions <you’d = you would>, clipped words (e.g., lab from laboratory), acronyms, and initials. See ACRONYM; INITIALIZM; CLIPPING. 2. The process of shortening a word or phrase by omitting or substituting letters. See pp. 2–4.

ablative case. See case.

ablation /ab-lowt/. The variation in the vowels of related words, usu. indicating a change in meaning or use. • This is typical of irregular verbs when they are conjugated <sing–sang–sung>. (See irregular verb under verb.) Ablaut may be in a word’s sound, or its omission, shortening, or lengthening. — Also termed gradation; vowel gradation.

absolute, n. A word that ordinarily functions as a sentence in itself, or as the nucleus of a sentence, but not as a component within a clause <ouch> <hello> <yes>.

absolute adjective. See noncomparable adjective under adjective.

absolute comparative. See dangling comparative under COMPARATIVE.

absolute construction. A phrase grammatically independent of the rest of the sentence. • Such a construction functions as a sentence adverb or sentence modifier and may consist of (1) a nominative subject <They having gone out of their way to see the monument, the hosts knew that the tour shouldn’t be rushed>; (2) an infinitive phrase <To be honest, I didn’t like the cake much>; (3) a participial phrase with an express subject <The play having been produced, all that remained was to hope for positive reviews>; or (4) a prepositional phrase <in isolation, their actions might seem justified>. See pp. 9–10.

absolute degree. See DEGREE.

absolute form. A form of a possessive pronoun that stands alone without a noun <Mine is the one on the right> (mine being an absolute form) <This book is hers> (hers being an absolute form). — Also termed independent form.

abstractitis. Undesirable lack of concreteness in writing; vapid airiness in style. • Sir Ernest Gowers, who seems to have invented the word in his second edition of H.W. Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage (1965), characterized and described overused abstract language as a disease (hence the suffix -itis). He noted that afflicted writers habitually use polysyllabic, abstract words, convoluted syntax, and circumlocutions because of cloudy thinking that gets worse with time, until neither readers nor the writer can tell what a sentence means. But abstractitis can be effectively used in contexts such as parody. George Orwell mocked the trend toward abstractitis by “translating” a passage from Ecclesiastes into “modern” English. The original, in Elizabethan English, read: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” Orwell parodied it this way: “Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.”

abstract noun. See NOUN.

abstruse, adj. (Of a writing or subject matter) difficult to understand, esp. by reason of remoteness from everyday life or the usual course of thought; recondite.

academese /a-kad-ә-meez/. The style typical of scholarly writing; esp., a mode of discourse that typifies the least appealing qualities of academic writing, namely, obscurity, pedantry, and pomposity. • Academese is characteristic of academicians who are writing for a highly specialized but, for the most part, rather uneducated audience. — Also termed ineloquent writing.

accent. 1. A distinctive set of pronunciation features that characterize a region or social group; a distinctive manner of utterance <a Boston accent>. Cf. DIALECT. 2. A special emphasis or stress placed on a particular syllable of a word <accent on the first syllable>. • The accent may shift when a word changes form. In photographer, the second syllable takes the accent. But in photographic, the accent shifts to the third syllable.

accentuation. The variation in the vowels of related words, usu. indicating a change in meaning or use. • This is typical of irregular verbs when they are conjugated <sing–sang–sung>. (See irregular verb under verb.) Ablaut may be in a word’s sound, or its omission, shortening, or lengthening. — Also termed gradation; vowel gradation.

accidents. 1. A distinctive set of pronunciation features that characterize a region or social group; a distinctive manner of utterance <a Boston accent>. Cf. DIALECT. 2. A special emphasis or stress placed on a particular syllable of a word <accent on the first syllable>. • The accent may shift when a word changes form. In photographer, the second syllable takes the accent. But in photographic, the accent shifts to the third syllable.

3. A diacritical mark (commonly ’) used in writing to show how a syllable should be stressed in pronunciation.

acute accent. In pronunciation, a diacritical mark (’) indicating that the letter or syllable is stressed or given a rising inflection. • In a loanword, especially those from French, the mark also indicates that the final letter or syllable is not silent <flambé>. Both stress and a nonsilent final vowel are shown by the acute accents in résumé. See DIACRITICAL MARK.

grave accent. A diacritical mark (’) indicating a falling pitch on a vowel (as in the French père) or that a final syllable is pronounced separately (as in Shakespeare’s perturbed spirit). • This mark most often appears in a word ending with -el. It’s uncommon in prose, although it’s occasionally useful to distinguish an adjective (as in learned friend) from a verb (the friend learned, meaning that a person acquired knowledge). See Diacritical mark.

accidie. 1. The field of grammar dealing with how word forms vary to express and distinguish number, case, person, mood, tense, and so on. • Affixes are one form of accidence. — Also termed inflectional morphology. See Inflectional affix under AFFIX. Cf. MORPHOLOGY; SYNTAX. 2. The system of inflection in a language; specif., the set of inflections, esp. suffixes and prefixes, that distinguish grammatical categories and relationships. • For instance, the suffix -ed often shows that a verb is in the past tense (as in jog–jogged), and the prefix un- indicates that there is only one of something (as in unicycle). See INFLECTION.

accident. Grammar. A property attached to a word but not essential to it, as case, gender, or number.

accidius /ak-siz-mas/, n. Rhetoric. A feigned refusal of something ardently desired. • When people receive gifts or honors, they may use accidius by modestly declaring something like, “Oh, I couldn’t possibly accept this!” or “I’m flattered, but I’m really not worthy of the honor.” Political candidates and appointees sometimes engage in something like this tactic by declaring that they would really rather be doing something else than being involved in public life.

accusative case. See objective case under CASE.
acquisition. See language acquisition.

acrolect /ə-krə-ˈlɛkt/. The most prestigious variety of a particular language; a standard dialect. Cf. basilect.

acronym. 1. A word formed using the initials of a full name or phrase and spoken as a whole word. • For example, CALL is an acronym for Computer Assisted Language Learning. But not all acronyms are written with capital letters: laser is an acronym of light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation. An acronym is a type of abbreviation. Cf. initialism. 2. Loosely, a word formed from the first few letters of a series of words (as in Benelux, from Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg).


acrolect /ə-krə-ˈlɛkt/.

acrostic, n. A poem in which the first or last letter of each line, when taken in order, spell out a word, phrase, or sentence. Cf. telestich.

action verb. See verb.

active voice. See voice.

actor. The doer of an action. • Usually the actor is the subject and precedes the action. But in passive voice, the actor comes after it, usually in a prepositional phrase beginning with by. — Also termed agent. See active voice and passive voice under voice.

acute accent. See accent.

additive coordinating conjunction.

See copulative conjunction under conjunction.

adjectival /ə-jik-ˈvəl/, adj. Of, relating to, or having the import of an adjective.

adjectival clause. See clause.

adjectival phrase. See phrase.

adjective. A word or phrase that describes or qualifies a noun or pronoun. • An adjective is usually placed before the noun it modifies <a blue lamp>, though sometimes it comes after the noun <court-martial>, or predicatively after a verb, such as a be-verb <It is hot> or a verb expressing a sense <The water looks choppy>. An adjective can also complement a noun <The options make the car expensive>. Many adjectives have a distinctive suffix such as -able (com- mendable), -al (frontal), -ary (legendary), -en (golden), -ful (helpful), -ible (possible), -ic (pervasive), -ish (squeamish), -ive (preventive), -less (pointless), -like (rocklike), -ous (tremendous), -some (wholesome), and -y (windy). Most adjectives have three forms: positive (skillful), comparative (more skillful), and superlative (most skillful). See pp. 19–21.

absolute adjective. See noncomparable adjective.

attributive adjective. A usu. descriptive adjective that precedes the noun it qualifies or modifies; an adjective within a noun phrase <a golden thread> <the tattered envelope>.

compound adjective. 1. An adjective formed from two or more conjoined words <bedridden> <hardscrabble> <roughshewn>. 2. See phrasal adjective.

coordinate adjective. An adjective that appears in a sequence with one or more related adjectives to modify the same noun. • The adjectives are separated by a comma or joined by and <calm, understanding manner> <a highly skilled and longtime employee>.

definitive adjective. An adjective that limits a noun by specifying "which one" or "how many"; an adjective that quantifies an exact or definite number <four people> <the three editions> <He gave a fourth example>. • Definitive adjectives include ordinal and cardinal numbers <first class> <five toes>, definite and indefinite articles <the photograph> <a photograph>, and words such as many, much, and some <some keys won't work>. Other types of adjectives, including demonstrative adjectives such as this and those <those wands in the cabinet> and possessive adjectives <my cast-iron skillet>, may function as definitive adjectives. See demonstrative adjective; possessive adjective. Cf. determiner.

demonstrative adjective. An adjective that modifies a noun merely by pointing to it, as opposed to describing it <this jewel>; an adjective that points to an antecedent. • The demonstrative adjectives are this, that (singular); these, those (plural); and such (preferably meaning "of that kind" and not "the very one just mentioned") <Such pages should be put into that pile over there>. See definitive adjective.

descriptive adjective. An adjective that defines the quality, type, or condition of something <positive outlook> <dry, hard soil> <nervous witness>.

distributive adjective. A type of adjective that qualifies a noun as one of a group <each person> <neither player>.

indefinite adjective. An indefinite pronoun used attributively for an indefinite number or quality of persons or things; an adjective that is the same as an indefinite pronoun in form but that modifies a noun <any college> <other people> <many years> <another day>. • Among the indefinite adjectives are another, any, both, each, either, neither, one, other, and some <Both arguments are debated> <She interviewed other candidates>.

interrogative adjective. The interrogative pronoun what, which, or whose when used as a determinant to pose a question or to identify a particular noun or noun phrase. • An interrogative adjective is identical in form to its corresponding interrogative pronoun, but the pronoun stands alone, whereas the adjective is coupled with a noun or phrase. For example, what is an interrogative pronoun in What do you want? and an interrogative adjective in What color are the tomatoes?

irregular adjective. An adjective that has comparative and superlative forms that are not made by the normal rules <good–better–best> <bad–worse–worst>.

noncomparable adjective. An adjective that defines a state or condition that cannot be intensified or diminished because it is absolute; an adjective that denotes a quality that cannot be graded <unique> <unanimous>. — Also termed absolute adjective; nongradable adjective.

nongradable adjective. See noncomparable adjective.

phrasal adjective. A phrase that functions as a unit to modify a noun <the no-service-can-be-declined policy> <high-school cheerleader>. • With rare exceptions, phrasal adjectives are hyphenated. — Also termed compound modifier; unit modifier.

possessive adjective. An adjective that denotes ownership or possession and modifies a noun or noun phrase. • In form, a possessive adjective appears similar to a possessive pronoun, but possessive adjectives cannot stand alone. For instance, in response to the question, Whose car is parked in the driveway?, you could use the possessive pronoun mine <It's mine> or the possessive adjective my plus the noun <It's my car>. The possessive adjectives are my, your, his, her, its, our, your, and their. See definitive adjective.

predicate adjective. An adjective that modifies the subject, but comes after a linking verb and is not followed by a noun <Vanessa seems happy>. — Also termed predicative adjective.

predicative adjective. See predicate adjective.

pronominal adjective /proh-nom-ə-nal/. A pronoun—other than a personal pronoun, who, or none—that modifies a noun <my> <your>
adjective clause. See phrase.
adjective phrase. See phrase.
adjective complement. See com-
plement.

relative adjective. An adjective that
has the form of a relative pronoun but
that qualifies a noun and introduces
a relative clause; specif., an adjective
introducing an adjectival clause or a
noun clause <without checking who
was at the door> <in late winter, by
which time the snow will be deep>. •
The relative adjectives are which, that,
who, whom, whose, and where <He
knew which way to go> <the writer
whose book I read>.

adjective clause. See clause.
adjective complement. See com-
plement.
adjective phrase. See phrase.
adjective pronoun. See pronoun.
adjectivism. The tendency to overuse
adjectives. Cf. adverbism.

adjunct. 1. In some grammatical sys-
tems, an adverb that adds detail to the
action denoted by the verb, specifying
such ideas as time <yesterday>
<tomorrow> <nowadays>, place <abroad>
<here> <upstairs>, manner <swiftly> <shy>, and
extent <partly> <wholly> <mostly>. Cf. conjunct; disjunct; subject.

2. A word or group of words having
secondary importance in a phrase or
sentence. — Also termed (in sense 2)
circumstance.

adnomination /ad-nom-i-nay-shan/, n. Punning, paronomasia.
adoxography /ad-ahk-sahg-ra-fee/, n. Brilliant, elevated writing about a
base, stultifying subject.
adverb. A word that modifies a verb
She wrote quickly>, an adjective
<a very kind gesture>, or another
adverb <uttered quite thoughtfully>,
by expressing time, place, manner,
degree, cause, or the like. • It is often
distinguished by the suffix -ly and
typically refers to the circumstances
or way in which an action occurs. Like
adjectives, adverbs have three forms:
positive <skillfully>, compara-
tive <more skillfully>, and super-
latve <most skillfully>. Adverbs
traditionally fall into five categories:
(1) adverbs of place or motion, such
as here, there, up, down; (2) adverbs
of time, such as now, then, sometimes,
ever, always, often, ever; (3) adverbs
of manner or quality, such as so, well,
entirely, fully, sincerely; (4) adverbs
of measure or degree, such as less,
much, more, enough, sufficiently; and
(5) adverbs of modality, such as cer-
tainly, not, maybe, perhaps, therefore.
bare adverb. See flat adverb.

conjunctive adverb. An adverb (such
as therefore and whenever) indicating
a logical relationship between two
clauses; specif., a connective word
that combines the functions of a con-
junction and an adverb by connect-
ing two clauses while also qualifying
a verb. • For example, in the sentence
I don't know when the concert is sup-
posed to begin, when qualifies the
verb phrase is supposed to begin. A
conjunctive adverb can have rela-
tive or interrogative force. — Also
termed connective adverb; adverbial
conjunction; illative conjunction;
introductory adverb; relative adverb.

connective adverb. See conjunctive
adverb.

consequential adverb. An adverb
denoting inference, conclusion, or
result.

flat adverb. An adverb that has the
same form as its corresponding
adjective <hard> <fast>. • Compare the
examples Go slow and Go slowly,
either of which is permissible (one
with a flat adverb and one a nor-
mal -ly adverb. — Also termed bare
adverb.

introductory adverb. See conjunctive
adverb.

locative adverb. An adverb that indi-
cates place or direction <The car
moved forward>.

numeric adverb. An adverb indicating
order or position <He played first>.

relative adverb. See conjunctive
adverb.

sentence adverb. An adverb that modi-
fies an entire independent clause,
often connecting a sentence with
the preceding one <fortunately> <moreover>. See p. 815.

simple adverb. A single-word adverb
that qualifies a single part of speech
<hardly visible> <entering now>.
adverb complement. See com-
pement.

adverbial, adj. Of, relating to, or func-
tioning as an adverb.
adverbial clause. See clause.
adverbial conjunction. See con-
junction.
adverbialize, vb. To convert (a word or
phrase that does not normally func-
tion as an adverb) into an adverb.
adverbial objective. A noun in an
adverbial position after a verbal <He
works nights>.
adverbial phrase. See phrase.
adverbism. The tendency to overuse
adverbs. Cf. adjectivism.

adversative /ad-var-sa-tiv/, adj.
1. Expressing contrast, antithesis, or
opposition <Although we were late
for the wedding, we had to stop for gas>
(the adversative although shows that
the dependent clause it introduces
was a hindrance to the action in the
independent clause). • In professional
writing, the most common adversa-
tive word is the sentence-starting But.

2. DISJUNCTIVE. — adversative, n.
adversative conjunction. See con-
junction.

affirmative. (Of a clause or phrase)
positive, without any markers for
negation.

affix. n. One or more letters or syllables
attached to the beginning or end of a
word, or inserted within a word, to
modify the word's meaning; a bound
morpheme attached to a root. See
INFIX; PREFIX; SUFFIX; SYNTHETIC
LANGUAGE.
derivational affix. An affix that, when
added to a root, changes its part of
speech.
inflational affix. An affix that con-
veys grammatical information and
do not change the root's part of
speech.

agency comparative. See dangling
comparative under COMPARATIVE.
agent. See ACTOR.
agent noun. See NOUN.

agglutination /a-gloo-ta-shan/. 1.
The process of compounding or
combining several words into a single
word, with minor or no changes to the
forms or meanings of the constituent
words. 2. The addition of a suffix to a
root to denote the word's grammati-
cal function. 3. The addition of affixes
to a word's root. • The affixes produce
new words with various functions.
In some languages, especially some
Native American languages, a word
that has undergone agglutination may
serve as a sentence.

government. The matching of words
or word classes in terms of number
(singular or plural), gender (mascu-
line, feminine, or neuter), and per-
son (first, second, or third). — Also
termed Concord; congruence. See
Concord.
formal agreement. The conventional matching of nouns, demonstratives, personal pronouns, and verbs to mark them as singular or plural, as animate or inanimate, and as first-, second-, or third-person references. *That sailor has made his bed*; *Those sailors have made their beds*.

notional agreement. The matching of nouns and verbs according to sense as opposed to conventional grammar. *A number of people were [not was] there*. See synesis.

proximity agreement. The mismatching of a verb with a noun that intervenes between the grammatical subject and the verb and that differs in number from that subject. *The state of the Olympic Games were [read was] uncertain*. Cf. false attraction.

alexia /æ-ˈlek-see-a/. The inability to read correctly as a result of brain disease that affects someone who once could read. — Also termed word-blindness. — alexic, adj.

alingual, /æ-ˈling-gwəl/, adj. (Of a person) not fluent in any language.

alliteration. Rhetoric. The repetition of a sound or letter at the beginning of consecutive or nearby words. *a maker and model of melodious verse*; *Her robe was ringed with rich, red ribbons*. • Alliteration can help make something memorable, but it can also look artificial or careless in prose. It is typically used in elevated oratory and in poetry. See euphony. Cf. assonance; consonance. — alliterative, adj. See p. 37.

allonym /al-ә-nim/. 1. A (usu. his-) form is customary. 2. A work assumes as a pen name. — Also termed anagogic, adj.

allomorph. A variation on a morpheme. • Only the sound of the morpheme changes, not the meaning. For example, the morpheme -ed indicates that a verb is in past tense. But it is not pronounced the same each time it appears. For example, it is /ad/ in scolded, but /d/ in farmed, and /t/ in finished. See morpheme.

allophone /al-ә-fohn/. A variation of a phoneme that is spelled the same but pronounced differently. • For instance, the k in kit is aspirated, but the k in skit is not; in these words, the k is an allophone of the phoneme k. See phoneme.

allusion /a-ˈloo-zyan/. A brief, usu. indirect reference to something or someone. • An allusion is effective only when the reader is familiar with the reference. Stating that someone is "as tightfisted as Scrooge" presumes that the reader knows the Charles Dickens story *A Christmas Carol*.

alphabetism. See initialism.

alloquient /əl-ti-il-kwent/, adj. Pompous; highflautin; high-sounding. — alloquenience, n.

ambages /əm-baj-iz/, n. Indications of speech; language characterized by quibbles, ambiguities, and circumlocutions. *The weird sisters of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* are constantly moulting ambages*. • Although the singular ambage exists, the plural form is customary.

ambiguity. 1. Uncertainty of meaning; the state of being equivocal or otherwise obscure. 2. Language that can be reasonably interpreted in two or more ways; a linguistic structure that is susceptible of more than one meaning. • A single word may be ambiguous if it has several meanings and the context does not make it clear what meaning applies. The statement *pain-relieving medicines are sold by frightening people* is ambiguous because frightening might mean "scary" or "putting fear into," — ambiguous, adj.

grammatical ambiguity. An ambiguity that results when a noun or noun phrase can be interpreted as having more than one grammatical role. *The lamb is ready to eat* (meaning either that the meat is well cooked or that the animal is ready for feeding).

grouping ambiguity. An ambiguity that results when adjacent words can be grouped in different ways to impart different meanings. *We decided on the airplane* (meaning either we decided while on the airplane or we chose the airplane).

lexical ambiguity. An ambiguity that results when a word has more than one plausible meaning in a sentence. *That house is cold* (meaning either that the temperature is too low or that the feeling is artificial and unwelcoming).

linguistic ambiguity. Ambiguity in which an entire sentence may have more than one interpretation. *Visiting relatives can be fun* (meaning either it is fun to visit relatives or it is fun to have relatives visit).

modification ambiguity. Ambiguity that results when a modifier can be interpreted as describing more than one part of the sentence. *We looked at the huge president’s portrait* (What was huge? The president? The portrait?).

structural ambiguity. Ambiguity that results from different possible analyses of grammatical structure. *She can’t bear children*; (meaning either that she dislikes children or that she cannot give birth to a child).

amelioration. See melioration.

amphibology /əm-fi-ba-lə-jee/, adj. 1. The use of an ambiguous statement. 2. The ambiguous statement itself. — Also termed amphiboly.

amphiboly. See amphibology.

amphigory /əm-fi-gor-e/, n. Nonsensical writing; a meaningless composition that has the semblance of sense. — amphigoric, adj.

ampollosity /əm-pa-lōs-sə-tē/, n. A bombastic, inflated prose style.

anacoluthon /ə-nə-ka-lō-thən or -than/. Rhetoric. A construction in which grammatical cohesion is lacking within a sentence, characterized by a change from one grammatical form to another, disharmonious form. • An anacoluthon usually occurs when the speaker suddenly changes the thought or point of view. "He was warned that he had to shape up or what could he expect to happen?". Sometimes it occurs as an instance of aposiopesis to heighten the rhetorical effect: if I don’t find my keys in the next ten minutes—we, you don’t want to know what will happen!". See aposiopesis.

anadiplosis /ən-ә-di-ploh-sis/. Rhetoric. The repetition of a key word in consecutive clauses or sentences, appearing esp. at the end of one and the beginning of the next. *It all comes down to money—money we don’t have*.. • Francis Bacon (1561–1626) used this device when he wrote, "Men in great places are thrice servants: servants of the sovereign or state; servants of fame; and servants of business." — Also termed epanastrophe.


analogy /ə-nә-ja-lә-jee/. Rhetoric. The comparison of two different things by pointing out correspondences, usu. several of them, esp. to augment conceptual clarity. 2. Philology. The influence of the general pattern of a language (e.g., a plural ending in -s) to make an individual item (such as woman) conform to the pattern (making the plural form womans). • Analogy is often at work in children’s speech (e.g., *That stinked*) until the children master irregular forms. Sometimes analogy arises well past the stage of children’s speech. Although dive and drive are similar in appearance, Standard English reflects them differently (dive–dived–dived vs. drive–drove–droven). Through analogy, dove is often
analytic language. Grammar. 1. A language in which every word has only one form and syntactical relationships such as tense, case, and number are shown by function words and word-order. • Context and pragmatic considerations are essential for understanding the meanings of words and sentences in analytic languages. A word or syllable may express a certain concept when it stands alone but express something else when combined with another. Chinese and Vietnamese are analytic languages. To some degree, English is also an analytic language. — Also termed isolating language. Cf. synthetic language. 2. More loosely, a language that depends more on word-order than on inflections to indicate grammatical relationships, as English differentiates between "Man eats fish" and "Fish eats man."

anaphora /ən-ә-nә-fәr-ә/. 1. Rhetoric. The emphatic repetition of a sound, word, or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses, verses, or sentences. • Martin Luther King's repetition of I have a dream in his most famous speech is a kind of large-scale anaphora. — Also termed epanaphora; epibole. See symploce. Cf. cataphora; epistrophe.

anaphoric /ən-ә-fәr-ik/, adj. 1. Of, relating to, or involving anaphora. See anaphora. 2. Of, relating to, or denoting reference to a preceding word or group of words. Cf. cataphoric.

anaptotic, adj. (Of a language) characterized by deterioration and loss of inflected terms, as in English.

anaptysis /ən-ә-pә-tik-sis/, n. Vowel epenthesis; the insertion of a superfluous vowel into the middle of a word or phrase <ellum> <thataway>. See epenthesis.

anastrophe /ə-nәs-tra-fee/. 1. Rhetoric. An inversion of the usual order of words in a sentence <Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown> <echoed the hills>. • This device is most common in poetry. For example, T.S. Eliot used it in "The Journey of the Magi" (1927): the ways deep and the weather sharp. Anastrophe is sometimes seen in literary prose, too. See inversion. 2. Metathesis.

Anglo-Saxon. See old english.

animate, adj. (Of an entity) conscious and able to act of its own will, or at least perceived as being able to do so. • In Indo-European languages (the family from which English descends), nouns were classified as animate (usually referring to living creatures but also to some nonliving things) and inanimate (usually referring to immobile things, especially ones that were never alive). In many languages, animate nouns were later subdivided into masculine and feminine genders, and inanimate nouns were assigned neuter gender. See feminine gender, masculine gender, and neuter gender under gender. Cf. inanimate.

animate noun. See noun.

antacasis /ənt-ә-nәk-la-sis/. Rhetoric. 1. A rhetorical tactic whereby a word or phrase appears twice in the same statement but in different senses <The lot I chose for my house is a lot bigger than I'd realized>. • Vince Lombardi (1913–1970) used this device when he said, "If you aren't fired with enthusiasm, you will be fired with enthusiasm." Cf. zeugma. 2. The repetition of a word or phrase after a parenthesis <I was saying—before I was so gently interrupted—I was saying how glad I am to be here>.

antagonoge /ənt-ә-nag-o-jee/, n. See tu quoque.

antecedent. A noun or noun phrase to which a personal pronoun, a relative pronoun, or a pointing word refers. • The antecedent must agree in number with the referring word. In although Alan left on time, he arrived late, the singular masculine Alan is the antecedent with which the pronoun he agrees. And in there were a dozen pictures to choose from, and those three are the best, the plural pictures is the antecedent of those. See pointing word under word; relative clause under clause. Cf. pronoun.

antepenult /ən-ti-pen-әl/ or /ən-ti-pee-nәlt/. The third from the last syllable in a word, as with /ma/ in accommodation.

anthemia. See functional shift.

anthorism /ən-thә-riz-sm/, n. Rhetoric. A counterdefinition; a rhetorical technique of redefining something differently from how one's adversary has defined it.

anthypophora /ən-thә-pәf-ә-rәl/, n. Rhetoric. A rhetorical tactic of refuting an objection with a contrary inference or allegation <My opponent says that grammar is difficult to learn. That is so. But its uses are infinite.>

anticlimax. Rhetoric. A sudden transition from a substantive or significant idea to one that is nonsensical or trivial, esp. after building up the importance of something.

antimetabole /ən-teemәbә-lә-. Rhetoric. An inversion of the same words or ideas, usu. with a clever, ironic, or profound twist <a wit with dunes, and a dunce with wits (Alexander Pope [1688–1744])> <Never kiss a fool, and never let a fool kiss you>. See antistrope.

antiphrasis /ənt-әf-ra-sis/. Rhetoric. The use of a word in a sense opposite to its established one. • For example, in teenage slang and some dialectal varieties of English, He's bad! Real bad! can mean "He's good." — antiphrastic, adj.

antistrophe /ənt-tis-tra-fee/. Rhetoric. The repetition of words in a transposed order; a reversal of the order of repeated words or phrases <the student of the professor and the professor of the student>. <Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country (President John F. Kennedy [1917–1963])>. — Also termed antimetabole. — antistrophic, adj.

antithesis. Rhetoric. The placement of contrasting or opposing ideas in a parallel construction <The prodigal robs his heir, as the miser robs himself>. • Examples:

- Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. (Shakespeare, Julius Caesar)
- To err is human, to forgive divine. (Alexander Pope [1688–1744])
- Taste consists in the power of judging, to its established one. • For example, in teenage slang and some dialectal varieties of English, He's bad! Real bad! can mean "He's good." — antiphrastic, adj.

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- Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. (Shakespeare, Julius Caesar)
- To err is human, to forgive divine. (Alexander Pope [1688–1744])
- Taste consists in the power of judging, genius in the power of execution. Taste appreciates; genius creates. (George Campbell [1719–1796])

antonomasia /ənt-ә-nә-mәy-ә/, Rhetoric. 1. The use of a proper noun in place of a common noun, as when a traitor is called an Arnold, a speaker a
aphesis
apheresis.
aphonia
aphasia
ә-
aphaeresis
ap
/ә-
aphaeretic,
aphatic
/ә-
avagogic,
appellative
/ap-
-ә-tiz-әm/. An aphetized
word; a form resulting from the loss
of a word's unaccented initial letter or syllable, as in coon for raccoon,
mid for amid, possum for opposum,
and squire for esquire. • This commonly occurs in speech (as when
cause becomes 'cause, and especially becomes 'spica) and in some types of
writing, such as poetry (as when
it was becomes 'twas). Some names
undergo aphaeresis (e.g., Bert,
Ben, Deb, Theof, Theo, Vince). — Also termed end-cut. — apocopate,
apodosis
/ap-
/a-pahd-a-sis/. In a conditional
sentence, the clause containing
the consequence or result. • The
apodosis is not always the last clause
as in if you want to have a picnic, we'll
have to go to the market; it may be
the first. In you can return the
jacket if it isn't the right color, the
apodosis is you can return the jacket because
that clause states the consequence of
the mismatch. — Also termed consequence clause; consequent; conclusion.
See protasis.
apophasis
/ap-
/a-pahf-a-sis/. Rhetoric.
The denial of an intention to mention
something even while mentioning
it <I won't even mention the fact
that local and state officials failed to
do their jobs>. • Several set phrases
in our language signal apophasis,
such as not to mention, to say nothing
of, and it goes without saying. Cf.
paralepsis.
aporia
/ap-
/a-pohr-ee-ә/, n. Rhetoric.
1. The suggestion or profession of
uncertainty about how to begin, what
to say, or what course to take <This
may not be the best choice of words,
but . . .>. 2. An equivalency of reasons
for and against a proposition.
aposioposis
/ap-
/a-si-a-pee-sis/. The leaving of a sentence unfinished as a result of some powerfully intruding
emotion or perception; esp., the
breaking off of a thought as if from an
inability or unwillingness to complete the sentence. • Examples:
Ye winds, whom I—but it is better to call
the billows. (Virgil [70 B.C.–19 B.C.])
I admit you are right. I myself . . . You
see, a person I knew used to divide
people into three categories: those who
prefer nothing to hide rather than being
obliged to lie, those who prefer lying
to having nothing to hide, and finally
those who like both lying and the
hidden. (Albert Camus [1913–1960])
apostrophe
/ap-
pahs-tra-fee/. 1. Rhetoric. The act or an instance of
to having nothing to hide, and finally
those who like both lying and the
hidden. (Albert Camus [1913–1960])
apostrophe
/ap-
pahs-tra-fee/. 1. Rhetoric. The act or an instance of
addressing an absent or dead person,
or an abstract idea or imaginary object <Death, be not proud>. 2. The
mark ['], which indicates (1) the omission
of one or more letters <can't>, (2) the possessive case <Caroline's book>,
or (3) the plural of a letter or abbreviation
<mind your p's and q's>. — apostrophize, vb.
green grocer's apostrophe. British English. An apostrophe mistakenly
placed before a plural s (as in orange's or tomato's). • Occasionally, the term
refers to other blunders, such as
the supposed plural asparagus's. — Also written (appropriately enough, there
is no agreement on the point) green-grocers apostrophe.
theives or hobos. Originally, the term denoted language used for purposes of disguise or concealment. — Also termed cant. See DIALECT. Cf. JARGON.

**argument.** 1. A statement or series of statements calculated to persuade or convince. 2. A disagreement or dispute, esp. a heated one. 3. Linguistics. The complement of a verb (as, e.g., subject, direct object, or indirect object). • A verb must have at least one argument, because the argument distinguishes the verb grammatically. An intransitive verb requires only one argument, the subject <Paul writes and Dianne paints> <He laughed heartily>. A transitive verb needs at least two, the subject and a direct object, perhaps also an indirect object <The catcher dropped the ball> <You should send him a gift>.

**arrestive, adj.** (Of a conjunction such as but) tending to arrest.

**article.** A word such as a, an, or the, used before a word to limit it or to make it more or less definite; a limiting adjective that precedes a noun or noun phrase and determines the noun or phrase’s use to indicate something definite (the) or indefinite (a or an). • An article might stand alone or be used with other adjectives (as in a road vs. a brick road vs. the yellow-brick road). Articles are also called determiners because they restrict or specify a noun in some way.

**definite article.** The word the. • It refers to a particular person or thing that (1) is understood without additional description (e.g., the flowers are here is a shortened form of the flowers you ordered from Ecuador are here); (2) is a thing that is about to be described <the hotel on Congress Street>; or (3) is important <the big one>. • The definite article can be used to refer to a group <the basketball team> or, in some circumstances, a plural <The ideas just kept flowing>.

**indefinite article.** The word a or an. • Each of these points to a nonspecific object, thing, or person that is not distinguished from the other members of a class. These things may be singular <a city in Texas>, or uncountable <a horde>, or generalized <a notion of truth>. A and an can’t be used with plural nouns. Euphony governs which one should be used in speech and writing. If a word’s first letter sounds like a consonant, use a <a unicycle> <a hammer>. If it’s a vowel sound, use an <an unusual place> <an hour>. See EUPHONY.

**zero article.** An article that is implicitly present, usu. before a mass or plural noun <The salespeople refolded shirts that shoppers had tried on> (the is implicit before shirts).

**articulation.** Phonetics. 1. The use of movements of the organs of speech to produce sound. 2. The resulting sound or utterance; esp., a consonant that affects syllabic division.

**ascensive.** See INTENSIVE.

**aspect.** A feature of a verb marked by an auxiliary form, changes in an internal vowel, or the addition or subtraction of an affix to express the duration and type of activity that a verb denotes. See MOOD; TENSE; VOICE; FORM. • Also termed aspectual, adj.

**aorist aspect.** A verb aspect that expresses past action as having occurred at some indefinite time, without implication of continuance or repetition. • This term is primarily used in reference to Greek and Sanskrit grammar. — Also termed punctual aspect; momentaneous aspect.

**continuous aspect.** See progressive aspect.

**durative aspect.** See progressive aspect.

**frequentative aspect** /free-kwen-ta-tiv/. A verb aspect expressing frequent recurrence or intensity of an action, state, or situation. • Unlike other languages, Standard English has no inflected forms for this purpose. But -le is a frequentative particle (e.g., in chuckle, fizzle, and sparkle). — Also termed iterative aspect.

**imperfective aspect.** A verb aspect that expresses action as (1) incomplete (or having no reference to completion), (2) continuing, or (3) repetitive <The hotel was booking reservations>. • Also termed iterative aspect.

**iterative aspect.** A verb aspect that expresses action as being repeated several times.

**momentaneous aspect.** A verb aspect that expresses action as having been begun and terminated in an instant. — Also termed aorist aspect; punctual aspect.

**perfective aspect.** A verb aspect that expresses action as complete—or implies that it is so <Juan has collected seven witness statements>.

**progressive aspect.** A verb aspect (formed with a be-verb plus the main verb’s present participle) showing that an action or state—past, present, or future—was, is, or will be unfinished at the time referred to. • For example, I’m cooking dinner is a current unfinished action. And in I was reading a book when the package came, reading was an unfinished action at the time the event took place. — Also termed continuous aspect; durative aspect. See main verb under VERB; PARTICIPLE.

**punctual aspect.** See aorist aspect; momentaneous aspect.

**aspirate** /as-pa-rayt/, n. 1. A consonant that is articulated (h in half) or followed (p in pou) by a puff of air. 2. The sound of the letter h. • Uneducated speakers of English in Great Britain often drop their t’s and are sometimes said to be weak in their aspirates. — Also termed /as-pa-rayt/, vb.

**aspiration.** An articulated sound that consists of a puff of breath, such as the h-sound in how or the slight puff following the s-sound in pot. Cf. ALLOPHONE.

**assimilation.** Phonetics. The influence of one sound on another that results in the two becoming more similar or even identical. • The word assimilate itself derives from Latin ad-simil-o, commission derives from L. con-mis-sio, correlative derives from L. con-relativus, irrelevant derives from L. in-relevant, etc. In grandma, the -nd-is assimilated to the following -m-, hence the pronunciation /gran-ma/ or /gram-maw/.

**assonance.** The close resemblance or correspondence between vowel sounds in different syllables or words (e.g., dimwit’s inhibition); the repetition of a sound, esp. a vowel sound, in adjoining or nearby words. • In My Fair Lady, Henry Higgins used assonance (a long a sound) as part of Eliza Doolittle’s speech lessons: “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.” Often assonance consists of imperfect or partial rhymes—that is, a repetition of vowel sounds with different consonant sounds, as in lady and baby, golden and molten, squealing and bleating, and penitent and reticent. Cf. ALLITERATION; CONSONANCE.

**asteism /as-tee-iz-əm/, n. Rhetoric. Politely clever mockery. • The gar-gulous brother of the taciturn Holy Roman Emperor Charles V once tried to cajole Charles into dinner conversation. Charles used asteism when he replied, “What need that brother, since you have words enough for us both?”

**asyneton** /a-sin-da-ton/, Rhetoric. The omission of conjunctions that normally join coordinate words, phrases, or clauses in a list. • Many great speakers have used asyneton to produce memorable statements (e.g., Abraham Lincoln’s declaration in the Gettysburg Address, “But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot
consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground”). Cf. polysyndeton.
atonic /ay-ton-ik or a-ton-ik/, adj. (Of a syllable or word) unaccented <an atomic vowel>.
attraction. See false attraction.
attribute /at-tri-byoot/, n. A word or phrase that functions adjectivally; an adjective.
attributive /a-trib-yay-tiv/, adj. Functioning as an adjective; specif., of relating to, expressing, or having the nature of an attribute <an attributive noun>. • An attributive adjective directly precedes the noun it modifies (for instance, the word lovely in lovely day). See attributive noun under noun.
attributive adjective. See adjective.
attributive noun. See noun.
augmentative. See intensive.
aureate diction. [Latin]. — Also termed /ә-lekt/, n. A word or phrase formed by combining the roots of words or ideas; tiresome repetition of portions of two other words and retaining some of each word’s essence. • Blends are relatively common in English. For example, we have scurry from scatter and hurry, and smog from smoke and fog. — Also termed portmanteau word. See pp. 711–12.
bibliography /bloh-vee-ayt/, vb. To speak or write like a barbarian. 2. To violate grammatical rules.
bare adverb. See flat adverb under adverb.
bare infinitive. See infinitive.
basis, n. See root.
bare form. The simplest uninflected variant of a morpheme. See morpheme.
Basic English. A simplified version of the English language consisting of only 850 words and intended as a medium of international communication. • C.K. Ogden of Cambridge invented the system in the 1920s and wrote about it in such books as Basic English (1930). In this name, the word Basic was intended as an acronym for British American Scientific International Commercial (English). — Often shortened to Basic.
basilect /baz-i-lekt or bas-1-i-lekt/, n. The least prestigious variety of a language; the lowest form of a language, typically spoken by the least well-educated members of society. Cf.acrolect — basilect.
battological, adj.
bathos /ba-thahs/, n. Rhetoric. A humorous descent from the sublime to the commonplace. • bathetic /ba-thet-ik/, adj. 
battlement /ba-tahl-3-jee/, n. 1. Idle talk; babbling. 2. Needless repetition of words or ideas; tiresome repetitiousness. • battological, adj. — battologist, n.
bayardage /ba-vahr-dazh/, Foolish or idle chatter; prattle; twaddle.
belles-lettres /bel let-ra/, 1. Literature regarded as an art form; literature valued for its aesthetic function rather than for its informative substance; esp., light but sophisticated literature. 2. Literary criticism, esp. of the kind typical of the 19th century; the study of literature. — Also spelled belles lettres. be-verb. See verb.
bidialectal /bi-di-a-lek-tal/, adj. 1. (Of a person) conversant in two dialects of a language, usu. the standard form and one other. 2. (Of a speech community or teaching environment) using two linguistic varieties at different times, usu. the standard form and one other.
bilingual /bi-lin-gwal/, adj. 1. (Of a person) fluent or competent in two languages. 2. (Of inscriptions, government instructions, ballots, etc.) written in two parallel versions with different languages. 3. (Of an educational regime) involving instruction in two different languages. 4. (Of a region) having a population among which two languages are commonly spoken.
bilingualism /bi-lin-gwal/, n. 1. The ability to use two languages; the habitual use of two languages. 2. The doctrine that promotes bilingual education. 3. The coexistence of two official languages within a given polity, as both French and English are used in Canada.
billingsgate /bil-ingz-gayt/. Coarse and abusive language. • Originally, the term referred to the type of language one heard at the fish market formerly located in the Billingsgate area of London.
blandishment. Flattering language used as a subtle inducement for someone to do something.
blatherskite /bla-thahr-skite/. 1. A person who talks at length yet says little or nothing of importance; someone whose speech has an exceedingly high ratio of words to ideas. 2. Nonsense; foolish talk.
blend. A word derived by combining portions of two other words and retaining some of each word’s essence. • Blends are relatively common in English. For example, we have scurry from scatter and hurry, and smog from smoke and fog. — Also termed portmanteau word. See pp. 711–12.
bloviation /bloh-vee-ayt/, vb. To speak garrulously, usu. with inflated rhetoric. — bloviation, n.
bound morpheme. See morpheme.
brachylogy /bra-kil-a-jee/, 1. Brevity; conciseness; condensed expression. 2. An expression in which one or more words essential to the grammar has been omitted.
break Priscian’s head. To violate the rules of grammar. • In the 6th century, Priscian [A.D. 500] wrote an 18-volume Latin grammar that was copied by almost every library in Europe and influenced writers for several centuries. He is reputed to have been so devoted to the study of grammar that making an error in his presence hurt him as much as a blow to the head. See PRISCIAN.

brevé /brevi or brev/. In pronunciation, a diacritical mark (‘’) indicating that a vowel is short or unstressed.

• For example, the mark shows that the vowel sound in bet is the short eh (/bɛt/). And in the pronunciation for cooperate, it indicates that the identical adjacent letters are not pronounced alike (/kɔʊpræt/). The straight mark is a macron. See diacritical mark. Cf. macron.

brogue /brohgi/. n. 1. An Irish accent in spoken English. 2. Any strong regional accent or dialectal pronunciation.

bromide /broh-mid/. Slang. A banal or trite platitudinous remark, meant to be soothing but suggesting insincerity or vapidity. — bromidic /broh-mid-iks/, adj.

bunkum. The practice of making insincere political speeches solely to please one’s political constituents. — Also spelled buncombe. See p. 131.

buriéd verb. See zombie noun under noun.

by-form. A word that has an alternative form that is similar but less common <spelled–spelt> <apothegm–apotheghm>. • By-forms may have the same or nearly the same meanings unless they’ve undergone different differentiation. See differentiation; Needless variant.

cacoæphy /kak-ə-wa-pee or ka-koh-ə-pee/. Bad or incorrect pronunciation. Cf. orthoepy.

cacoæthes loquendi /kak-ə-weet-theez loh-kwen-di/. A mania for talking; esp., a morbid desire for gossip or speechmaking.

cacoæthæs scribendi /kak-ə-weet-theez skri-ben-di/. A mania for writing; specif., a morbid desire for authorship. • The term derives from the satures of the Roman poet Juvenal (ca. A.D. 55–127). See sporadically.


cacoæronym /kak-ə-nim/. An objectionable name or inappropriate term; esp., a term that violates the rules of a system for naming and should therefore not be used as a technical designation (for a start-up company, a newly discovered star, a newly developed drug, etc.). Cf. euonym.

cacoæphony /ka-koh-fə-ne/, Rhetoric. An unpleasant or dissonant coupling of words; esp., harsh-sounding words; a harsh combination of sounds. Cf. euphony.

cacoæzeal /kak-ə-zee-əl/. Inferior imitation in literary composition; an absurd affectionation of writing.

cale /kalk/. See loan translation. cant. See argot.

cardinal number. A number denoting quantity rather than place in a sequence (e.g., three French hens). Cf. ordinal number.

caritative. See hypocoristic.

carriwitchet /ka-ri-wit-ches/. 1. An absurd question that is intended to be facetious, such as “What’s the distance from San Francisco to next Friday?” 2. A play on words; PARONOMASIA.

• case. 1. A grammatical category for the inflection of nouns and pronouns to indicate their function in a sentence; a noun or pronoun’s change in form as a result of its change in function.

• Nouns have two cases: common and possessive. Pronouns have three: nominative, objective, and possessive. (See declension.) Some older grammars, modeled on Latin grammars, recognized five cases: nominative (or subjective), genitive (or possessive), dative, accusative (or objective), and vocative. But modern grammarians have long held that clarity of analysis is gained by recognizing no more cases than the language’s inflectional system demands. 2. In an analytic language, as opposed to a synthetic one, the relation that a noun, adjective, or pronoun bears to some other word in the sentence—as opposed to its change in form.

ablative case. A grammatical case that exists in Latin and certain other Indo-European languages, but not in English, to mark a noun as carrying the sense “by, with, or from” with it. Among the ablative phrases that English has borrowed from Latin are ipso facto (= by the very nature of the case) and mutatis mutandis (= with the necessary changes having been made).

accusative case. See objective case.

common case. The case of a noun that retains the same form whether it functions as a subject, direct object, or indirect object; esp., the unaffected form of a noun or pronoun, as distinct from its genitive or possessive form. • In English, all nouns have the common case. Some grammarians say that they have no case at all.

dative case. In some Indo-European languages, a case denoting the indirect object of a verb—that is, to whom or for whom we do a thing <Give the book to James>, or to which or for which we do a thing <Build a house for Jill>. The preposition is often omitted <Give me one good reason>.

genitive case. The case used to show a thing’s source (as in the car’s exhaust), a trait or characteristic (as in women’s intuition), or possession or ownership (as in our new house). • In English, the genitive case is identical to the possessive case. With animate nouns, the genitive is generally indicated through inflection—the addition of -‘s for a singular (e.g., boy’s) or -‘s for a plural (e.g., boys’). With inanimate nouns, the of-genitive is more common (e.g., the purpose of the remark).

nominative case. The case for the subject of a clause. • English nouns do not use inflections to show the nominative case, but languages such as Latin and Russian do. — Also termed subjective case.

objective case. The noun and pronoun case denoting either (1) the person or thing acted on by a verb in the active voice <The computer hurt him as much as a blow to the head>. — Also termed accusative case.

oblique case. Any case of a noun or pronoun other than the common case or the nominative case.

possessive case. The noun and pronoun case denoting possession or ownership. • The possessive case is reflected in nouns by inflection (‘s or ‘s) or by the periphrastic form [noun + of the + noun]. For example, in Rachel’s desk, the apostrophe-plus-s shows that Rachel’s is possessive; in the money is theirs, the form theirs is possessive.

subjective case. See nominative case.

casualism. A highly informal expression characteristic of conversation more than of edited prose. See pp. 148–49.

catachresis /kat-ə-keez-siss/. Rhetoric. 1. The mistaken use of a word or phrase for another that is similar but does not have the same meaning. • Using luxurious (= elegant) for luxuriant (= profuse) is an example of catachresis. See malapropism. 2. The strained use of a word or phrase without concern for its accepted sense, as
occurs in a mixed metaphor. • It is sometimes used for rhetorical effect. In his farewell address, General Douglas MacArthur undoubtedly puzzled many listeners when he said, “I listen vainly, but with thirsty ear.”

3. Any forced use of a word. 4. The use of a word falsely formed through folk etymology. See ETYMOLOGY (d).

— catarhesis, adj.

catarhaphic [kat-ә-for-ik], adj. Of, relating to, or denoting reference to a word or group of words occurring later in the sentence. Cf. ANAPHORA.

catastasis [ka-tas-tә-sis], n. The part of a speech, toward the beginning, in which the speaker sets forth the subject of discussion.

catastrophic. See VERB.

causeteric /kohz-tә-thee/, n. The part of a series on a literary subject. Informal article, essay, or talk, usu. one of a series on a literary subject.

causitive [sa-di-e-ә]/. In some Romance languages (e.g., French and Portuguese), a diacritical mark that appears under the letter c to indicate that the letter is pronounced softly as an s rather than hard as a k. • Most loanwords used in English that had cedillas are now usually spelled without <souçon–souçon> <garçon–garçon> <façade–façade>. See DIACRITICAL MARK.

cedilla /sa-di-e-ә/. A repeated or meaningless word or phrase used to fill out the end of a sentence when euphony or balance with other sentences is desired. • The device is often used in poetry, as in Lewis Carroll’s Jabberwocky: “O frabjous day! Cal–looh! Callay!” (in Through the Looking Glass 24 [1871; repr. 1993]).

chiasmus /kohz-mәs/. Rhetoric. The use of a substitute to refer to or stand for a later word or phrase. • Although it might be a good investment, the stock is too expensive. (the pronoun it having no antecedent but instead referring to stock, which occurs later in the sentence). Cf. ANAPHORA.

catechumen /kat-ә-for-ik/, adj. Of, relating to, or denoting reference to a word or group of words occurring later in the sentence. Cf. ANAPHORA.

— catastrophe, n.

— catachresis, n.


chunk. Linguistics. 1. A phrase or group of words, usu. learned as a unit when acquiring a language. 2. A grouping of words customarily used together in a fixed expression, such as It’s a shame that, It’s up to you, or To make a long story short.

circumambage /sar-kәm-am-baj/, n. 1. Usu. pl. The use of roundabout or indirect speech or writing, often to avoid a particular subject; an instance of such indirectness. 2. CIRCUMLOCUTION. See AMBIGUES. — circumambagious /sar-kәm-am-baj-әs/, adj.

circuit. vb. To mark with the diacritical mark known as a circumflex. See CIRCUMFLEX.

circuitous, adj.

— circumflex. 1. A diacritical mark (‘) used over a vowel in a French word to show that a following s was elided <hospital–hôpital>. • Although French loanwords with circumflexes (such as hôtel) were used in the 19th century, the mark is uncommon today because so many loanwords have become naturalized. An exception is fête. It retains the circumflex in British English, but in American English it is a variant spelling of fete. See DIACRITICAL MARK. 2. An accent or tone of voice in which a higher or acute tone is followed by a lower or grave tone within a single syllable.

circumlocution /sar-kәm-loh-kyoo-shәn/, n. Roundabout speech or language, or the use of many words where one or two would suffice. — circumlocutory /sar-kәm-lok-yo-tohr-ee/, adj.

circumstance. See ADJUNCT.

clausal /klaw-zәl/, adj. Of, relating to, or consisting of a clause. • The word dates from the early 20th century. Cf. PHRASAL.

clause. A sentence part that contains a subject and verb. • While a clause has two essential elements (subject and predicate), a phrase consists of a group of two or more words not containing both of those elements. See PHRASE; WORD.

— dependent clause. A dependent clause that is used to expand a noun or noun phrase <She was delighted with the letter that informed her of her admission to college>. • The evening when we arrived was eerily foggy. <I went to see the spot where we met>. — Also termed adjective clause. Cf. relative clause.

— adverbial clause. A clause that indicates time, place, manner, degree, cause, or the like. • An adverbial clause can modify an adjective, an adverb, or a verb in the independent clause <You’re better than I ever was> <I came as soon as I knew you’d arrived> <Because you were still sleeping, I waited before I started practicing my flute>. In the category of adverbial clauses some grammarians include (1) tag questions <He didn’t go to the movie, did he?>, (2) interjected clauses <The dog, he has declared, must be fed promptly at 3:00 P.M.>, and (3) dependent clauses introduced by such words as however and whichever <Whenever the play begins, the children will settle down>. — appositive relative clause. See non-restrictive relative clause.

— comparative clause. A clause containing (and usu. introduced by) a comparative conjunction. See COMPARATIVE CONJUNCTION under CONJUNCTION.

— conditional clause. See PROTASIS.

— consequence clause. See APODOSIS.

— coordinate clauses. The individual clauses of a compound sentence, or the independent clauses of a compound–complex sentence; specif., clauses of the same rank.

— defining relative clause. See restrictive relative clause.

— dependent clause. A clause that, because it does not express a complete idea, must be joined with an independent clause in order to make sense, typically by a subordinating conjunction such as before, though, or when. • For example, in the sentence I left after the mail arrived, the clause following after is dependent. And in I learned to drive when I was 16, the clause beginning with when is subordinate. Dependent clauses may function as nouns <That I am interested should be obvious>, adjectives <Caroline, who had never before been deep-sea fishing, caught a shark>, or adverbs <Because Alexander scored two points, the family celebrated>. — Also termed subordinate clause; subclause. See subordinating
**Glossary of Grammatical, Rhetorical, and Other Language-Related Terms**

**conjunction** under *conjunction.*

**elliptical clause.** A clause in which some of the words have been omitted as being understood <When [you are] hitting a golf ball, focus on just one "swing thought">.

**embedded clause.** A sentence that changes into a relative clause when combined with another sentence. • For example, the sentences *The boy is defending the goal well. The boy is my son.* can be combined into *The boy who is defending the goal so well is my son.* The relative clause who is defending the goal so well was derived from the first sentence.

**independent clause.** A clause that can stand alone as a complete sentence. • For example, in the sentence *I was present when the teacher walked in,* the clause *I was present* could stand alone. — Also termed main clause; principal clause; matrix clause; superordinate clause. Cf. dependent clause.

**main clause.** See independent clause.

**nominal clause.** A dependent clause that functions as a noun or noun phrase. • Nominal clauses may begin with an interrogative (such as who, when, how) or a conjunction (such as that, if, which). For example, in the sentence *I couldn't imagine who would send an invitation,* the nominal clause who would send an invitation functions as the direct object. And in *The fact that he confessed is in his favor,* the nominal clause that he confessed is an appositive of the fact. Nominal clauses aren’t as syntactically malleable as nouns because they have no plural form and can’t take all the determiners and complements that a noun can. — Also termed noun clause.

**nondefining relative clause.** See nonrestrictive relative clause.

**nonrestrictive relative clause.** A clause beginning with *which,* who, or whose and adding nonessential information about the noun it modifies; a relative clause that narrows and identifies the head phrase. • The clause is always set off by commas *<My aunt, who published a book recently, will be lecturing tonight>,* and could be omitted without affecting the sentence’s meaning (in the preceding example, *My aunt* is the subject of the complete sentence and the who-clause adds nonessential information). — Also termed nondefining relative clause; appositive relative clause.

**noun clause.** See nominal clause.

**principal clause.** See independent clause.

**reduced relative clause.** A relative clause that has lost either a relative pronoun plus a be-verb or an object relative pronoun.

**relative clause.** A dependent clause that modifies an antecedent and is most often expressly introduced by a relative pronoun such as *which,* who, whose, or that. See antecedent.

**restrictive relative clause.** A clause beginning with *that,* who, or whose that contains essential information about the noun or noun phrase it modifies; a relative clause that gives additional information about a noun element that has already been identified. • It is never set off with commas. If the clause were deleted, the meaning of the sentence would be affected. Compare *The room that I slept in was tastefully decorated with* *The room was tastefully decorated.* The restrictive relative clause that I slept in identifies a particular room. A restrictive relative clause never begins with which. — Also termed defining relative clause.

**subordinate clause.** See dependent clause.

**superordinate clause.** See independent clause.

**cledonism /klee-da-niz-am/, n.** The practice of using euphemisms; the avoidance of seemingly ominous words.

**cleft construction.** See cleft sentence under sentence.

**cleft sentence.** See sentence.

**cliché.** A trite or hackneyed phrase that has been repeated so often as to have become meaningless. • Clichés can also be irritating. Consider this passage: We chased a red herring and got the wool pulled over our eyes. Few writers can turn one to effective use, although it can be done <let him who has never used a cliché cast the first stone> <football is a game of inches>. Avoid them. See figure of speech; set phrase. Cf. idiom. See p. 172.

**climax.** Rhetoric. The presentation of ideas or propositions so that each successive one is more forceful than the one preceding it—as in Caesar’s I came; I saw; I conquered.

**clipping.** The process by which a word is shortened to produce a new word with the same meaning. • Clippings are abundant in English. For instance, *auto* comes from *automobile,* *fax* from *facsimile transmission,* and *fridge* from *refrigerator.* Cf. apocope.

**clitic /klit-ik/.** An unstressed word that is pronounced and sometimes written as part of a neighboring word, often in contracted form (e.g., *sans serif* when so spelled, instead of *sans serif*). • Although it is an independent word, it forms a phonological unit with the words that follow or precede it. There are two types of clitics: enclitics and proclitics. See enclitic; proclitic.

**closed syllable.** See syllable.

**cognate /koh-nayt/, adj.** 1. (Of two or more languages) descended from the same original language; belonging to the same linguistic family. 2. (Of two or more words) deriving from the same root; representing the same original word, though having differences because of separate phonetic development <provenance is cognate with *provenience*>.

**cognate object.** See object.

**collective noun.** See noun.

**collocation /kol-oh-kay-shen/, n.** A customary phrasing; the habitual pairing of one word with others. 2. A group of words habitually grouped together in a particular order.

**colloquial, adj.** (Of language) informal; conversational. • Although traditionally the word applied to everyday words not thought to be admissible in formal settings, today—in what in some ways is a more relaxed age—*colloquial* language is considered one of the hallmarks of an effective style. The word *colloquial* is often misunderstood to be equivalent to *vulgar, low,* or *incorrect.* In fact, it describes words and phrases that rightly and frequently occur in ordinary conversation.


**comma splice.** See run-on sentence.

**commat.** adj. (Of a composition) made up of short clauses or sentences; tersely phrased; concise.

**comment clause.** A clause, such as *I think or you know,* expressing an opinion or attitude and typically...

common, adj. 1. Of, relating to, or involving the individuals that make up a class or the species that make up a genus. 2. (Of a word) applicable to individuals of either sex in speech. See epicene.

case. See case.

categorical gender. See gender.

categorical gender. See gender.

categorical language. See language.

categorical gender. See gender.

categorical gender. See gender.

categorical degree. See degree.

categorical degree. See degree.

categorical degree. See degree.

categorical degree. See degree.

categorical gender. See gender.

comparative, adj. Of, relating to, or involving a derived form of an adjective or adverb used in the comparison of one thing to another, to show a higher degree of a quality or characteristic. See degree.

comparative, n. 1. The middle of three degrees of comparison for gradable adjectives and adverbs, showing that something has more of a quality than something else to which it is compared; the form of an adjective or adverb used to compare two things. • A comparative adjective or adverb is usually signaled by an -er suffix or by more or less. For example, better is the comparative of good; more refreshingly is the comparative of refreshingly. A comparative adjective compares a specified quality possessed by two things (e.g., in Weekday newspapers are lighter than the Sunday edition, the adjective lighter is comparative). A comparative adverb compares a specified action or condition common to two things (e.g., in Lady Katherine speaks more eloquently than Ron does, the adverbial phrase more eloquently is a comparative). — Also termed comparative degree. See adjective; adverb; degree. Cf. positive; superlative. 2. A wording that implies comparison; esp., a statement that denotes a higher degree of a quality, relation, etc., from belonging to one object or set of objects as compared with another.

dangling comparative. An unfinished comparative that does not state the criterion or referent of the comparison <We work harder!> (than whom?). — Also termed agency comparative; absolute comparative; hanging comparative; unfinished comparative.

double comparative. A nonstandard construction such as more better or more higher. Cf. double superlative under superlative. See p. 187.

periphrastic comparative. A comparative adjective or adverb that changes degree by taking more or less, esp. when a one-word form ending in -er is available.

comparative clause. See clause.

comparative conjunction. See conjunction.

comparative degree. See comparative.

comparative linguistics. See linguistics.

complement. 1. A word or group of words completing a grammatical construction in the predicate and describing or being identified with the subject or object (e.g., long in *The paragraph is long*). 2. Any word or group of words that completes a grammatical construction, esp. in the predicate. • In sense 2, a complement may be an adverbial (e.g., in *He left it in the car*), an infinitive (e.g., to go in *They wanted to go*), or an object (e.g., the ball in *She hit the ball*).

adjective complement. 1. An adjective that completes a clause after a linking verb such as appear, become, grow, prove, or seem <Bob looks healthy>; a complement consisting of an adjective or adjective phrase. • As with a subject complement, the adjective complement modifies the subject <We are alone> <The water level is much higher>. 2. An element following an adjective in an adjective phrase and completing the meaning of the adjective <Are you ready to go?> (in which to go completes the predicate adjective ready). — Also termed adjectival complement.

adverb complement. An element following an adverb in an adverbial phrase and completing the meaning of the adverb <Meet me in the lobby after the show> (in which in the lobby and after the show are adverb complements). — Also termed adverbial complement.

object complement. A complement that follows a linking verb and modifies or completes the sentence's object. • Generally, a verb expressing a perception, judgment, or change can allow its direct object to take an object complement: I saw the driver sleeping. The object and its complement can be rewritten as a sentence with a subject complement: The driver was sleeping.

prepositional complement. A complement that is linked to the verb by a preposition <I wandered around the shops and along the streets> (in which the shops completes around and the streets completes along).

subject complement. A complement that follows a linking verb and modifies or completes the sentence's predicate; specif., a noun or an adjective that modifies the subject of a sentence, comes after a linking verb, and completes the sentence. • For example, in the statement the grass becomes greener in spring, the complement refers to the subject grass, not the linking verb becomes, and completes the grass's description.

compelling. 1. The act of addressing someone directly. 2. The name, title, or other designation by which one is addressed; appellation.

complementary infinitive. See infinitive.

complementary subject. See subject.

compound. A grammatical unit composed of several independent elements. See compound word under word.

compound adjective. See phrasal adjective under adjective.

compound–complex sentence. See sentence.

compound conjunction. See conjunction.

compound indefinite pronoun. See pronoun.

compound modifier. See phrasal adjective under adjective.

compound negation. See negation (1).

compound noun. See noun.

compound personal pronoun. See pronoun.

compound predicate. See predicate.

compound preposition. See preposition.

compound relative pronoun. See pronoun.

compound sentence. See sentence.

compound subject. See subject.

compound word. See word.

conceit. 1. An elaborate or strained metaphor; a fanciful idea. 2. An organizing theme or concept for a written work.

concessive, adj. (Of a preposition or conjunction) denoting a word, phrase, or clause that signals a reversal of an idea, opinion, viewpoint, or the like (e.g., introduced by although, even though, in spite of).

conciseness. The quality of expressing much in brief form; compact comprehensiveness.
conclusion. See apodosis.

concord. A grammatical relationship in which related parts of speech correspond in features such as number, gender, and person <I was> <you were> <they were>. • A subject and its verb must agree in person and number. A pronoun and its antecedent must agree in number, person, gender, and (sometimes, with linking verbs) case. — Also termed agreement. See also gender; singular; person.

concrete noun. See noun.

conditional clause. See clause.

conditional conjunction. See conjunction.

conditional sentence. See sentence.

conduplication /kәn-ˈdi-pli-kәn/ phr. Rhetoric. The emphatic repetition of a word, with other words intervening between repetitions.—Also termed conunduplication. Cf. epizeuxis.

congruence. See agreement.

conjunct /ˈkon-ja-gət/ adj. 1. The changing of a verb’s forms to show voice, mood, tense, number, and person. • conjunct /ˈkon-ja-gət/, adj. 2. A list of a verb’s inflectional forms. • In some traditional grammars, the term conjunct applied not just to inflection but also to various sets of verb phrases—hence not just rings and rang but also will ring, has rung, had rung, and will have rung. This broader interpretation of conjunct was a holdover of Latin grammars. 3. A class of verbs similarly conjugated <Latin verbs of the second conjugation>.

conjunction. In some grammatical systems, an adverb that connects one sentence or clause with another by expressing addition (e.g., and as a sentence-starter), contrast (e.g., but as a sentence-starter), or the like. • Although traditional grammarians use the term conjunction to cover both miserement and sentence-starting ands, some modern grammarians call the former conjunctions and the latter conjuncts. Cf. adjunct; disjunct; subjunction.

conjunction. A particle (such as and, or, or since) that joins words, phrases, clauses, or sentences, and that indicates their relationship to one another.

additive coordinating conjunction. See copulative conjunction.

adverbial conjunction. See conjunctive adverb under adverb.

adversative conjunction /ad-ˈvәr-sә-tiv/ phr. A conjunction that introduces a contrast or comparison to the first phrase or clause, e.g., but, still, and yet <The roof and the walls are finished, yet there is a lot of inside work to do>.—Also termed contrasting coordinating conjunction.

comparative conjunction. A conjunction that expresses equality or difference of degree <as . . . as> <as if> <just as . . . , so . . .> <than>. See comparative clause under clause.

compound conjunction. A conjunction formed from the combination of two or more words, such as nevertheless and notwithstanding.

conditional conjunction. A conjunction that expresses contingency or some other condition <if> <unless>.

contrasting coordinating conjunction. See adversative conjunction.

coordinate conjunction. See coordinating conjunction.

coordinating conjunction. A conjunction that joins two elements of identical construction and of equal grammatical rank, such as and <Tom and I are going> or or <She is deciding whether to fly or drive>.—Also termed coordinate conjunction; coordinator.

copulative conjunction /ˈkәp-ya-lә-tiv/ phr. A conjunction that joins two coordinate phrases or clauses <and> <also> <and>; esp., one that states an additional fact related to the first clause, e.g., and, also, and moreover <She is an excellent swimmer; moreover, she knows CPR>.—Also termed additive coordinating conjunction.

correlative conjunctions /ˈkәr-rl-ә-tiv/ phr. Conjunctions that function as separable compound forms, occur in pairs, and have corresponding meanings <both . . . and> <either . . . or> <neither . . . nor>. See p. 224.

disguised conjunction. A conjunction that has the form of a participle but is used to introduce clauses (e.g., considering, regarding, and supposing).

disjunctive conjunction /dis-ˈjәnktiv/ phr. A conjunction that expresses opposed or contrasting ideas; esp., one that denotes separation or an alternative to the first phrase or clause. • Examples are but, either, or, and nor. —Also termed separative coordinating conjunction.

expletive conjunction /eks-ˈplә-tiv/ phr. A conjunction connecting two thoughts that are not expressed in the same sentence. • The conjunction refers back to a preceding thought or sentence (e.g., So in So they say and thus in May it always be thus).

final conjunction. A coordinating conjunction that denotes an inference or consequence. • It introduces a clause that gives a reason or shows what has been or ought to be done in view of the first clause (e.g., consequently, hence, so, and therefore <I misread the map, hence my wrong turn>.)—Also termed illative conjunction.

illative conjunction /i-lә-tiv/ or i-ˈlә-tiv/ phr. 1. See final conjunction. 2. See conjunctive adverb under adverb.

separative coordinating conjunction. See disjunctive conjunction.

simple conjunction. A single-word conjunction such as and, but, if, or, or through.

subordinating conjunction. A conjunction that introduces a dependent clause. — Also termed subordinator. See dependent clause under clause.

conjunctive /ˈkon-ja-tiv/, adj. Serving to connect words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. Cf. disjunctive.

conjunctive adverb. See adverb.

connecting verb. See linking verb under verb.

connective, n. A word that connects one sentence part to another; specific, a conjunction, preposition, or conjunctive adverb.

connective adverb. See conjunctive adverb under adverb.

connotation. Secondary meaning implied by a word or phrase, though not part of its literal meaning: semantic suggestiveness. • For example, the word fire has emotional associations with both “warmth” and “danger,” depending on the context. Cf. denotation.

consequence clause. See apodosis.

consequent. See apodosis.

consequential adverb. See adverb.

consonance. The repetition of a consonant sound in stressed syllables of two or more words <Catch and fetch, my dear pooh!>. • Consonance denotes especially the harmony of final consonant sounds, with unlike vowel sounds, as in pull and call, black and deck, or come and home. Cf. alliteration; assonance.

consonant. 1. One of a class of speech sounds (such as g, l, n, and s) that are enunciated by constricting or closing one or more points of the breath channel; a letter that represents such a sound (such as g, l, n, and s). See phoneme. See Aorist. 2. An alphabetic element other than a vowel. Cf. semivowel; vowel.

constative /kon-ˈsta-tiv/, adj. 1. Of, relating to, or involving the aorist tense. See Aorist. 2. (Of a statement) capable of being true or false.

constituent. A sequence of words grouped together and functioning as a grammatical unit.
constructio ad sensum /kan-strak-shē-oh ad sen-sam/. See SYNESIS.

construction. 1. The syntactic arrangement of words in a sentence. 2. The connection between verbs and their objects or complements, between adjectives and their extensions, between prepositions and their objects. 3. The explanation or interpretation of a statement or text; sense. construe /kan-stroo/, vb. 1. To combine a verb, adjective, preposition, or other part of speech with other parts of speech to which it is syntactically related. 2. To analyze or explain the grammatical construction of a sentence. 3. (Of a series of words) to be subject to grammatical analysis or interpretation. 4. To explain the meaning of (a sentence, text, etc.); to interpret. content word. A word that has intrinsic meaning in a lexicon. Cf. EMPTY WORD.

continuant. See FRICATIVE.

continuous aspect. See PROGRESSIVE ASPECT UNDER ASPECT.

correction /ka-rep-shoo-n/. A word that bears contradictory senses, such as oversight ("supervision" or "neglect"). See p. 218.

correlative /ˌkoʊ-rər-ə-tiv/. See CONJUNCTION.

count noun. See NOUN.

crasis /ˈkræsɪs/. The blending of two vowels belonging to two different words that come into contact with each other (as in thin or the in thin). — Also termed synresis. See SYNALTYPHRH.

crocle /k्रεκολ/. A language that began as a pidgin but has become the first language for some speakers; specif., a language that has developed from a standard language, first being used as the second language of a group and then becoming the group's usual language, with changes in sounds, grammar, and vocabulary. Cf. PIDGIN.

cryptoclet /ˈkrɪp-tə-lɛkt/, n. A small language used by a particular group or a segment of society.

danger. A participle or participial phrase that is not syntactically connected to the noun it is meant to modify; a nonfinite predicate that cannot be properly linked to a noun or noun phrase in the rest of the sentence. — For example, in Waving in moderate winds, the golfer took dead aim at the flag, the action of the introductory phrase wants to attach to the closest noun (golfer rather than flag). — Also termed dangling modifier. See DANGLING PARTICIPLE UNDER PARTICIPLE.

dangling, adj. (Of a participle or other modifier) not part of a proper grammatical construction. dangling participle. See PARTICIPLE.

coprolalia /kərpələlə/ya/, n. The use of extremely coarse or disgusting language, esp. as a result of a mental disorder.
copula. The part of a proposition that connects the subject and the verb; esp., a be-verb employed as a sign of predication. See LINKING VERB UNDER VERB. — copulative, adj.
copular verb. See LINKING VERB UNDER VERB.
copulative conjunction. See CONJUNCTION.
copulative conjunctions. See CONJUNCTION.
correlative conjunctions. See CONJUNCTION.
correction /ˌkoʊr-ətʃən/. A shortening of a word's or syllable's pronunciation.
counter word. A word that has recently come into widespread use in a sense or use other than its traditional one.
count noun. See NOUN.
crisis /ˈkrɪsɪs/. The blending of two vowels belonging to two different words that come into contact with each other (as in thin or the in thin). — Also termed synresis. See SYNALTYPHRX.

declamation, n. 1. The act of reciting a passage or selected oration, esp. as an exercise in intonation, elocution, or delivery. 2. A speech or passage to be recited from memory in public. 3. Bombastic, turgid oratory; an impassioned rhetorical condemnation or tirade; a harangue. 4. A speech or writing with more sound than sense. — declamatory, adj.
declarative /ˌdiː-klɛr-ə-tiv/, adj. Characterizing a sentence in which the speaker makes a statement (e.g., Our nieces are visiting from Bangkok). Most sentences are declarative. See DECLARATIVE SENTENCE UNDER SENTENCE.
declarative mood. See MOOD.
declarative sentence. See SENTENCE.
decision. 1. The inflection of nouns or pronouns, depending on how they are used; esp., the deviation of a noun or pronoun's form from that of its nominative case. • In English, declension does not play a major role because there are no case endings on nouns (as there are in Latin and Romance languages). English has only seven pronouns that are declined as follows (for each, the nominative, objective, possessive, and absolute forms are shown [possessives and absolutes are different only in the first set and the last two sets]): I—me—mine; you—your—yours; he—him—his; she—her—hers; it—it—its; we—us—ours; and they—their—theirs. — Also termed paradigm. 2. A listing of the inflected forms of a noun or pronoun; the rehearsing of a noun or pronoun's inflections. — decline, vb.
decidable, adj. Having inflections. Cf. UNDECIDABLE.
decussation /ˌdɛkə-sə-she-ən/. See CHIASMUS.
deep structure. In transformational grammar, the set of underlying semantic and syntactic relationships in a sentence. Cf. SURFACE STRUCTURE.
defective, adj. (Of a noun, verb, etc.) lacking some of the usual forms of declension or conjugation.
defective verb. See VERB.
defered preposition. See TERMINAL PREPOSITION UNDER PREPOSITION.
definition /ˌdiː-fi-nənʃən/. A word, phrase, or symbol that is defined.
definition /ˌdiː-fin-ənʃən/. A definition; the words or symbols used in defining something.
defining relative clause. See RESTRICTIVE RELATIVE CLAUSE UNDER CLAUSE.
**definite article. See article.**

**definitive adjective. See adjective.**

**degree.** An indicator of the extent to which gradable adverbs or adjectives compare in intensity. • In their changing forms, gradable adverbs and adjectives display greater or lesser intensity in each of three degrees called positive or absolute (the base degree), comparative (the second degree), and superlative (the third degree) <lively–liveliest> <bad–worse–worst>. — Also termed grade. See positive; comparative; superlative.

**degree modifier. See intensifier.**

**deictic/ /di-kik-tik or dayk-/, adj. (Of a word) showing or directly pointing to something, esp. something's identity or a time or place. • The referent is determined by the context of the surrounding words. For example, in today, I need you here, the words today, I, you, and here are deictic. Identifying the referent for each word depends on who speaks or writes the sentence, who is being spoken to, and when and where it is said. For example, the word I points to the person who produces the sentence, and you to the person receiving it. See pointing word under word.**

**deictic pronoun. See demonstrative pronoun under pronoun.**

**deictic term. See pointing word under word.**

**deletion.** The suppression of one or more sounds in the pronunciation of a word (hence probably becomes /prob-lee/ or even /pro-l/ee/).

**demonstrative /day-mon-str-tiv/, adj. (Of an adjective or pronoun) distinguishing a referent based on its location relative to the speaker, esp. this, that, these, and those. • A demonstrative word can be used as a determiner (a type of adjective) <Please take those papers> or as a pronoun <Give him that>.**

**demonstrative adjective. See adjective.**

**demonstrative pronoun. See pronoun.**

**denotation.** The literal meaning of a word) showing or directly pointing to something, esp. something's identity or a time or place. • The referent is determined by the context of the surrounding words. For example, in today, I need you here, the words today, I, you, and here are deictic. Identifying the referent for each word depends on who speaks or writes the sentence, who is being spoken to, and when and where it is said. For example, the word I points to the person who produces the sentence, and you to the person receiving it. See pointing word under word.**

**decomposition.** A type of adjective that limits how a noun phrase applies, including articles (a, an, and the), demonstrative adjectives (this, that, these, and those), and indefinite adjectives (e.g., all, any, each, every, some, few). • Cf. definite adjective under adjective.

**deverbal, adj. (Of a word, esp. an agent noun) derived from a verb. See deverbative.**

**deverbative, n. A word derived from a verb; a deverbal word <runner> <skier>.**

**diachronic /di-t-on-ik/, adj. Of, relating to, or involving the historical development of a language over time. • The historical approach to linguistics is often called diachronic because it looks at linguistic phenomena through previous ages to see how the current language, or a particular element in it, has evolved. Cf. synchronic.**

**diachronic linguistics. See historical linguistics under linguistics.**

**dialect.** A linguistic variety peculiar to a particular geographical area or used by members of a specific social class or group; specif., the linguistic features of a particular locality or class, esp. as distinguished from the speech of educated people. • It may differ from the standard form in characteristics such as accent, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. See accent; argot; idiolect; jargon; nonstandard English; patois; provincialism; slang. Cf. standard English. See pp. 272–74.**

**dialectology /di-t-on-ik-tal-j/, n. The study of dialects; esp., the branch**
of linguistics concerned with understanding and describing dialects. — dialectologist, n.
diallge /di-әl-al-ә-jee/, n. Rhetoric. An advocate’s presentation of arguments from various points of view, concluding with the argument that one particular point of view is soundest and should govern the outcome.
dialogism /di-әl-al-ә-jiz-әm/, n. 1. Rhetoric. The use of dialogue to explain a subject, with characters to whom the author imputes various ideas and feelings. • Plato’s Dialogues are a prime example. 2. A conversational phrase; a colloquialism. 3. A conversational style.
diasynthesis. See syntax (2).
diasyrm /di-ә-sәrm/, n. Rhetoric. Rhetorical disparagement or ridicule.
diction. 1. The manner of using words in literature, oratory, or song; the way in which something is expressed in words, including articulation, pronunciation, intonation, and punctuation. 2. The part of rhetoric dealing with word choice and word arrangement.
dieresis. See diaeresis.
differentiation. A process by which similar words, esp. by-forms (e.g., derisive and derisory), diverge in meaning, so that each word becomes distinctly useful. • For example, the verb estimate was once used to mean (1) “to assess” or (2) “to regard highly.” Meanwhile, esteem was used to mean (1) “to regard highly” or (2) “to assess.” Today the differentiation between the words is complete, and sense 2 of each is obsolete. If by-forms don’t undergo differentiation, prescriptivists are likely to label the less widely used form as a “needless variant.” See by-form; needless variant. See pp. 277–78.
diffuseness. The state or quality of being unfocused, disorganized, and verbose in speech or writing. — diffuse, adj.
diglossia /di-ә-glәhs-ee-a/, n. The coexistence of two languages within a speech community, usu. standard form and a regional dialect. Cf. monoclassia; triglossia.
diglot /di-ә-gloot/, adj. 1. Bilingual. 2. Composed or translated into two languages.
digraph /di-ә-grәf/, n. 1. A combination of two letters to represent one sound, such as the initial and final consonant sounds in thrush or the two vowels in boat. 2. A ligature of two vowels that are not diphthongs but are written together as a single character, such as â (ae) and æ (oe). Cf. diphthong.
digression. A divergence or departure from the primary point or line of thought. — digress, vb. — digressive, adj.
diminutive, n. A word that expresses youth, endearment, or a diminished size or status, usu. through a suffix. • The principal diminutive suffixes in English are -et, -ette, -ling, -ock, -in, -y, -ie, -kin. — Also termed hypocoristic.
dimorphism /di-ә-mәr-fiz-әm/, n. The existence of a word in two or more forms called doublets <dent–dint> <fat–vat> <church–kirk>. • To be a true dimorphism, the source of the two words must be identical. See doublet.
diphthong /di-ә-fthәng/. A pair of vowels blended into one syllable to produce a single sound; specif., a succession of two vowels joined in a single syllable by a continuous glide of the tongue and lips from one vowel position to another <loud> <noise>. • In a proper diphthong, both vowels are pronounced, but they are blended so as to form one syllable. In an improper diphthong (not really a diphthong at all), two or more vowels appear in one syllable to make a simple sound <each> <people>. Formerly, writers such as Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) used the term diphthong for what modern writers call a digraph (e.g., the ae in aesthetic or the oe in oenology). The word is sometimes mispronounced /dip-thәng/.
diptyote /di-ә-pәtәt/, n. In certain Indo-European languages, a noun having only two cases. Cf. aptote; monoptote; triptote.
direct object. See object.
discourse. 1. A sequence of statements that together constitute a unified communication. • Examples are conversations, lectures, letters, newspaper articles, short stories, and novels.
direct discourse. Direct quotation involving the repeating of someone else’s precise words. • In print, direct discourse is marked by quotation marks or by an extended quotation that is set off by indenting it <He asked, “Do you feel bad?”>. • Also termed oratio recta.
indirect discourse. The reporting of an earlier utterance without the use of direct quotation <He asked whether I felt bad>. • Also termed oratio obliqua.
2. Traditionally, a formal discussion of a subject; a dissertation or treatise.
discourse analysis. Linguistics. 1. The close study of texts or utterances longer than one sentence for the purpose of understanding linguistic content or sociolinguistic context. 2. The result of such study.
disguised conjunction. See conjunction.
disjunct. In some grammatical systems, an adverb that affects the interpretation of the whole clause or sentence by expressing either attitude toward the thought of the sentence <unfortunately> <regrettably> or the likelihood of something’s occurrence <perhaps> <possibly>. Cf. adjunct; conjunct; subjunct.
disjunction. 1. A coordinating conjunction that signals a choice between conjoined elements. 2. The grammatical structure created by such a coordinating conjunction.
disjunctive, adj. 1. Signaling a relationship of alternatives, contrast, or opposition <rough but good> <neither wholly right nor wholly wrong>. 2. Adversative. Cf. conjunctive.
disjunctive conjunction. See conjunction.
dissimilation. Phonetics. 1. A process by which two nearby consonant sounds that are identical or similar gradually become less alike. • In English, l and r are the letters whose sounds are most often affected by dissimilation. Two nearby r sounds can be difficult to articulate, so dissimilation may change the second r to l. This process produced the English word marble from the French marbre. And in colonel, although the word is spelled with two Is, the first l is pronounced as though it were an r (/kar-nal/). Many words are still written with certain consonants that are often dropped altogether in speech /listen/. 2. The dropping of a consonant sound when a similar or identical sound is repeated within a word. • For example, the first r in governor is usually dropped and the word pronounced /gәv-a-nәr/ instead of /gәv-ar-nәr/. In government, the n is often dropped (/gәv-ar-mәnt/). Those pronunciations are widely accepted, but others with dropped sounds are not. For example, failing to articulate the first r in library (e.g., saying /li-bәir-әl/) is considered dialectal. — dissimilate, vb.
distributive /di-strib-ә-ti-tiv/, adj. Referring to things individually, not collectively, so as to express separation or emphasize individuality. • Adjectives such as each, either, and every are distributive. — distributive, n.
distributive adjective. See adjective.
distributive pronoun. See pronoun.
disyllable. See dissyllable.
ditransitive, adj. (Of a verb) taking both a direct and an indirect object.
ditransitive prepositional verb. See verb.
ditransitive verb. See verb.
ditto graph. One or more letters or words mistakenly repeated when printing or copying a writing. — ditto graphic, adj. — ditto graphy, n.
ditto graphy. The unintentional repetition of a written letter, syllable, word, or series of letters, syllables, or words, esp. when copying. • A person may copy mechanically, without thinking about what he or she has just copied, and so write "wizzard" for wizard and "competition" for competition.
dodecasyllable /doh-de-ka-si-lә-bәl/, n. A line or word of 12 syllables.
— dodecasyllabic /doh-de-ka-si-lәb-ik/, adj.
doggerel /dog-ә-ro/, or /daw-go-/, adj. 1. (Of poetry or verses) rhythmically irregular, usu. to heighten burlesque or comic content. 2. (Of writing or verses) badly expressed or composed; trivial.
doggerel, n. 1. Humorous poetry or verses that are loosely styled and have an irregular rhythm. 2. Poetry or writing that is trivial or badly composed.
double comparative. See comparative.
double-dash construction. A grammatical construction in which a pair of long dashes sets off part of a sentence to emphasize or distinguish its content. • This construction is stronger than using parentheses or a pair of commas. Compare we saw—and understood—the message left on Roanoke with we saw (and understood) the message or we saw, and understood, the message.
double entendre /dәb-әl ahn-tahn-dra or doob-әl ahn-tahn-dra/. 1. A word or phrase having two meanings, one of the two usu. being ribald or off-color. 2. Ambiguity arising from the double sense of a word or phrase. • The phrase double entendre isn't native to French, the closest expression being mot à double entente "a word (or phrase) with a double meaning." The English phrase, dating from the late 17th century, appears to have originated as bungled French.
double negative. 1. A construction in which two negative words are used, usu. in dialect <I don't never get asked to do chores>. • Among the most common double negatives are combinations of n't with hardly <couldn't hardly think> and n't with no <I can't get no satisfaction>. Double negatives are one characteristic of nonstandard language. 2. A type of understatement (litotes) in which two negatives express a kind of positive or neutral thought. • Your argument is not unjustifiable contains not and the negative prefix -un, yet the sense is close to (but not quite as strong as) Your argument is justifiable.
doublespeak. Language intentionally used to deceive, esp. by concealing or misrepresenting facts. • Contrary to popular belief, this word wasn't used by George Orwell (1903–1950) in 1984; it first appeared in the 1950s. But Orwell was the first to use -speak as a suffix, as in newspeak and oldspeak, and used the word doublethink. Doublespeak is most often used by bureaucracies, businesses, and the military. Doublespeak is present, for example, in euphemisms such as enhanced coercive interrogation techniques (meaning "torture") and ethnic cleansing (meaning "genocide"). See pp. 300–01.
double superlative. See superlative. doublet. Philology. One of a pair of words that have similar meanings, forms, or origins. • Doubles are quite common in English today. They typically share the same root but may have entered the language by different paths. Some are nearly synonymous, but not all are interchangeable because the words are distinguished by subtle differences in application. For example, royal ("descended from monarchs; or related to the monarchy") and regal ("of, relating to, or suited for a monarch") ultimately share the Latin root word regalis, but the royal family may not be at all the same thing as a regal family. As a historical matter, doubles usually consist of an older form (e.g., benison [14th c.], malison [13th c.], and provenance [18th c.]) and a more recent form (e.g., benediction [15th c.], malediction [14th c.], and provenience [19th c.]). Sometimes doubles are accidental variations of one original, with or without a differentiation in meaning (e.g., alarum, alarum; unbeknown, unbeknownst). And sometimes doubles consist of a standard literary form <lord> and a dialectal one <laird>.
do-verb. See verb.
dual /dәl-yә/adj. Of, relating to, or involving an inflection expressing two or a pair.
dual, n. The grammatical form, midway between singular and plural, indicating that a word applies to precisely two people or two objects. • It is used in addition to the singular and plural forms in some languages, such as Old English, Arabic, and many Polynesian languages—but it is not a part of Modern English.
dummy subject. An expletive (such as there and here in There is . . . and Here are . . .) that is in subject position at the beginning of a sentence but is not the subject itself.
dummy word. See expletive.
durative aspect. See progressive aspect under aspect.
dvandva compound /dvan-dvә/. [Sanskrit] A compound word consisting of elements that are related to each other as if joined by and <prince-consort> <teacher-writer> <Dallas–Fort Worth>.
dysphasia /dis-fә-yә-zә/. Any difficulty of speech resulting from a brain disorder; derangement of a person's speech due to confusion or loss of ideas arising from a brain disease.
dysphemism /dis-fә-miz-әm/. 1. An offensive word or phrase used in place of a neutral one (e.g., gerund-grinder for grammarian). 2. The act of making such a substitution. See p. 312.
Early Modern English. The English language used from about 1500 to about 1700.
eccentric /ek-bәt ik/, adj. (Of a conjunction or clause) denoting a result or consequence, as opposed to a purpose or an intention. • This term is used primarily in reference to Greek grammar.
echolalia /ek-oh-lә-yә/, n. 1. Meaningless repetition of words and sounds spoken by another person. • In young children, echolalia is a natural part of language acquisition. In older children and adults, it is often involuntary and pathological, occurring sometimes as a symptom of a psychiatric disorder. 2. Any meaningless repeated noises, esp. vocalized ones. Cf. palilalia — ecolalic /ek-oh-lә-lik/, adj.
echo question. An interrogative that retains the structure of a declarative statement that precedes it.
echthesis /ek-thәp-sәs/. The suppression of one or more sounds in a word (as in the [correct] two-syllable pronunciation of Wednesday).
editorial we. The use of the first-person plural pronoun by an individual who is speaking on behalf of a group, such as an editorial board of a newspaper or other publication.
eisegesis /i-sә-jә-sәs/. A textual interpretation into which the reader has injected his or her own ideas.
elenchic. See elenctic.
elenchus /i-lәng-kәs/. Rhetic. 1. That which must be proved to refute an opponent’s argument. 2. A refuting argument; a refutation.
Socratic elenchus. The Socratic method of disproving a falsity by posing a series of questions that lead to the truth.
elision, n. 1. The omission of a vowel or syllable from a spoken word, usu. in poetry for metrical reasons or in rapid, casual speech <wuzzup?>. • All contractions involve elision. Weak vowels are sometimes elided, so history is often pronounced /hi-tree/, and suppose becomes /sp/o/. In some words, consonants are elided. For example, Christmas becomes /kris-mas/. In some words a syllable is sometimes dropped, so library comes out /li-bree/. Elision is the general term for all of the types of phonological reduction, such as apocope, haplography, hypophresis, paressis, synaeresis, and syncope. • Also termed paressis. Cf. hypaphresis. 2. In writing, the striking out of a word or phrase. • elide, vb.

ellipsis. 1. The omission of one or more words that are understood and necessary to make a construction grammatically complete <Who steals my purse steals trash> (the phrase he who being collapsed into who by ellipsis). • The reader or listener is expected to supply the full form. This figure of speech often enhances the vividness and energy of prose. Examples:
• I must to England. (William Shakespeare [1564–1616])
• And so to bed. (Samuel Pepys [1633–1703])
• This party objects, and that. (Thomas Carlyle [1795–1881])
• Liana walked out on Cambridge and in on me. (Anthony Burgess [1917–1993])

2. The three dots < . . . > showing that some portion of written text has been omitted, usu. in a quotation.
• The dots, which are typographically identical to periods, each have a space before and after. An ellipsis always consists of only three dots. When the omitted material is inside a sentence, only the ellipsis appears <Micah received many . . . awards for his art>. When the omitted material appears between two sentences, the ellipsis is preceded or followed by a period, depending on whether part of the first sentence or part of all of the following sentence (or sentences) has been omitted. If the first sentence is complete and its last word is before the dots, then the period is in its usual place and followed by the three ellipsis dots <Those were good days. . . . We had time to enjoy life.>. If it is not, then the first three dots are ellipsis dots and the last is the sentence’s period <Some people are committed to achieving their personal goals . . . . But are they too focused on the future?>. • Also termed ellipsis dots; period dots. • elliptical, adj. ellipsis dots. See ellipsis (2). elliptical clause. See clause.
elocution. The art of training to improve public speaking, as by teaching a person to use a socially acceptable accent and to speak clearly and effectively. • elocutionist, n. — elocutionary, adj. embedded clause. See clause.

eMBOLOPHASIA /em-boh-loh-fay-zhal/, n. The use of sonorous but meaningless words. empty word. A word that has little or no intrinsic meaning but primarily serves some grammatical function, such as a particle. • Also termed form word; function word; grammatical word. Cf. content word.
enallage /e-nal-ae-jel/. See functional shift.
enantiosis /e-nan-tee-oh-sis/, n. See IRONY.
enclisis /en-kel-kel-sis/, n. The pronunciation of a phrase in such a way that a word is compounded with an immediately adjacent (usu. preceding) word (as in follow-up, n.). • In speech, the enclitic part of the compound often, but not always, loses its emphasis. Cf. proclisis.
enclitic /en-klit-ik/, adj. (Of a word) leaning or dependent on what precedes; esp., of, relating to, or involving an unstressed word that follows a stressed word (as in stop him! [him is unstressed] or piece of cake [piece is stressed; of is not]). • Sometimes an enclitic word becomes joined with the preceding word (as with thee in prithee [pray + thee] or not in cannot). See clitic. Cf. proclitic. — enclitic, n.
end-cut. See Apostrophe.
enneasyllable /en-ee-a-sil-a-bal/, n. A line or word of nine syllables. — enneasyllabic (en-ee-a-sil-ub-ik), adj.
enthmeme /en-tha-meem/, n. Logic. A syllogism in which one of the premises is unexpressed, as in Because it is autumn, the leaves are falling from the trees (implying that leaves fall from trees in the autumn). Cf. syllogism. • enthymematic, adj. enthymeme of the first order. An enthymeme with an unexpressed major premise <Because Socrates is a man, he is mortal> (implying that all men are mortal).
enthymeme of the second order. An enthymeme with an unexpressed minor premise <Because all men are mortal, Socrates is mortal> (implying that Socrates is a man).
epiphora. See epistrophe.
epiplexis /ep-i-plek-sis/, n. Rhetoric. The use of rebuke or reproach to convince someone of an argument. — Also termed epismosis.
epiploce /ep-i-pla-se/, n. Climax, specific, the adding of one striking circumstance after another to culminate in a resounding argumentative finale.
epistolary /ep-is-tol-er-i/, adj. Of, relating to, or involving missives or other correspondence.
epistrophe /ep-i-stro-fa/, n. Rhetoric. The emphatic repetition of a sound, word, or phrase at the end of successive clauses, verses, or sentences. "Charity beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." • One of the best-known examples of epistrophe in American rhetoric is in the concluding sentence of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: 'and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." It's also used in the statement, "Many people spend their lives purching power, consolidating power, and enjoying power." — Also termed epiphora. See symploce. Cf. anaphora. — epistrophic, adj.
episylogism /ep-i-sil-a-jiz-am/, n. A syllogism one of whose premises is the conclusion of a previous syllogism. See syllogism. Cf. prosyllogism.
epithesis /ep-i-tha-sis/, n. See paragoge.
epithet /ep-i-that/, n. 1. A particularly apt description or label, whether the quality denoted is favorable or unfavorable. 2. A verbal obscenity; a profane word or phrase.
epitimesis. See epiplexis.
epitrope /ep-i-tro-pee/, n. Rhetoric. 1. A rhetorical tactic whereby one conveys the force of an opponent's claim in an attempt to gain an advantage, usu. by suggesting that the claim, though sound, is irrelevant to the debate at hand. 2. A declaration of willingness to let disinterested others (e.g., a judge and jury) decide the merits of one's case, usu. made with the intention of showing that a favorable judgment is inevitable.
epizeuxis /ep-a-zew-iz/, n. Rhetoric. The immediate, emphatic repetition of a word. "All you care about is me, me, me!" Cf. ploce; palilology; conduplication; epimone. • Examples: • Why are we going to fight? Why, why? (Esther Forbes [1891-1967]) • A monument was erected to the memory of one of the best husbands by his "wretched widow" who records upon the marble that there never was such a man on the face of the earth before, and never will be again, and that there never was anybody so miserable as she—no, never, never, never! (Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. [1809-1897]) • Writing is at its best—always, always, always—when it is a kind of inspired play for the writer. (Stephen King [1947-])
eponym /ep-a-nim/, n. 1. A person, real or fictional, from whose name a person, thing, or place derives (or is believed to derive) its name. • Surnames are the most common source of eponyms. Examples are boycott (from Irish landlord Captain Charles Boycott), sousaphone (from American bandmaster and composer John Philip Sousa), and malapropism (from Mrs. Malaprop, a character in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play The Rivals). But some are drawn from personal or other names, such as the month August (from Augustus Caesar), central (from Ceres, the Roman goddess of grain), and America (from Amerigo Vespucci). — Also termed eponymous person. 2. A name that is so derived.
eponymous person. See eponym (1).
equational /ek-wa-nal/, adj. Of, relating to, or involving a construction showing that two elements have the same referent. • Equational elements in a sentence are interchangeable without affecting meaning (e.g., in Mike's son is my daughter's teacher, the nouns son and teacher refer to the same person, so the subject and the complement could be switched: My daughter's teacher is Mike's son).
equational verb. See linking verb under verb.
equative /ek-wa-tiv/, adj. Of, relating to, or involving a construction showing that two separate things are equivalent in some way. • An as . . . as construction is equative (e.g., the air smells as sweet as perfume).
egergative verb. See verb.
erotema /er-oh-te-mal/, See erotesis.
erotesis /er-oh-te-sis/, n. Rhetoric. A figure of speech used by the speaker in the form of interrogation to assert the opposite of the question asked or to imply an answer without plainly giving it or leading one to expect an answer; rhetorical question. 2. An unbroken series of rhetorical questions. — Also termed eperotesis; erotema. See rhetorical question.
esperanto /es-pa-rahn-toh/, n. An artificial language invented for universal use, with stems common to European languages and regularized endings. • Dr. Ludovik Lazarus Zamenhof' (1859–1917), a Polish linguist whose pseudonym was Dr. Esperanto (= Dr. Hoping-One).
invented the language in his 1887 book *Langue Internationale*. Cf. *interlingua; pasigraphy; pasilaly.*

**etymology** /et-a-mahl-a-jee/. 1. The study of the origin or derivation of words and how their meanings develop and change over time. • In dictionaries, the etymology of a term is shown after the pronunciation, part of speech, and variant spellings, or at the end of an entry. 2. The history of a particular term, usu. including an account of its various forms and meanings. See pp. 350–52.

**euphemism** n. See exclamative, euphony.

**euphony** evo-nim/, n. A good name or appropriate term; esp., a term that conforms to the rules of a system for naming and is therefore available as a technical designation (for a start-up company, a newly discovered star, a newly developed drug, etc.). Cf. *caconym.*

**euphemism** Rhētoric. 1. The use of a more or less neutral word or phrase in place of an expression that is considered disagreeable in some way. 2. An expression so substituted. • Euphemisms are often intended to prevent or soften negative responses. But they should be used only after careful consideration. To call a used car "pre-owned" is a semantic sleight of hand. • Euphemize, euphemistic, euphemistic object. See see factitive.

**euphemistic** adj. — euphemize, vb.

**euphony**. The quality of having a pleasing sound or harmonious combination of sounds. • Euphony guides word choices, but it is not an objective concept. One listener may find the phrase notorious notions amusing, while another finds it irritating. • euphonious, adj. See alliteration. See also *indefinite article* under article. Cf. *caconyph.*

**euphuism** /e-i oo-iz-am/. 1. A pretentious, highly artificial literary style characterized by alliteration, high-flying words, antitheses, and strange expressions. 2. Concocted elegance of language. Cf. *gongorism; periergia.* — euphistic, adj.

**exclamation**. An utterance expressing anger, pain, anguish, or surprise; a sentence used to express a feeling with added emphasis. — Also termed exclamative. 2. INTERJECTION.

**exclamative** n. See EXCLA-

**exclamatory sentence**. See sentence.

**excessive** /ek-skres-an-t/, adj. (Of a sound in a word) not etymologically part of a word but instead appearing for reasons of euphony or ease of pronunciation. • Excessive sounds occur in many common English words. For example, the *b* sound in *thimble* is not found in its Old English root *thynel*, nor is the *d* sound of *thunder* part of its etymological precursors, *thoner* (Middle English) and *thanor* (Old English).


**exempla** /ek-zem-pla/. Rhētoric. Illustrations, esp. by way of analogy, used to sustain an argument or to point to a moral. • Although the singular exemplum sometimes appears, the plural exempla is far more common in discussions of rhetoric.

**exonym** /ek-soh-nim/. A place name that one group of people uses to denote a foreign place when the denizens don’t use that name as a matter of self-reference. • Examples are *Turin* (Torino), *Moscow* (Moskva); *Vienna* (Wien), *Florence* (Firenze), *Morocco* (Maroc), *Angleterre* (England), and *Germany* (Deutschland).

**expletive**. A word that serves as a noun in idiomatic expression but bears none of the lexical meaning that nouns usually bear; specif., a “dummy” constituent of a sentence with no inherent semantic content, such as *it* or *there*; <It was raining> <There were celebrities present>. — Also termed dummy word; prop word. 2. An exclamatory word or phrase, often profane. • Sense 2 is an extension of sense 1, profanities having once been considered as irrelevant words used to fill up space.

**expletive conjunction**. See con-

**expression**. 1. The manifestation of an idea in words. 2. A phrase or saying. • Extrinsic modality. See epistemic modality under modality.

**factitive** /fak-ta-tiv/, adj. (Of a transitive verb or a clause) expressing an action that leads to a result, esp. a change in a thing’s state of being. • Verbs such as *appoint, build, destroy, elect,* and *make* are factitive (e.g., in *Munchie built a playhouse out of scrap lumber,* the action verb *built* is factive because the lumber was transformed into a playhouse). The object of a factitive verb is sometimes called the factitive object. Some grammarians use the term result or resolutive as a synonym for factitive. The word is sometimes spelled (through syncope) factive.

**factitive object**. See factitive.

**factitive verb**. See factitive.

**false attraction**. The influence exerted by a word on another word that causes it to take the incorrect form; esp., a mismatch between the number of a subject and its verb occurring when a phrase intervenes between the subject and the verb and misleads the writer into believing that the noun in the intervening phrase is the subject. • For example, when a subject is followed by a prepositional phrase with an object of a different number, the verb is often influenced by the closer noun. In the correction of papers are a tough assignment, the singular subject correction requires the singular verb is, but the plural papers influences the choice of the plural form are; it is incorrect because papers is a prepositional object, not the sentence’s subject.— Also termed attraction.

**feminine** adj. (Of a noun, pronoun, or suffix) indicating that the person or animal named is female. • In English, only the personal pronoun *she*, certain nouns such as *girl* and *doe*, and a few adjectives are feminine. — feminine, n. See gender.

**figurative** adj. Rhētoric. 1. Involving a rhetorical figure of any kind. 2. Expressing an idea in words that normally denote another thing, as by analogy, simile, or metaphor. Cf. *literal.*

**figure of speech**. Rhētoric. A special use of words; esp., the use of an expression in which a word or words are used for stylistic effect rather than for their literal meaning. • The expression “I’m starving!” means “I’m very hungry,” usually not “I’m dying of hunger.” “Starving” heightens the effect of the statement; it does not literally describe the person’s condition. Figures of speech include metaphors and similes. The names of most figures of speech derive from ancient Greek and Latin. See *cliche; hyperbole; metaphor; simile.* Cf. *trope* (2).

**final conjunction**. See conjunction.

**finite** /fin-tiv/, adj. (Of a verb) not in the infinitive mood—that is, limited by person and number.

**finite verb**. See verb.

**first person**. See person.

**flat** adj. Not having a distinctive ending characterizing of a particular part of speech (e.g., an adverb that has the same form as an adjective or noun, or a noun used adjectively without a change in form).


glossary of grammatical, rhetorical, and other language-related terms

flat. See adverb.

flection. See inflection (1).

folk etymology. 1. A widespread but false notion about the origin of a word or phrase. 2. The tendency of popular and mistaken beliefs about a word’s origins to affect its use or form. • The adjective posh is a good example. It appeared relatively recently, in 1903, but its origins are unclear; it might have been derived from the slang noun posh, meaning money or a dandy. But according to folk etymology, wealthy people who traveled by ship between England and India paid more for cabins on the cooler side of the ship, port on the journey to India, and starboard returning. Hence posh was said to be an acronym for “port outward, starboard home.” The story is entertaining, but researchers have not found any evidence that prices for cabins differed by which side of the ship they were on. 3. A change in an unusual-looking word’s form to a more usual form—based on a misunderstanding of the word’s origin. See catachresis (4); etymology (10).

foot. The primary measure of poetic rhythm, corresponding to a bar of music.

fool. See emptied word.

foolishness. See empty word.

fool to/foot·al·s, vb. To talk foolishly or nonsensically.

form. The way a word is spelled and pronounced according to how it is used in different tenses, cases, number, etc.; one of the inflected variations of a word. See aspect.

form word. See empty word.

foolish. An old word or expression that persists only in certain set phrases or idioms (e.g., hue in the phrase hue and cry).

fragment. A sentence that lacks some essential component (esp. a predicate) to make it complete. • To determine whether a sentence is a fragment, rephrase it as a yes/no question. If you can’t, it’s not a complete sentence. A sentence fragment may result because the main clause doesn’t have a main verb <peppers of all colors rolling down the slope>. Adding the verb are or were before rolling finishes the sentence. Incorrect punctuation may also create a fragment, especially when a dependent clause is separated from the main clause by a period instead of a comma: The new doorknob came off in my hand. Which shouldn’t have happened. — Also termed nonsentence. See p. 501.

free morpheme. See morpheme.

frequentative aspect. See aspect.

Freudian slip. The inadvertent substitution of a wrong word for the intended word and presumably therefore revealing a subconscious thought or feeling. • The famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) first described the phenomenon, which he called “faulty action;” in 1901. Classically, Freudian slips suggest that the speaker’s true thoughts have been exposed. For example, a speaker may intend to say “I’d like to thank all of you” but instead says “I’d like to spank all of you,” before launching into a tirade. — Also termed parapraxis. See heterophony.

fricative. A consonant sound made with a partial obstruction of the breath stream. — Also termed continuant.

front-cut. See aphaeresis.

fruity, adj. (Of speech or writing) empty, insubstantial, and trivial.

full passive. See passive voice.

fulminate /ful·ma·nae/-, vb. 1. To issue or utter (a threat, menace, denunciation, or criticism). 2. To thunder forth invective or censure.—fulmination, n. —fulminatory, adj.

functional shift. The use of a word or phrase that normally functions as one part of speech in a different way so that it functions as another. • Using fun (traditionally a noun) as an adjective (as in This is a fun trip!) is an example of functional shift. The most common types are noun-to-adjective shifts (a hotel car), verb-to-noun shifts (an assist), and noun-to-verb shifts (to office on a particular floor of a building). A noun, for example, may function as a verb <A truck jackknifed>. It may also function as an adjective <law report> <book report>. An adjective may also function as a verb <crimson with flowers> or as a noun <the poor>. — Also termed functional change; conversion; enallage; anthimera. See p. 416.

function word. See empty word.

word.

fused participle. See participle.

fustian /fus·chan/. Pretentious, bombastic verbiage; esp., an absurdly elevated style of speech or writing about a pedestrian subject. See twaddle.

future-perfect tense. See tense.

future tense. See tense.

galimatias /gal·ŏ·may·sh(ĕ)·as/ or /mat·ee·as/. A confused and often pretentious jumble of words; a medley of meaningless talk; gobbledygook.

garrulity /gar·ool·i·tee/, n. Severe overtalkativeness; logorrhea. — garrulous, adj.

gemination /jem·i·nay·shan/, n. 1. The doubling of a consonant sound in a word. 2. The doubling of a letter in the spelling of a word. • Many English words, such as baggage and saddle, have doubled letters, but only one is pronounced distinctly and the second only marginally, if at all. Often when gemination occurs in speaking a word such as bottle or button, and the second -t- is pronounced distinctly, the speaker is using a nonstandard pronunciation.

gender. A grammatical category by which a noun or pronoun is classified as masculine, feminine, or, in some languages, neuter, and articles and adjectives must take the masculine, feminine, or neuter form that agrees. • Although in some languages nouns have gender, in English most nouns have no set gender. Exceptions include animal names <buck–doe> <bull–cow> <cock–hen>, and the traditional use of feminine pronouns when referring to ships or boats. Only nouns and personal pronouns that expressly refer to a male or female person or animal are masculine or feminine. Personal pronouns (he, she) are most commonly affected by a noun’s gender, but a very few adjectives are as well. For example, blond and blonde refer to yellow-haired males and females, respectively. Some nouns that once referred exclusively to a man (e.g., actor, waiter) now apply to both men and women. The noun still requires a masculine or feminine pronoun, but which one depends on the sex of the person referred to <George Clooney is my favorite actor>. Meanwhile, the sex-specific actress still lingers in some contexts <the Best Actress category>. See also concord.

common gender. The gender of an inanimate noun or of a neutral classification of animate nouns. • Most English words are of common gender (e.g., a doctor may be a man or a woman), though there are many exceptions (e.g., a father is a man; a mother is a woman). Cf. neuter gender.

feminine gender. The gender of a noun or pronoun denoting a female person or animal (e.g., daughter, doe, filly). • Traditionally, many words were masculine in gender and changed to feminine by adding a suffix such as -ess (e.g., steward–stewardess). Many of those words are disappearing in favor of gender-neutral substitutes. (See sexism.) In other languages, nouns assigned the feminine gender have some semantic correlation with animation and the female sex. See animate; inanimate. Cf. masculine gender.

grammatical gender. Gender that depends on the form of a word and
not primarily on its meaning, as in highly inflected Indo-European languages. Cf. natural gender.

**masculine gender.** The gender of a noun or pronoun denoting a male person or animal (e.g., buck, ram, son). • In other languages, nouns assigned the masculine gender have some semantic correlation with animation and the male sex. See animate; inanimate. Cf. feminine gender.

**natural gender.** Gender that depends not on the form of a word but on the sex of the thing denoted by the word, as in English. • According to this type of gender, only animate parts of speech have the notion of sex attached to them. So inanimate words are said to have no gender at all. See common gender. Cf. grammatical gender.

**neuter gender.** The gender of a noun or pronoun denoting an inanimate thing (e.g., highway, shrub, weather). In some languages other than English, the neuter gender is assigned to a noun or pronoun that has no semantic correlation to something animate (such as a human or higher animal). See animate; inanimate. Cf. common gender.

**generalization.** 1. The process by which a word with a fairly narrow meaning takes on a broader meaning. • For example, barn derives from Old English roots meaning “barley house,” but has generalized to refer to a farm building for all kinds of storage. Cf. specialization. 2. The extension of a linguistic feature from one item to a whole class. • Overgeneralization occurs when the feature is extended indiscriminately to all items in the class when the feature does not in fact apply to everything. Irregular verbs, for example, form the past tense by changing a vowel rather than taking an ending <sing–sang>.

**general semantics.** A field of study developed during the 20th century as a way to improve how people use language and other symbols, as well as their environment more generally. • It was developed by Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950) and popularized by S.I. Hayakawa (1906–1992) and Stuart Chase (1888–1985). Its basic tenets are that (1) a word is not the thing it represents (“the map is not the territory”); (2) words cannot say everything about anything (“a map does not represent the entire territory”); and (3) words are self-reflexive in the sense that explaining them requires other words, and others (“a map would have to include a map of the map, which in turn would have to include a map of the map of the map, etc.”). Cf. semantics.

**genitive case.** See case.

**gerund.** A present-participial form that functions as a noun; a verbal noun. • A gerund is distinguishable from a participle verb, which is used only after a be-verb and functions as a main verb. A gerund can be the main verb’s subject or object <Dancing is good exercise> <I like dancing>, and also the object of a preposition <I exercise every morning by walking two miles>.

**gerundive, n.** In Latin grammar, a future passive participle (e.g., amandus = to be loved) functioning as a verbal adjective to express necessity of performance. See participle.

**gerundive phrase.** See gerund phrase under phrase.

**gerund phrase.** See phrase.

**gibberish.** Unintelligible speech; incoherent talk.

**gloss/gláhs/, n.** 1. A word inserted into a text, esp. a historical one, by way of explanation or simplification. • Often a gloss makes explicit something that the original text left implicit. 2. An explanatory statement in a reference book, such as a dictionary or glossary. 3. More broadly, a comment, explanation, or interpretation. 4. In a negative sense, a disingenuous “spin” on something; a tendentious interpretation.

**glossary.** 1. A partial dictionary that lists the definitions of technical terms in a field. — Also termed (rarely) glossology. 2. A collection of glosses. See gloss.

**glossalalia /glos-oh-lay-lá/, n.** An ecstatic, unintelligible utterance usu. accompanying religious euphoria. • Glossalalia is also known as “speaking in tongues.” — glossalalic, adj.

**glossology /gláss-ol-á-jee/, n.** 1. The scientific study of language. • This is an old-fashioned word for linguistics. — Also termed glottology. 2. The marshaling and defining of the terminology used in any field of study.

**glossostomalgia.** A sound produced in the glottis, the upper part of the larynx between the two vocal cords.

**glottal stop.** Phonetics. A sound produced with complete closure of the glottis followed by an explosive release of breath. • You can hear a glottal stop in the middle of the utterance uh–oh. See okina.

**glottochronology.** A method of calculating the rate at which dialects and languages diverge by analyzing the rate at which vocabulary changes.

**glotology.** See glossology (1).

**gnome /nohm/.** A concise statement of a principle, truth, or sentiment; a maxim, proverb, aphorism, or aphorism. — gnomic, adj.

**gobbledygook.** Complicated, pompous, and obscure verbiage, particularly that used by governments, businesses, or professions. • Gobbledygook was coined in 1944 by Maury Maverick, a former member of Congress who was serving in FDR’s wartime government. He claimed that his inspiration was the turkey: "always gobbledygobbling and strutting with ludicrous pomposity. At the end of his gobble, there was a sort of gook." It’s not hard to find examples of gobbledygook, although they can be hard to comprehend <Forward-looking companies invest in quality asset projections> <We can revitalize the economy with regenerated policy innovations>. — Also spelled gobbladegook. Cf. legaldeckook.


**government.** The effect of one word on another according to usage, esp. in determining the case of a pronoun or the mood of a verb.

**gradable, adj.** Capable of being compared. See degree.

**gradation /gra-day-ən/.** Inflection produced by changing a vowel in the root word (e.g., drink–drank–drunk). — Also termed ablaut. See strong verb under verb.

**grade.** See degree.

**grammar.** 1. The structural pattern of a language learned unconsciously by a child while acquiring his or her native tongue. 2. A systematic, comprehensive description of this structural pattern. 3. A pedagogical book in which a language is partially described, focusing primarily on the needs of native speakers. 4. A book that seeks to describe a language comprehensively, as if to an alien, without reference to the pedagogical needs of native speakers. See descriptive grammar;
Glossary of Grammatical, Rhetorical, and Other Language-Related Terms

prescriptive grammar; transformative grammar; linguistics.


grammatical, adj. 1. Of, relating to, or involving grammar. 2. According to the rules of grammar.

grammatical ambiguity. See ambiguity.

grammatical function. The syntactic role that a word or phrase serves in a sentence (e.g., a noun or noun phrase may serve as subject or object) and the part of speech in which the word or phrase operates. — Also termed grammatical relation.

grammaticality, n. Correctness according to the rules of grammar. • Grammaticality is not a strict concept. Some forms of construction may be acceptable to all speakers of a particular dialect, while others may never be acceptable. But some forms may have more or less acceptance by at least some speakers. • Grammatical relation. See grammatical function.

grammatical word. See empty word.

grammaticaster /grә-mәt-i-kәs-tәr/. An unknowledgeable grammarian; an amateur who comments incompetently on points of grammar. Cf. poetaster; logicaster.

grammaticism /grә-mәt-i-siz-am/. A grammatical rule, principle, or peculiarity.

grammaticize /grә-mәt-i-siz/, vb. 1. To make (a sentence or construction) grammatically correct. 2. To display grammatical knowledge. 3. To expiate on a point of grammar.


grapheme /grә-fәm/. The smallest distinguishable unit in a writing system.

• Letters <A, C>, punctuation marks <, >, symbols <, %>, and numbers <4, 7> are all types of graphemes.

• <>, !>, symbols <+, %>, and numbers are all types of graphemes.

• <4, 7> are all types of graphemes.

• All types of graphemes. — Also termed graphemes.

grapholect /grә-fә-lәkt/. A standard written language.

graphology /grә-fә-lojә/, n. 1. The study of handwriting. 2. The analysis of handwriting as an index to personality, intelligence, and other characteristics. 3. The study of the written symbols or printing systems in various languages. — graphologist, n. — graphological, adj.

glyph accent. See accent.

Great Vowel Shift. In the development of the English language, the period (ca. 1400–1700) when the pronunciation of stressed vowel sounds changed. • During this period, the pronunciation of stressed vowel sounds became systematically "raised," that is, pronounced higher in the mouth. So the word each in Chaucer's time was spelled ech and pronounced /ech/. • Grouping ambiguity. See ambiguity.

headword. 1. The word that begins an entry in a reference work such as a dictionary or encyclopedia. 2. Head (1). • Helping verb. See auxiliary verb under verb.

hendecasyllable /hen-de-ka-sil-ә-bal/, n. A line or word of 11 syllables. — hendecasyllabic /hen-de-ka-sil-ә-bal-ik/, adj.

heniady /hen-di-a-dәs/. Rhetoric. The use of two words connected by and to express the same idea as might be expressed with a single word and a qualifier; the separation of what is really one thing into two things <They drank from goblets and from gold> (they drank from golden goblets).


hermeneutics, n. The art or science of interpreting texts. • The term is commonly used to refer to techniques of interpreting scripture, but it applies to any kind of text. — Hermeneutic, adj.

heteretic /hi-ter-ik/, adj. (Of a spelling) nonphonetic.

heteroclite. A word of irregular inflection; esp., a Latin noun irregular in declension. — Heteroclite, adj.

heteroepy /het-ә-roә-pee/. A variance from standard pronunciation.

— heteroepic /het-ә-roә-ep-ik/, adj.


heterological, adj. (Of a modifying word) not having the characteristic denoted. • A word that is heterological never describes itself. Examples are long (it has only four letters and one syllable) and monosyllabic (it has five syllables). Cf. autological.

heteronym. 1. A word that is spelled like another word but has a different meaning and is pronounced differently. • For instance, lead can mean "to guide" (fed) or "a metallic element" (led). Similarly, alternate can mean "the next choice" (iawn-tar-nit) or "to switch back and forth" (iawn-tar-nayt). 2. A phrase referring to a thing that is called by an entirely different name in a different geographical area. For example, an apple coated with hardened redsugar syrup is called a candy apple in New York and a taffy apple in Pennsylvania. 3. A synonym; specif., a word that has the same meaning as another but is not written similarly and has a different origin. Bucket and pail, for instance, refer to the same object, but bucket derives from Anglo-Norman, while the origin of pail is unknown.
heterophony. The inadvertent use of a word or phrase when another is meant. • Heterophony usually results from a momentary lapse in concentration (as when a server writes an order for white wine instead of white rum). In speech, it is also called a slip of the tongue (lapseus linguae) and in writing a slip of the pen (lapseus calami). Freudian slips are a type of heterophony. See FREUDIAN SLIP.


hiatus /hi-ay-tәs/. A break in pronunciation between two adjacent vowels or vowel sounds that are not in the same syllable (e.g., coowner; reside-uum) or in different words (e.g., to irritate; draw out).

historical linguistics. See LINGUISTICS. historical present tense. See TENSE.

Hobson-Jobsonism. The modification of a foreign word or phrase to fit the sound system of the borrowing language. • Hobson-Jobson is an anglicized corruption of the Shi'ite Muslim cry Ya Hasan! Ya Hosain!—used during the Festival of Muharram. The term became the popular name for the Glossary of Anglo-Indian Colloquial Words and Phrases, published in 1886. At the time, many of the hybrid terms in the Glossary were unique to British India. But some have become Standard English (e.g., shawl, veranda, pajamas, and shampoo). See p. 465.


holophrasis /hә-lә-ә-grә-sәs/, n. The representation of a language's sounds so that each sound is expressed by a single character, and no character represents more than that one sound. • The International Phonetic Alphabet is perhaps the best-known system of homography. Cf. heterography (2).

homonym. 1. A word that is spelled identically with another but has a different pronunciation or meaning, and usu. a different origin; homograph. • The word mood, for example, in the sense of an emotion or state of mind derives from German (Mut) and Dutch (moed). But mood in the grammatical sense of verbs derives from Latin (modus). 2. HOMOPHONE. — homonymous, adj.

homophone. A word that is pronounced the same as another but has a different meaning and usu. spelling <rain–rein–reign> <rite–write–right–wright>. • Many nouns are homophones, such as pair–pear. Other parts of speech can also be homonyms. The verb lie means either (1) to say something that is not true, or (2) to be at rest, usu. (esp. of a living thing) in a horizontal position. The distinction becomes obvious when lie is conjugated in each sense: lie–lied–lied and lie–lay–lain. Homophones that have identical spellings are also homographs. — Also termed paronym. — homophonic, adj. — homophony, n.

hybrid. Philology. A word formed by combining elements of different languages. • For example, amoral is formed from the Greek negative prefix a- and the Latin root moral. Hyperdrive has the Greek prefix hyper- and the English drive. See p. 474.

hypallage /hi-pәl-ә-jeә or hi-i/. Rhetoric. The reversal of the usual syntactic or semantic relationship of words; esp., the transference of an adjective from the person who has the quality denoted to some object (person or thing) with reference to which the person manifests that quality <flattering offer>. • A memorable example occurs in Byron’s lines: “The night-winds sigh, the breakers roar, / And shrieks the wild seawave.” (In the final clause, the subject–verb sequence is inverted to create a strikingly unparallel phrasing.) In Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar appears this example: “His coward lips did from their color fly.” Shakespeare might have written, more ordinarily (and less memorably), “The color did fly from his coward lips.” On a more down-to-earth level, hypallage frequently occurs in phrases such as caring home (it’s not the home that’s caring, but the people in it), glad tidings, hopeless efforts, friendly glance, jealous look, joyful news, wise counsel, and treacherous plots. — Also termed transferred epithet. See pp. 474–75.

hyperbaton. See INVERSION.

hyperbole /hi-par-bә-lee/. Rhetoric. Overstatement; specif., exaggeration to distort facts by making them appear much more significant than they really are. • Hyperbole may be used to entertain or for serious purposes. Either way, it should be used with care. For example, calling a referee’s poor decision “the crime of the century” is excessive. See AUXESIS; FIGURE OF SPEECH. Cf. IRONY; LITOTES; SARCAST. — hyperbolic, adj.


hypercorrect, adj. 1. (Of an expression used by an imperfectly educated person) incorrectly formed from an erroneous attempt to use a prestigious form of language. 2. (Of an ill-educated speaker or writer) using erroneous expressions in a mistaken attempt to mimic educated usage. Cf. HYPERURBANISM. — hypercorrection, n. See pp. 474–77.

hypernym /hi-par-nim/, n. A genus-word; a broad term that denotes something for which the language contains many more particular terms (as red is the hypernym for crimson, oxblood, rubicund, ruddy, scarlet, etc.). Cf. HYPERONYM. — hypernymy, n.

hyperurbanism /hi-par-әr-bә-niz-әm/, n. 1. An affected manner of speech or writing intended to avoid sounding rural or uneducated. 2. A hypercorrect phrasing used by some one who wants to sound sophisticated but instead achieves the opposite result. Cf. HYPERCORRECT. — hyperurban, adj.

hypaeresis /hi-fәr-ә-sis or hi-feer-ә-sis/. Philology. The omission of a letter, syllable, or sound from the body of a word. • For example, whene’er drops the v of whenever and thereby loses a syllable. Essentially, this word is synonymous with apocope. Cf. ELISION; HAPLOLOGY.

hypbole. See HYPOPHORA.

hypocorism /hi-pahk-ә-riz-әm/, n. A pet name or familiar name (e.g., Billy for William, Lexi for Alexandra).
hypocoristic /ha-pahk-ə-ris-tik/, adj. 1. Of, relating to, or involving pet names or familiar names. 2. DIMINUTIVE. — Also termed caritative.

hymn /ha-poh-nim/, n. A species-word; a narrow term whose meaning is embraced within a broad category of meanings carried by a more general term (as daisy, gladiolus, marigold, rose, stargazer, tulip, and violet are hyponyms of the word flower). Cf. HYPERNYM. — HYPONYM, n.

hypophora /ha-poh-fə-ral/, Rhetoric. The posing and answering of questions, often at length; esp., the practice or an instance of raising and answering one or more questions that an opponent might raise about one’s argument. Cf. PROLEPSIS (2). — Also termed hypobole /ha-poh-bə-lee/.

hypotaxis /ha-poh-tak-sis/. The subordination of one clause to another to show the logical relationship between ideas. • We’ll have to do the marketing tomorrow because I forgot to make a grocery list (the conjunction because subordinates the dependent clause I forgot to make a grocery list). Cf. PARATAXIS. — HYPOTATIC, adj.

hypozoicus /ha-poh-zək-oos/. The use in one sentence of three or more parallel clauses in succession, each one with a subject and a verb.

hysteron proteron /his-tər-ən proh-terr-ən/ or prot-a-ron/. Rhetoric. A construction in which the natural order of the elements is inverted to stress the more important event, even though it must occur later in time. • The command put on your shoes and socks, though literally absurd, is meant to put the emphasis on shoes over socks. — Also termed hysterosis.

hysteron proteron. See HYSTERON PROTERON.

idiogllossia /id-ee-oh-glos-ee-ə/. The inability to pronounce guttural or palatal sounds in someone whose origins of speech are otherwise normal.

ideogram /id-ee-o-gram/. A symbol that represents an idea rather than a particular word (e.g., the numeral 8 in contrast with the word eight). Cf. LOGOGRAM; PICTIONGRAM.

idiolct /id-ee-ə-lekt/. An individual’s distinctive language; a personal dialect. • Every person’s language reflects word choices and other features that characterize that individual’s speech and writing. See DIALECT; SLANG.

idiom /id-ee-o-m/. 1. A phrase that has a meaning greater than its constituent parts might suggest and that must therefore be learned independently of the traditional definitions of its constituent parts (e.g., break wind, put up with, raining cats and dogs, top-shelf). • For example, kick the bucket means “die,” and red herring means “something brought up to divert attention from the real issue.” 2. An expression that is widely used and accepted despite being illogical or formally ungrammatical (e.g., a life-and-death situation is illogical and it’s me! is technically ungrammatical). Cf. SET PHRASE; CLICHÉ. — IDIOMATIC, adj.

ignoratio elenchi /ig-nor-ə-ay-she-ə-ə-ləng-kee/, n. Rhetoric. The fallacy of arguing the wrong point. • Literally, this Latin phrase means “ignoring the refutation”—meaning that the advocate wastes time by trying to establish something not at issue. See ELENCHUS (3).

ignotum per ignotius /ig-noh-təm par ig-noh-shəs/. [Latin “the unknown by the more unknown”] An attempt to explain something obscure in terms even more obscure. <What does habitation mean? Why, it means “comorancy”!> <For those of you who don’t understand the term extirpate, it’s equivalent to deruncate>. • The term is often applied when a word is defined opaquely or to an argument in which something that is not well understood is explained in terms even more arcane.

illative conjunction. 1. See final conjunction under CONJUNCTION. 2. See conjunctive adverb under ADVERB.

illeism /ɪl-ɪ-ləm/. Reference to oneself in the third person, either by the third-person pronoun (he, she) or by name or label. Two examples. In Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar (1598), the eponymous character consistently uses illeism, saying at one point: “Caesar should be a beast without a heart / If he should stay at home today for fear” (2.2.42–43). In the 1996 presidential election, the Republican candidate, Bob Dole, was widely lampooned for his illeism (“Let me tell you what Bob Dole thinks.”). Cf. PERLOCUTION.

im-per-a-tiv/. (Of verbs) expressing a command (come here), prohibition (don’t touch that), request (help me a minute), warning (stay out or else!), or the like. A synonym is JUSSIVE, but JUSSIVE has a second sense that is narrower than IMPERATIVE. Cf. JUSSIVE (2). See IMPERATIVE SENTENCE UNDER SENTENCE.

imperative mood. See MOOD.

imperative sentence. See SENTENCE. IMPERATIVE aspect. See ASPECT.

improper diphthong. See DIPHTHONG.

inanimate. Adj. Of, relating to, or being a thing that lacks consciousness or is inherently immobile, although it may be a living thing such as a plant. See feminine gender, masculine gender, and neuter gender under gender.

inanimate noun. See NOUN.

inceptive /in-sep-tiv/. See INCHOATIVE.

inchoative /in-koh-a-tiv/. Of a verb showing that an action, state of being, or the like has begun. The term is also used as a noun to denote such a verb. — Also termed INCEPTIVE; INGRESSIVE.

incipit /in(t)-sə-pit/ or /in-ka-pit/, n. The first part or opening words of a writing, esp. when a work is untitled; specif., the beginning of a medieval manuscript.

indefinite adjective. See ADJECTIVE.

indefinite article. See ARTICL.

indefinite pronoun. See PRONOUN.

independent clause. See CLAUSE.

independent form. See ABSOLUTE FORM.

indicative /in-dik-a-tiv/, adj. (Of a verb) expressing a plain statement.

indicative mood. See MOOD.

indirect object. See OBJECT.

indirect-object inversion. The placement of an indirect object before the direct object (as in John gave her the book as opposed to John gave the book to her).

indirect question. See QUESTION.

indirect speech. See REPORTED SPEECH.

infinitive. A verb in its unconjugated form that can function as a noun but retains certain verb features, such as taking an object and being modified by adverbs. • The infinitive is usually preceded by “to” (<to dance> or <You can take the camera>). The subject of an infinitive is always in the objective case (<For him to prepare any less diligently would have been shocking>). BARE INFINITIVE. An infinitive in which to is omitted. It almost always follows an auxiliary verb such as should. — Also termed plain infinitive; pure infinitive; unmarked infinitive.

complementary infinitive. An infinitive that functions as the principal verb (<I am going to revise the manuscript next week> (in which am going has a modal quality).

marked infinitive. A verb form preceded by the word to.

plain infinitive. See bare infinitive. PURE INFINITIVE. See bare infinitive.

split infinitive. An infinitive verb composed of to followed by one or more modifiers before the verb (<to deliberately split an infinitive>). See pp. 853–55.

unmarked infinitive. See bare infinitive.

infinitive phrase. See PHRASE.
infinitive verb. See INFINITIVE.

infix /ˈɪn-fiks/. n. 1. A sound element, such as a letter or syllable, inserted within a word. • In a string of suffixes, as in cleanliness where -ly and -ness are both suffixes, some grammarians treat all but the last-added syllable as infixes. Otherwise, infixes are comparatively rare in English. 2. A word inserted between the parts of a compound word, often typical of slang (e.g., some-damn-where, absobloodylutely). See affix. Cf. prefix; suffix.

infecting language. See SYNTHETIC LANGUAGE.

inflection. 1. The change of form that a word undergoes to distinguish its case, gender, mood, number, voice, or other characteristics. • Nouns, pronouns, and verbs are inflected either by affixation or by internal vowel change. Nouns are inflected to show that they are plural <goose–geese> <clock–clocks>. Verbs are inflected when conjugated <I have–it has> <jog–jogged>. — Also spelled inflexion. — Also termed flection. 2. The study of how the endings of words may be used to show their relationship to one another; ACCIDENCE.

inflectional affix. See affix.

inflectional morphology. See ACCIDENCE.

inflexion. See inflection.

ingressive /ˈɪn-ˈgres-ɪv/. adj. See INCHOATIVE.

initialism. An abbreviation made from the initial letters (or most important initial letters) of a name, each letter being pronounced separately, such as CPU, FBI, and r.p.m. • The American Broadcasting Company is typically reduced to its initials: ABC. An initialism is a type of abbreviation. — Also termed alphabeticism. See ABBREVIATION. Cf. acronym.

inkhornism. Rhetoric. An arcane term; a bookish word. • An inkhorn was variously a portable case for holding writing materials or a portable ink bottle (originally made of horn). In the Renaissance, a pedantic, ostentatious writer would be said to “smell [or savor] a little of the inkhorn.” Hence inkhornism came to be used in reference to a word that typifies a style with that particular odor. Before moving to define intensifier, I must pause to acknowledge the irony that so many of the rhetorical terms in this glossary are essentially inkhornisms. In self-defense, I merely note that I didn’t make them up. I’m just reporting the linguistic facts. But in a glossary like this one, a little sesquipedality—for the right reader—can be some fun. Who’d have known that terms like epandiplasis and hypophora even existed? — Also termed inkhorn term.

intensifier /ˈɪn-ˌten-sɪ-ər/. An adverb that emphasizes and heightens an adjective or some other adverb. • Intensive adverbs and adjectives include extremely, fairly, quite, rather, so, too, very, and (as negative intensifiers) hardly and scarcely. — Also termed intensive or degree modifier.

intensive, adj. Expressing intensity; emphatic. • The prefix in- can be either intensive (as in intense and incense) or negative (as in incredible and indefensible). — Also termed ascensive; augmentative. — intensive, n.

intensive pronoun. See PRONOUN.

interjection. A word or short phrase uttered as an exclamation with no literal meaning and having no grammatical connection with anything; an expression used as an exclamation, usu. one expressing a certain feeling (e.g., Really? Oh, no! It can’t be!). • Interjections show emotion, particularly strong ones such as surprise and shock. They usually appear at the beginning of a sentence and are punctuated with a comma or an exclamation mark. Because an interjection has no grammatical function in a sentence, a meaningless utterance used as an introductory word can also be an interjection (e.g., Well, I’ll have to ask first). Cf. EXCLAMATION; PASILALY.

interlingua /ɪn-ˈtɛr-lɪŋɡw-/., n. An artificial language invented for universal use, esp. the one promoted since the 1920s by New York’s International Auxiliary Association. Cf. Esperanto; pasigraphy; pasilaly. • The transposition of the subject and the auxiliary verb for the purpose of posing a question (e.g., He is making that awful noise? is making that awful noise? — Also termed intensifier and deontic modalizer.

intensive, adj. Expressing intensity; emphatic. • The prefix in- can be either intensive (as in intense and incense) or negative (as in incredible and indefensible). — Also termed ascensive; augmentative. • intensive, n.

interrogative /ɪn-ˈtər-ɡreɪ-tɪv/. adj. Expressing a question (as in Who is making that awful noise? or Why didn’t the mail come today?). • The word is also used as a noun to denote a question. See interrogative sentence under SENTENCE.

interrogative adjective. See ADJECTIVE.

interrogative mood. See MOOD.

interrogative pronoun. See PRONOUN.

interrogative sentence. See SENTENCE.

intervocalic, adj. PHONETICS. (Of a sound) immediately preceded and followed by vowel sounds, as with /p/ in occupy and /d/ in idea.

intonation /ɪn-ˈtə-nɛtʃən or -ˈtoʊ-/., 1. The rise and fall in the pitch of a person’s speaking voice. • A question is generally marked by a rising intonation at the end of the sentence. And certain words, such as only, may vary in sense according to the speaker’s intonation. Except for questions, exclamations, and the like, American English tends to sound more monotone, with less intonational variation than British English. 2. The system of pitch and tone patterns of a spoken language. See PITCH.

intransitive verb. See VERB.

intrinsic modality. See deontic modality under MODALITY.

introductory adverb. See conjunctive adverb under ADVERB.

inventive, n. Abusive or insulting language. — inventive, adj.

inversion. 1. A change in the normal order or relationship of words or other elements; esp., the placement of a verb or some part of the verb phrase before its subject (“I’m coming,” calmly said he—). — Also termed hyperbaton; metaplasm. See ANASTROPHE. 2. The transposition of the subject and the auxiliary verb for the purpose of posing a question (e.g., He is a golfer becomes Is he a golfer?).

ipissima verba /ɪp-ˈsi-sɪ-ma vɜːˈbɑːl/. The very same words used by someone who is being quoted; a verbatim rendition.

irish bull. A statement that is incongruous, ludicrous, or logically absurd, often unintentionally. • Irish bulls are usually found in speech, but they occasionally make their way into print. Examples:

• It seems, from what I gather, to be one of those simple cases which are so extremely difficult. (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle [1859–1930])
• I don’t like spinach, and I’m glad I don’t, because if I liked it I’d eat it, and I just hate it. (Clarence Darrow [1857–1938])
• Always go to other people’s funerals; otherwise they won’t come to yours. (Yogi Berra [1925–2015])

irony /ɪr-ə-ˈnɛɪ/., Rhetoric. A mode of speech in which the literal or implied meaning of the words is opposite that of the intended meaning; esp., a suggested meaning that differs from the apparent meaning. • A classic example of irony is Mark Antony’s speech in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar. Although Antony declares, “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him,” and declares that the assassins are “honorable men,” he means just the opposite. Irony can be used for many purposes, such as humor or to be rude without
being directly confrontational. <Of course the bride won’t mind if you wear ripped jeans to her formal wed-
ing.> — Also termed *enantiosis*. Cf. *hyperbole*; *litotes*; *sarcastm*.

irregular adjective. See *adjective*.

irregular verb. See *verb*.


isolating language. See *analytic language*.

italic. 1. (adj). Of, relating to, or involving a sloping style of typeface. 2. (n.) (usu. pl.) In printing, the sloping typeface used for emphasis or distinction. See pp. 533–54.

iterative /ɪt-ə-rə-tiv or -rət-/, adj. See *frequentative aspect under aspect*.

iterative aspect. See *aspect*.

jargon /ˈdʒɑr-ən/. The special, usu. technical idiom of a social, occupa-
tional, or professional group, often intended to streamline communi-
cation and save time and space, but sometimes also to conceal meaning from the uninitiated. Cf. *argot*; *dia-

jawbreaker. A word that is particularly difficult to pronounce.

Johnsonese. An inflated, stilted, or pompous literary style that displaces plain English with long words and Lat-
ine diction. • This pejorative term derives from the name and style of Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), the renowned lexicographer and writer. James Boswell recorded this example of how Johnson altered plain English:

He seemed to take a pleasure in speak-
ing in his own style; for when he had carelessly missed it, he would repeat the thought translated into it. Talking of the Comedy of The Rehearsal, he said, “It has not wit enough to keep it sweet.” This was easy; he therefore caught himself, and pronounced a more round sentence:

“Has not vitality enough to preserve it from putrefaction.” (James Boswell [1740–1795])

Thomas B. Macaulay likewise noted how Johnson’s style changed when writing a private letter and recount-
ing the same incident for the public:

His letters from the Hebrides to Mr. Thrale are the original of that work of which the *Journey to the Hebrides* is the translation; and it is amusing to compare the two versions. “When we were taken upstairs,” says he in one of his letters, “a dirty fellow bounced out of the bed on which one of us was to lie.” This incident is recorded in the journey as follows: “Out of one of the beds on which we were to repose started up, at our entrance, a man black as a Cyclops from the forge.” (Thomas B. Macaulay [1800–1859])

Yet another classic example occurs in Johnson’s definition of *network* in Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755): “any thing reticulated or decussated, at equal dis-
tances, with interstices between the intersections.”

jot. The least letter or character of any writing; hence, a minuscule part of anything. See *tittle*.

*jus et norma loquendi* /jʊs ət nɜrn-mə loh-kən-dən/ [Latin]. Collectively, the standards or rules of grammar, pronun-
ciation, and other linguistic elements as established by the customs of the native users of the language.

jussive /ˈjʌs-ə-tɪv/, adj. 1. IMPERATIVE. 2. Expressing a command directed to a third person (e.g., *let them eat cake*; *have them submit suggestions*). Cf. IMPERATIVE.

justification. In printing, the align-
ment of text so that one or both mar-
gins form a straight edge.

karmadharaya /kahr-mә-dahrәyə/, n. [Sanskrit] A compound consisting of an adjective plus a noun <black-
bird> <supernova> or an attributive noun plus a noun <fireworks> <damp-
post>. Cf. *bahuvrhi*.

kernel sentence. In transformational grammar, a simple sentence that results from the application of a few required transformations, and that with further transformations can be expanded into more complicated sentences. • A kernel sentence is the stripped-down nucleus of a sentence of any complexity <Young people are often exceptionally polite even though the general coarsening of society has resulted in the lack of emphasis on good manners> (the kernel sen-
tence being *People are polite*). — Also termed *simplex*.

kening. n. In printing, the adjust-
ment of spacing between characters or letters.

kinesics /ki-nee-siks/, n. The study of how body movements and gestures convey nonverbal meaning; the exami-
 nation of body language as a part of communication.

King’s English. The supposed apothe-
osis of BrE grammar, syntax, usage, punctuation, and pronunciation. — Also termed *Queen’s English*.

koiné. 1. A literary dialect. 2. *Lingua franca*. 3. A regional dialect or language that becomes the standard language for a wide area and loses its most pronounced local charac-
teristics. • *The term comes from the name of an ancient Greek dialect that eventually became the common language of the eastern Mediterrane-
nian countries under the Greek and Roman empires.*


lambdacism (2). See *verb*.

lambdacism /lәm-ðә-siz-əm/, 1. The overuse or overfondness of the letter l in speaking or writing. 2. The mispro-
nunciation of l. 3. The erroneous sub-
stitution of l for r in pronunciation. • In sense 3, *lambdacism* is synonymous with *hotacism*. See *hotacism*; *lal-
lation* (2). See p. 738.

language. 1. The expression of human thought or emotion in words, whether written or spoken. 2. The set of habits by which the members of a nation are accustomed to com-
municating with one another; the sum of a population’s means of com-
municating information, including words and syntax as well as gestures and customs of behavior (as in *English language*). 3. The manner or style of writing or speech (as in *pompous* language). 4. The vocabulary and phraseology of a group of people in a profession, industry, or the like (as in *medical language*).

language acquisition. The process or result of learning language, either as a whole or in part. — Sometimes short-
ened to *acquisition*.

langue. *Linguistics*. Language as an abstract system, the principles of which make speech possible. • The elements of langue include subsys-
tems such as spelling, syntax, and grammar. These elements create meaning according to the principles by which they are arranged and how they relate to one another. Cf. *parole*, *lapis calami* /ˈlә-pәs kal-ә-mә/. [Latin] A slip of the pen. See *heterophemy*.


leading /led-ing/, n. In printing, the amount of blank space between every two lines of text.

left-branching sentence. A complica-
ted sentence that has most of its complexity—the conditions, excep-
tions, etc.—before the principal verb; one that has a majority of its constitu-
ents on the left side of the tree diagram. Cf. *right-branching sentence*.

legaldeogok. A combination of legal-
es and gobbledygook; unclear or overtechnical legal language. See *gobbledygook*; *legalese*. 
legalese. 1. The jargon used by members of the legal profession. 2. Language marked by the overuse of legal terms. See legaldeemook.

lemma /le-ma/. 1. An ancillary proposition used as part of an argument. 2. The heading or theme of a written argument. 3. A word or phrase defined or discussed in a dictionary, glossary, encyclopedia, etc.; esp., a dictionary headword. Pl. lemmas (preferably not lemmata). — lema-
tical /li-mat-i-kal/, adj.

lemmatize /le-mat-əz/, vb. 1. To group together the inflected forms of a word and list them under a headword. 2. To choose the headwords (or main entries) for a dictionary, glossary, encyclopedia, etc. — lemmatization, n.

letter. 1. A symbol in an alphabet, such as Z. 2. A character representing a speech sound or sounds.

lexeme /lek-seem/. Linguistics. A word or phrase taken as a lexical unit in the abstract, without considering the forms it takes in specific constructions. — Also termed lexical unit.

lexical, adj. 1. Of, relating to, or involving a word or words. 2. Of, relating to, or involving the vocabulary of a language. 3. Of, relating to, or involving a dictionary or lexicography.

lexical ambiguity. See ambiguity.

lexical category. See part of speech.

lexical meaning. The essential meaning of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—i.e., of the words that carry the bulk of the semantic burden in any utterance.

lexical unit. See lexeme.

lexicographer /lek-si-kog-ra-fər/. The writer or compiler of a dictionary. • In his great English dictionary of 1755, Samuel Johnson’s famous definition read as follows: “A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge.”

lexicography /lek-si-kog-ra-fe/. The art or process of compiling a dictionary or lexicon. — lexicographic /lek-si-ka-graf-ik/, adj.

lexicology /lek-si-kol-ə-je/. The study of words and their derivation and signification.

lexicon. 1. The vocabulary of a language, group, or individual. 2. A dictionary; wordbook.

lexigraphy /lek-sig-ra-fe/. 1. The representation of words by distinct characters, as in the Chinese alphabet. 2. Loosely, lexicography. — lexicographic, adj.

lexiphanes /lek-sif-a-neez/. Someone who indulges in sesquipedality or lexiphanicism to an extreme degree.

lexiphanic /lek-si-fan-ik/, adj. Of, relating to, or involving the use of many hard, pretentious words. — lexiphanicism, n.

lexis. Linguistics. The total vocabulary of a language, as distinct from the grammar.

literature /lit-ə-túr/. A written or discussed in a dictionary, glossary, encyclopedia, etc.; esp., a dictionary headword. Pl. lemmata (preferably not lemmata). — lemmata.

light verb. See verb.

line-editing. The spotting and fixing of problems in a manuscript—whether one’s own or someone else’s. • Several things can go wrong when you’re editing: (1) you might miss a problem and fail to eliminate it; (2) you might spot a problem and propose a flawed solution, perhaps even a “solution” that worsens the text; or (3) you might misidentify something as a problem when in fact it’s perfectly correct, so that your “solution” mars what was an unblemished text (rarely in such a situation is the editorial hand benign). So a good editor is surefooted, but the surefootedness depends on accurate knowledge of editorial problems and their solutions. — Also termed copyediting.

lingo. A variety of language rendered somewhat unintelligible to a generalist as a result of peculiarities of vocabulary or pronunciation.

lingua franca /ling-gwə-fränk-kəl/. A language that is spoken commonly, esp. for business purposes, by people in many different lands. • In ancient times, Latin was spoken throughout the Roman empire and continued to be used in former Roman possessions as a trade language after the empire crumbled. By the Renaissance, French had become the lingua franca in Europe. Today, English is the global lingua franca.

linguist. 1. An expert in linguistics; a student of the history or science of language. 2. Someone who is fluent in several languages.

linguistic ambiguity. See ambiguity.

linguistics. The scientific study of language. See grammar; morphology; morphophonemics; phonetics; phonology; pragmatics; semantics; stylistics; syntax.

comparative linguistics. The branch of linguistics that focuses on the mutual relationships of languages believed to have a common origin or the historical development of a language between periods.

diachronic linguistics. See historical linguistics.

historical linguistics. The study of how one or more languages develop over time. — Also termed diachronic linguistics.

prescriptive linguistics. The study of language to derive or develop common rules and guide users in the use of standardized rules that aid communication. Cf. descriptive linguistics.

psycholinguistics /si-koh-líng-gwis-tiks/. The study of how people learn, understand, and produce language.

sociolinguistics /söh-see-oh-líng-gwis-tiks or soh-shëe-oh-líng-gwis-tiks/. The study of language in relation to society. • Social factors that affect language include class, region, and occupation.

structural linguistics. The analytical study of language as a system and the functions of linguistic units such as sounds, words, and sentences within the system.

linking verb. See verb.

literal, adj. 1. (Of a word or phrase) having the usual or most basic sense. Cf. figurative. 2. Unembellished.

literarism. 1. The use of unusual words by the literary or erudite. 2. An addic-
tion to literary language; an expression of literary language. 3. A literary idiom or expression.


literation. The representation of sounds or words by letters.

litotes /li-tə-teez or lit-a-tee/. Rheto-
ric. 1. Understatement achieved by denying the opposite of an idea; affirmation of a thing by denying the truth of its opposite (a citizen of no mean city). • Litotes is used to increase effect or to reduce censure. It’s a very old tool in English rhetoric; examples are found in Anglo-Saxon literature right up to modern times. For example, he’s not the friendliest person means he’s unfriendly. And it’s not inconceivable that there will be a pop quiz means you’d better study: there will probably be a pop quiz. Cf. hyperbole; irony; sarcasm. 2. An instance of such understatement.

loan translation. A word or phrase borrowed from another language by literally translating the components. • English has borrowed many terms from many languages, including Spanish (blue-blood = sangre azul), French (merciless = sans pitié), German (superman = Übermensch), and Latin (wisdom tooth = dens sapientiae). — Also termed calque.
loanword. Philology. A word borrowed or adopted from another language and partly or wholly naturalized. • Few or no changes are made to some adopted words such as *hotel* (from Fr. *hôtel*) and *kindergarten* (Ger.). For others, naturalization is evident. For instance, *extravert* was adapted from the German form *extravertiert*, which itself was compounded of the Latin *extra-* and *vertere*. The word evolved into *introvert* when patterned on the established word *introverte*, derived from the Latin *introvertere*.

locative /lә-hәk-a-tiv/, adj. Expressing location; answering the question *where or in (at) what place*. • Some examples of locative words are directional words (e.g., north; southwest) and adverbs (e.g., above; everywhere; here; inside).

locaitive verb. See ADV.VERB.

location. 1. A mode of speaking. 2. A word, phrase, or idiom; phraseology.

logicaster /loj-i-kas-tәr/. An inferior logician; an illogical dabbler in logic. Cf. *grammaticaster*; *poetaster*.

logocracy /lo-h-gahk-ra-see/, n. Government by the power of words. — logocratic, adj.


logogram /lo-gә-gram/. A written character such as a letter (e.g., c. for *century*) or a symbol (e.g., $ or %) that represents a whole word, as in shorthand writing. — Also termed *logograph*. Cf. *ideogram*; *pictogram*.

logograph /lo-gә-grәf/, 1. A written word. 2. LOGOGRAM.

logograph /lo-h-goh-grәf/, A word riddle in which the solution requires the discovery of some word by a recombination of the letters or elements of specified words or by guessing and combining other words that, when correctly arranged, form the word to be guessed.

logolatry /lo-h-gol-a-tree/, Excessive regard for verbal or literal accuracy. — logolatrous, adj.

logolept /lo-h-goh-lept/. A writer with a passion for sensational uses or combinations of words; a word maniac.

logology /lo-gәh-ә-jee/, The study of words with an emphasis on features such as length and letter patterns rather than meaning.

logomancy /lo-h-goh-mәn-tәj-see/, Divination through the use of supposedly magical words or phrases; verbal augury.

logomaniac /lo-gә-mәn-ә-jee/, adj. A type of insanity characterized by uncontrollable garrulity; mad loquacity. — logomaniacal, adj.

logouers /lo-h-goh-nә-sәs/, A mental disorder resulting in defective use or forgetfulness of language. — logouerotic, adj.


logophobia /lo-gә-foh-ә-ә-ә/, A persistent fear, distrust, or dislike of words. — logophobic, adj.

logoplegia /lo-h-goh-plee-jee-ә/, A paralytic condition resulting in the inability to pronounce particular words.

logorrhea /lo-gә-reә-ә/, n. Diarrhea of the mouth; excessive, often incoherent talkativeness. Cf. *garrulity*; *loquacity*.

longueur /lo-n-gwәr/, A long or boring passage, esp. in a writing. • This term originally applied to writings alone but is now extended to performing arts, including plays, music, and speeches. It almost always carries a hint of insult or disdain.

loose, adj. Of, relating to, or involving a syntactical element that is inessential to the meaning or grammatical construction <loose clause> <loose apposition>.


lurry, n. 1. Something recited by rote or delivered in a monotone; boilerplate speech. • John Milton (1608–1674), who disapproved of the Church of England’s *Book of Common Prayer*, wrote that one effect of its use was “to turn prayer into a kind of lurry.” 2. A babble of voices; a hubbub.

macaronic /makә-rәn/, adj. Using real or coined words mixed and managed from various languages; linguistically jumbled.

macrolinguistics. 1. The study of all types of human communication, verbal or symbolic. • Defined most broadly, it includes both microlinguistics and prelinguistics. Cf. *microlinguistics*; *prelinguistics*. 2. The statistical analysis of large-scale linguistic phenomena, esp. involving more than one language.

macron /mәrәn or makә-ron/, In pronunciation, a diacritical mark (‘) indicating that a vowel sound is long. • For example, the mark shows that the vowel sound in *beet* is a long ee (/bәt/). And in *cooperate*, it indicates that the identical adjacent letters are not pronounced alike (/kәʊpәrәt/). The curved mark is a breve. See DIA. CRITICAL MARK. Cf. *breve*.

main clause. See independent clause under CLAUSE.

main verb. See VERB.

malapropism /mәlә-prop-iz-әm/, A grotesque misuse of a word, often one with some similarity in sound or stress pattern to another; the word so miscued. • This sort of misuse is named for Mrs. Malaprop, a character in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s play *The Rivals* (1775), who frequently used words that sounded like the ones she meant to say, as in, “His physiog-nomy [phraseology] is so grammatical!” See CATACHRESY. See p. 577.

malediction /mәlә-dik-shәn/, A curse or imprecation; an invocation of evil.

mannerism. Constant or excessive recourse to a particular style or expression, syntactic feature, or literary treatment.

marked infinitive. See INFINITIVE.

masculine, adj. (Of a pronoun or noun) indicating that the person or animal named is male. • In English, only the personal pronoun *he*, certain nouns (such as *rooster*), and a few adjectives are masculine. Unlike in the feminine gender, masculine nouns and adjectives are not distinguished by suffixes. See GENDER. — masculine, n.

mass noun. See NOUN.

mataeology. Pointless or unproductive conversation or questioning; fruitless discourse. — mataeologist, n.

matrix clause. See independent clause under CLAUSE.

maxim. A pithy proposition or principle drawn from experience.

mechanics. Devices that lend clarity to writing, such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

meiosis /mi-o-sis/, n. Rhetoric. A figure of speech in which something’s importance is intentionally understated or implied to be less significant or substantial than it really is. • The understatement actually heightens the force of the statement. For example:

• One nuclear bomb can ruin your whole day.
• Today, my wife left me, my dog bit me, and I lost my job, so I’m feeling a little down.
• I was somewhat worried when the psychopath ran toward me with a chainsaw.

— meiotic, adj.

melioration. Linguistics. The process by which over time a word elevates...
in meaning or gains a more positive connotation, so that a negative or derogatory word takes on a positive or favorable meaning. • For example, Old English hlaford “keeper of the bread” was simplified and underwent melioration to Modern English lord. In Middle English, luxury and lasciviousness were synonyms. Today luxury means “something highly desirable but not a necessity,” and lasciviousness refers to unrestrained sexual desire. Cf. pejoration. — Also termed amelioration.

mellifluous /mi-lif-loo-əs/, adj. (Of an utterance, series of words or sentences, or voice) smoothly flowing; honey-like.

melliloquence. Pleasant-sounding speech; charming eloquence. — melliloquent, adj.

merism /mər-iz-əm/, n. Rhetoric. A type of synecdoche in which a totality is expressed by two contrasting parts <head-to-toe search> <come old and young alike>. — Also termed merismus.

metaphasis /ma-təb-ə-sis/, Rhetoric. A transitional summary that links different sections of a writing; esp., a brief summing up of what has already been covered, followed by a précis of what will follow. — metathetic, adj.

metahalluence. Language. Linguistics. Technical language used to describe or analyze an object of study, such as mathematics, philosophy, and esp. other languages. • When language is studied, it is called an object language. A meta-language may be a natural language or a formal one that uses specific terms or formal models to discuss the elements or use of an object language. For example, the English sentence "Andrew shouts" might be rendered in a formal metalanguage as "S(a),", where S = shouts and a = Andrew. When addressing a natural language that is the same as the object language (e.g., English), writers conventionally use typographical means to distinguish between the metalanguage and the object language, usually by italicizing statements in the object language or surrounding them with quotation marks. See OBJECT LANGUAGE.


metastasis /ma-təs-tə-sis/, 1. Grammar. The change of tenses, such as the use of the historical present tense. 2. Rhetoric. A sudden change of subject; an abrupt transition.

metathesis /ma-thə-sis/, n. Rhetoric. Transposition of the usual sequences of letters, syllables, or sounds of a word (e.g., asked for asked, or irrelevant for irrelev- ant). • Over time, metathesis may produce a permanent change in the language. See p. 591.

meter. 1. Poetic rhythm; esp., the technique by which such rhythm is achieved. 2. The pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in lines of poetry.

metonymy /ma-tə-ə-me/, Rhetoric. The use of a word or phrase to represent not just what it denotes but something it is closely associated with; specif., a metaphor by which something related to another thing becomes the word for that other thing. • For example, the Beltway refers to political Washington; Broadway refers to the New York theater; the Crown refers to a monarchy; gray hairs refers to old age; Wall Street refers to investments or American stock markets. — metonymic, adj. — metonym, n. See TROPE.

microlinguistics. 1. The direct study of a particular aspect of language, such as phonology, semantics, or grammar. Cf. macrolinguistics; prelinguis-tics. 2. The study of one particular linguistic system and its peculiarities. Cf. macrolinguistics.

Middle English. The English language used from about a.d. 1100 to 1500.

missive /mis-iv/, A message in writing; esp., a letter.

misword, n. An ill-advised word used harshly or angrily.

misword, vb. To express erroneously; to word badly.

mixed construction. A phrasing that fuses two or more idiomatic constructions <as much or more than>.

modal, adj. Of, relating to, or imparting grammatical mood—that is, the distinct form of the verb that expresses factuality, command, question, counterfactual assertion, etc. See MOOD.

modal auxiliary. See modal verb under VERB.

modality. 1. The condition, fact, or quality of expressing mood or of otherwise being modal. 2. A special linguistic attribute or emphasis that marks a statement in some way.

deontic modality. Modality that expresses permission or obligation <You may go> <You must go>. — Also termed intrinsic modality.

epistemic modality. Modality concerned with the truth of a proposition <You might be right> <You may be right>. — Also termed extrinsic modality.

modal verb. See VERB.

mode. See MOOD.

Modern English. The English language in use since about 1500.

modification ambiguity. See AMBIGUITY.

modifier. 1. Grammar. A qualifying word, such as an adjective or adverb. — Also termed qualifier. 2. Phonetics. A diacritical sign used with a symbol to indicate that the marked word’s sound is modified only by the symbol.

compound modifier. See phrasal adjective under ADJECTIVE.

momentaneous aspect. See ASPECT.
Glossary of Grammatical, Rhetorical, and Other Language-Related Terms

mondegreen /mahn-di-green/. A misheard lyric, saying, catchphrase, or slogan that is then repeated erroneously. • Sylvia Wright coined this word in a 1954 Harper’s Magazine article entitled “The Death of Lady Mondegreen.” She explained how, as a child, she had listened to a Scottish ballad called “The Bonny Earl of Moray,” in which one line is “They hae slain the Earl o’ Moray and laid him on the green.” She heard it as “They hae slain the Earl o’ Moray and Lady Mondegreen.” Mondgreens often arise in popular songs, such as “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and the misinterpreted reference to “Olive, the other reindeer” (“for all of the other reindeer”). Some mondegreens become widespread, though not accepted, in speech (e.g., “for all intents and purposes”). See pp. 603–04.

monogenesis /mon-oh-si-nәs/, n. The theory that all languages have a single ancestral origin. Cf. POLYGENESIS.

monoglossia /mon-oh-glab-see-ә/, n. The existence of only one language within a speech community. Cf. DIGLOSSIA; TRIGLOSSIA.

monoglot. A person who speaks and understands only one language.

monophthong /mahn-әf-thong/. A single, simple vowel sound, formed with the organs of articulation in a fixed position; a pure vowel. • An example is the /e/ sound in the word set.

monoptote /mon-әp-toht/, n. A word that has only one case; esp., in Greek or Latin, a word that occurs only in a single oblique case. • Essentially, this term is synonymous with aptote. See APTOTE; DIPTOTE; TRIPOTOTE.

monosemy /ma-әnah-sә-mee/, n. The quality of having a single meaning. • Something characterized by monosemy is unambiguous. Cf. POLYSEMY.


monotransitive, adj. (Of a verb) taking only a direct object, not an indirect one as well. Cf. DITRANSITIVE.

monotransitive verb. See VERB.

mood. The characteristic of a verb’s form that shows the speaker’s attitude, and expresses whether the action or state it denotes is a fact, command, possibility, or wish. — Also termed mode. See MODAL. Cf. ASPECT; TENSE; VOICE.

declarative mood. The normal mood of a verb, in contrast to the imperative, interrogative, and subjunctive moods.

imperative mood. The mood used to express a command, or to instruct, incite, or encourage. • Imperatives are typically uninfl ected verbs used to state something firmly <Start now>, but they are tempered when trying to be polite or show respect <Bring that file here, please>.

indicative mood. The mood used to express an idea as objective fact. interrogative mood. The mood used to show that something is a question. • Some grammarians consider this not to be a separate mood in English; they classify it as indicative.

optative mood. A mood that expresses a desire or hope. • Languages such as classical Greek have optative verb forms, but in English the subjunctive is used in expressions such as Heaven help him!

subjunctive mood. The mood that expresses an action or state not as a reality, but as a mental conception. • The subjunctive mood is not often used in modern English apart from a few expressions such as if I were you. See p. 869.

morpheme /mor-feem/. The smallest meaningful unit of a language; a word or part of a word that cannot be divided into smaller parts. • For instance, outgoing can be broken down into the preposition out, the verb go, and the suffix-ing, but none of those components can be further broken down, so they are morphemes. The word girls consists of two morphemes: girl and the plural suffix-s. But mahogany cannot be divided into smaller meaningful units. — morphemic, adj.

See BASE FORM. Cf. PHONEME.

bound morpheme. A morpheme that cannot stand alone but must be attached to another morpheme.

free morpheme. A morpheme that can occur as a stand-alone word. • Nouns such as rule and place are free morphemes.

inflectional morpheme. A morpheme that is added to a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb to change its grammatical role in some way. • Nouns have two inflectional suffixes (plural -s and possessive -‘s); verbs have four of them (-s, -ing, -ed, and -en); and some adjectives and adverbs have two (-er and -est).

morphology /mor-fahl-a-jee/, 1. Linguistics. The study of how sounds are grouped into words, and how the constituents are arranged to signal meaning; esp., the study of how words are made from morphemes. 2. The form and structure of words; word formation. — morphological, adj. Cf. ACCIDENT; SYNTAX.

morphophonemics /mor-foh-fә-nә-mәks/. Linguistics. The analysis of grammatical and phonological facts that determine the forms of phenomena. — Also termed morphophonology. See PHONEME.

morphophonology. See MORPHOPHONEMICS.

motto. A word, phrase, or concise sentence that expresses a guiding rule of life, principle, or faith, and that has been adopted by a person or group of people.

mouillé /moo-yә/, adj. (Of a consonant) sounded with the tongue touching the palate (as with /l/ and /n/).

mumpsimus. 1. A persistent adherent to an erroneous tenet or linguistic form, despite irreparable correction. • The story runs that in the Middle Ages, an old priest was saying a prayer in Latin. The word sumpsimus (= we have received) he mispronounced as mumpsimus. When corrected, he insisted that he’d been saying mumpsimus for 30 years and would not change his “old mumpsimus” for the “new sumpsimus.” In our own day, former President George W. Bush persisted in /noo-kyә-ә/ for /noo-klee-ә/ despite a deluge of corrections in the press. His pronunciational pertinacity might have earned him the title of mumpsimus. 2. An erroneous tenet or linguistic form that someone tenaciously adheres to.

mutation. 1. The gradual, systematic change of a sound in a given language. 2. The substitution or disappearance of a letter to form a new word. 3. A change of vowel sounds, esp. as influenced by other sounds in the word or neighboring words. • The chief types are consonant mutation and vowel mutation (e.g., umlaut). Mutation accounts for shifting vowel pronunciations over time, and for irregular inflections as shown in spelling (e.g., foot–feet; man–men) and heard in pronunciation (e.g., the -’s in child–children; the -o- in woman–women). See GREAT VOWEL SHIFT.

mute. adj. (Of a letter) not pronounced.

myterism. Rhetoric. Subtle mocking; a scornful gibes; an instance of sarcasm or irony. See SARCASM; IRONY.

narrowing. See SPECIALIZATION.

nasal /nә-yә-zәl/, adj. (Of a spoken sound) produced by resonating air in the nose and mouth; of, relating to, or involving a speech sound made with air exiting the nose.

needless variant. An unnecessary deviation from the standard form of
a word. • A writer or speaker who uses a needless variant may mislead the reader into believing that there is a distinction in the words. See by-form; differentiation.

tivation /ni-ga-shan/. 1. The act or an instance of making what would otherwise be an affirmative statement into a negative one.

compound negation. The negation of a compound construction using neither . . . nor.

2. A negative statement.

negative, adj. Of, relating to, or involving a clause or phrase that contains a marker for negation.

neologism /nee-a-hi-jiz-om/. A newly coined word or expression. — Also termed neology. — neologist, n. — neologistic, adj. See p. 624.

neoterism /nee-ot-a-riz-om/. The use of one or more newly invented words or phrases; the employment of a neologism. 2. A neologism itself. — neoteric, adj.

neurolinguistics. The branch of linguistics that studies the relationship between language and the structure and functioning of the human brain.

neuter gender. See gender.

neumatic. Propagandistic language consisting of counter words, new-fangled euphemisms, periphrasis, and doublespeak. • The term was coined by George Orwell in his novel 1984.

nimity (ni-mi-a-tee). The state or quality of redundancy.

nomenclature. 1. A system of names applied to some field of study. 2. A systematic listing of technical names or terms.

nominal, n. A word, phrase, or clause that is functionally equivalent to a noun. • The category embraces nouns, pronouns, noun phrases, and noun clauses. Cf. noun phrase.

nominal clause. See clause.

nominalization. The conversion of a part of speech into a nominal, as by making false into falsity, or authorize into authorization. See zombi noun under noun.

nominal phrase. See noun phrase.

nominative /nah-ma-na-tiv/, n. The case of a sentence's subject or of a noun complement that follows a linking verb. • Only personal pronouns have a distinct nominative form (e.g., the first-person pronouns in I lost my keys again and that's what we wanted). — Also termed subjective.

nominative absolute. A phrase containing a subject and a participle that adverbially modifies the main clause of a sentence and has no other grammatical relation to that clause. • A nominative absolute is not part of the sentence it qualifies by time, condition, cause, or circumstance. In essence, the nominative absolute (or absolute phrase) is a parenthetical comment (e.g., Dinner having fizzled, we sat and watched television. Or: He being a friend of mine, I shouldn't comment publicly on his actions). See absolute construction.

nominative case. n. See case.

non-word. A word invented "for the nonce," that is, for one occasion only. • The first editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, James A.H. Murray (1837–1915), invented this expression for use in the Dictionary's entries. There are related terms such as nonce-borrowing (= a word borrowed from a foreign language only for one occasion), nonce-compound, nonce-expression, and nonce-meaning.

noncomparative adjective. See adjective.

noncount noun. See mass noun under noun.

nondefining relative clause. See nonrestrictive relative clause under clause.

nonfinite verb. See infinitive.

nongradable adjective. See incomparable adjective under adjective.

nonrestrictive, adj. (Of the modifier of a noun or phrase) adding information that is parenthetical but does not help identify the referent. • For example, in The tents, which are on aisle 3, are on sale, the clause which are on aisle 3 is nonrestrictive because it does not identify which tents are on sale—presumably they all are. Similarly, in Orrin Hatch, the Utah senator, spoke next, the phrase the Utah senator is not needed to identify the person named, so it is a nonrestrictive appositive. Nonrestrictive matter is always set off from the rest of the sentence by commas. Cf. restrictive.

nonrestrictive relative clause. See clause.

nonsense. See sentence.

non sequitur. 1. An absurd statement that produces a comic effect; esp., a statement or thought that does not logically follow what was just said. • In social situations, a non sequitur may indicate a misunderstanding or lack of attention, or it may be an effort to get away from an uncomfortable subject. 2. A sudden, illogical turn in the dialogue or plot. • Would-be world-famous author Snoopy, the creation of Charles Schulz (1922–2000), committed non sequiturs repeatedly in his attempts at writing: "It was a dark and stormy night. Suddenly, a shot rang out! A door slammed. The maid screamed. Suddenly, a pirate ship appeared on the horizon! While millions of people were starving, the king lived in luxury. Meanwhile, on a small farm in Kansas, a boy was growing up." 3. A fallacious argument in which the conclusion does not follow from the premise or premises. • A classic example is the argument, "If A, then B. B is true. So A is true." But the conclusion is not necessarily related to the premises. For instance, "Dogs don't drink beer. I don't drink beer. Therefore, I am a dog." This doesn't exclude the possibility that the speaker is a human. Similarly, an if-then statement may be a non sequitur: "If I see four dachshunds today, then I'll have good luck tomorrow." Cf. anacoluthon.

nonstandard, adj. (Of usage) not found in educated speech or writing.

nonstandard English. Informal English not used for educated speech or writing; colloquial English or dialects. See dialect. Cf. standard English.

non-U, adj. Of, relating to, or involving language characteristically used by people who are neither in the upper social echelon nor among the better-educated in society. Cf. U.

nonverbal, adj. Without the use of words.

nonword. 1. A word that is not recorded in most major dictionaries <converse>. 2. A word that, even though it may be recorded in some dictionaries, is regarded by many as illegitimate because of its spurious origins <irregardless>. • Nonwords arise from many sources. They may be back-formations <orientate>, malapropisms <unmercilessly>, common misspellings <forebearance>, or neologisms <jumblious>. Some move out of their shadowy existence if they prove to be useful or at least popular (e.g., donate, stick-to-it-iveness). But there is no sure way to tell whether a nonword will fade away or become standard. The term nonword itself was first coined in the 1890s and became standard only in the 1960s. See p. 630.

normative, adj. Concerned with the accepted standards or norms of usage.

normative grammar. See prescriptive grammar.

nosism. 1. An individual's use of the word we when speaking of or for himself or herself. 2. The self-centered attitude of a group of people. • This is the collective form of egotism.

noun. A word that names something, whether abstract (intangible) or concrete (tangible).

abstract noun. A noun referring to something that has no physical existence, such as a feeling, quality,
concept, or state of being. • Examples of abstract nouns are education, fortune, love, quondary, and shamelessness. Although an abstract noun is intangible, it may be countable <noises> <meetings> or uncountable <music> <happiness>. Sometimes the meaning of an abstract noun changes from singular to plural <kindness–kindnesses>. Cf. concrete noun.

**agent noun.** A noun that denotes a person who performs some action. • Agent nouns often have the suffix -er <traveler> or -or <collector>.

**animate noun.** A noun that refers to an animal or human.

**attributive noun.** A noun functioning as a modifier, usu. as an adjective. • An attributive noun may be a word or a noun phrase. When it is a person who performs some action. A noun or noun phrase that follows the verb and receives the action of a verb. • Recipient nouns often have the suffix -ee <honoree>.

**collective noun.** A noun that names a group of people, animals, objects, or concepts; a noun that is grammatically singular but has a plural sense. • Some collective nouns may be singular or plural. You can usually tell which by looking at how the members of the group behave. If they act in unison with one another, then the collective noun is singular <The jury retires to deliberate>. But if the members behave as individuals, then the noun is plural <The jury disagree on a verdict and have told the judge they are deadlocked>. In American English, some collective nouns have distinct singular and plural forms (e.g., team and teams) and the accompanying verbs match them in number (e.g., the team is and the teams are). In British English, you’ll often hear collective nouns, such as team, treated as plural <The team are playing very well today>. See pp. 179–80.

**common noun.** A general name for a person, place, or thing, capitalized only under certain circumstances, as when it begins a sentence or appears in a title. • Common nouns include girl, police officer, teenager (people); office building, restaurant (places); and microwave, tractor (things). A noun may function as a common noun when used in a general sense <times> <manor> and a proper noun when used for something specific <The Times> <Manor House Realty>. Common nouns ordinarily have singular and plural forms and are used with articles. Cf. proper noun.

**compound noun.** Two or more words that are joined (or, sometimes, hyphenated) to make a single noun <boyfriend> <landowner> <airplane>.

**concrete noun.** A noun referring to a person or thing that is perceptible through at least one of the five physical senses. Cf. abstract noun.

**count noun.** A noun that denotes an item that can be counted. • Count nouns have both singular and plural forms, usually made by adding -s or -es. In the plural, they frequently appear in constructions such as two — several —, and a large number of —. Cf. mass noun.

**inanimate noun.** A noun that refers to neither an animal nor a human.

**mass noun.** A noun that denotes an item that cannot be individually counted. • Examples: meat, sugar, water. Some mass nouns can also be count nouns on occasion <choose only the best meats>. But mass nouns do not usually have a plural form. — Also termed noncount noun; uncountable noun. Cf. count noun.

**noncount noun.** See mass noun.

**proper noun.** The name of a specific person, place, or thing, always written with a capital letter. • Proper nouns include Jean Valjean (character); Jamaica, Abacus Restaurant (places); and the Eiffel Tower, Monday, the Fourth of July (things). The names of holidays, days of the week and months, historical documents, organizations, religions, and the like are all proper nouns. — Also termed proper name. Cf. common noun.

**recipient noun.** A noun that denotes a person who receives something or action, or for whom something is done. • Recipient nouns often have the suffix -ee <honoree>.

**zombie noun.** A noun formed from a verb by addition of a suffix such as -ance, -ity, or -tion <performance–perform> <realization–realize>. • Such nouns often require prepositional phrases to elicit their meaning, and can result in wordiness. Recasting the sentence to use the simple verb is a good solution. — Also termed nominalization; buried verb.

**noun adjunct.** See attributive noun under noun.

**noun-banging.** See nouniness.

**noun clause.** A clause that functions as a noun or noun phrase <When the car was dented is irrelevant>. Cf. nominal.

**object noun clause.** A noun clause that plays the role of direct object in a sentence.

**subject noun clause.** A noun clause that plays the role of subject in a sentence.

**noun-equivalent.** See substantive.

**nouniness.** The excessive use of nouns, noun phrases, and noun clauses, esp. in close succession. — Also termed noun plague; noun-banging. See p. 635.

**noun phrase.** A phrase with a noun as its head; a noun cluster that may include a determiner <the goat> and one or more adjectives <an old barn>. — Also termed nominal phrase. Cf. nominal.

**noun plague.** See nouniness.

**number.** A quality of a word that shows whether one object or more than one object is referred to; the grammatical marking of quantity. • In English, the two numbers are singular and plural.

**numeric adverb.** See adverb.

**nuncipative /nuːnsɪˈpætɪv/ adj.** (Of a will) spoken as opposed to written; oral.

**obelize /əbəlɪz/ vb. 1.** To mark (part of a text) with an obelus (†) or numeric adverb.

**oboe /ˈoʊboʊ/ n.** A woodwind instrument similar to the clarinet, but with a lighter tone.

**object.** A word denoting either (1) the person or thing acted on by a transitive verb in the active voice <The balloon carried a pilot and a passenger> (pilot and passenger are objective) or (2) the person or thing related to another element by a connective, such as a preposition <Place the slide under the microscope> (under is a preposition, microscope is objective). • Objects may be direct or indirect.

**cognate object.** An object that is derivationally related to the verb <Sing a song> <Die an untimely death>.

**direct object.** The noun or noun phrase that receives the action of a transitive verb or shows the result of that action <Brian enjoys golf>.

• It answers the question What? or Whom? after an action verb.

**indirect object.** The noun or noun phrase representing the person or thing with reference to which the action of a ditransitive verb is performed; the noun or noun phrase that follows the verb and receives the action. • It answers the question To whom? or For whom? In English, an indirect object usually comes between the verb and the direct object. You can paraphrase it as the object of a preposition, often to or for (e.g., He sent me a book can be paraphrased as He sent a book to me). Although there can be a direct object without an indirect object, there must always be a direct object.
if there is an indirect object. Indirect objects are usually found with verbs such as brought, give, offer, show, and take.

**object of a preposition.** The noun or noun phrase that follows a preposition in a prepositional phrase.

**retained object.** An object that continues to function as an object when a passive sentence is rewritten in active voice. • For example, in the passive-voice sentence He was given money by many trusting people and the active-voice rewrite Many trusting people gave him money, money is the direct object. The passive-voice sentence a gold watch was given to my father will have two objects when rewritten in active voice, The company gave my father a gold watch, but only one, my father, is a retained object. In the passive sentence, it was the object of a preposition. In the active sentence, it is an indirect object.

**object complement.** See complement.

**objective /əb-jektɪv/ , adj.** (Of a word or expression) meaning something, especially something that affects another element in a sentence.

**object noun clause.** A noun clause that is the object of a preposition. It is retained when the preposition is expressed.

**object language.** The language that is being described, the system that a word has to other words (e.g., who–whom the nominative form (i.e., I–me who–whom the accusative case (i.e., I–me he–him she–her, we–us, they–them, and who–whom). Apart from those words, syntax determines the relationship that a word has to other words (e.g., in the apple fell from the tree, the word tree is the object of the preposition from, so [in the view of some traditional grammarians] it is in the objective case). Some grammarians call this the **accusative case.**

**objective case.** See case.

**object language. Linguistics.** A language that is being described, analyzed, or discussed. See metalanguage.

**object noun clause.** See noun clause.

**object of a preposition.** See object.

**obligative /əb-lɪg-ə-tɪv/ , adj.** (Of a modal auxiliary) expressing a necessity or requirement (as with must). Cf. permissive.

**oblique case.** See case.

**obmutescence / ɒb-ˈmyoo-ˌtes-ən/ , n.** The loss of the ability to speak. Cf. aphonia. 2. Taciturnity; muteness.

**obnubilation /əb-nʌb-ə-ˈlɪ-ʃən/ , n.** The blouding of concepts or the act of making something obscure or the indistinct. — obnubilate, vb.

**obsolescent, adj.** (Of a word or expression) gradually disappearing; becoming obsolete.

**obsolete, adj.** (Of a word or expression) no longer used; out of date.

**occupatio /əb-kə-ˈpay-ʃən-ə/ , n.** See paralipsis.

**octosyllabic /ək-tə-ˈsɪl-ə-bəl/ , n.** A line or word of eight syllables. — octosyllabically /ək-tə-ˈsɪl-ə-bə-lik/ , adj.

**officialis.** The inflated, pompous, obscure language considered typical of bureaucrats’ work, esp. in official documents and letters. • With effort, officialese can usually be translated into plain English. For instance, “The aforementioned office will, in its economic treatment, cease and terminate the distribution of moneys commencing as from May 1, 2007” becomes “Our office will stop making payments on May 1, 2007.” See plain English. See p. 648.

**okina /oʊ-ke-ə-nəl/ , n.** A diacritical mark resembling a right-facing apostrophe (‘), used in the Hawaiian language to indicate a glottal stop or a consonant. • In Hawaiian, the name of the island group (and the biggest island) is sometimes written Hawai’i. See diacritical mark; glottal stop.

**Old English.** The Anglo-Saxon language used in England from around A.D. 450 to 1100. • Unlike Middle English, Old English had a fully inflected grammar and had relatively few words borrowed from Latin and French. — Also termed Anglo-Saxon.

**oligosyllabic /ə-lə-gə-ˈsɪl-ə-bəl/ , adj.** (Of a word or expression) containing a small number of syllables. — oligosyllabically /ə-lə-gə-ˈsɪl-ə-bə-lik/ , adv.


**onomatopoeic, adj.** Of, relating to, or involving the sound it represents. • For example, buzz approximates the sound made by a flying insect, and quack is similar to a duck’s voice. Other examples are belch, crack, fizzle, flutter, meow, plop, screech, smash, splash, squish, whom, and zoom. 2. The use of a word whose sound suggests its sense. Cf. synaesthesia. — onomatopoeically, adv.

**onomatopoetic, adj.** open syllable. See syllable.

**operator.** 1. A grammatical element, such as a negative or determiner, that affects another element in a sentence.

2. The first auxiliary verb in a verb phrase when the verb can be placed in front of the subject in order to change the mood of the sentence from declarative to interrogative (e.g., Dan has been calling becomes Has Dan been calling?).

**optative /əp-tə-tɪv/ , adj.** (Of a verbal mood) expressing a hope or wish, esp. one that is realizable <may the best team win>.

**optative mood.** See mood.

**oracy /ər-ə-si/ , n.** 1. Proficiency in speech; the ability to express oneself fluently and appropriately in speech.

• Linguists have used this term since the mid-1960s. 2. The oral transmission of information, esp. of cultural traditions and the like.

**oral, adj.** 1. Of, relating to, or involving the mouth. 2. Of, relating to, or involving the spoken word. 3. Of, relating to, or involving a speech sound made with no air exiting through the nose.

**oratio obliqua /ər-ə-ˈreɪ-ə-si/ , or -ray-ə-si/ , n.** See indirect discourse under discourse.

**oratio recta /ər-ə-ˈreɪ-tə/ , or -ray-tə/ , n.** See direct discourse under discourse.

**ordinal number.** A number that denotes a position in a series rather than a quantity of things (e.g., first; second; third). • Ordinal numbers may function as adjectives (e.g., first place) or nouns (e.g., Eustace is second). Cf. cardinal number.

**orismology /ər-ɪz-ə-ˈmɒl-ə/ , n.** 1. Technical terminology. 2. The science of defining, esp. technical terms; lexicography for one or more technical fields. — orisologic, adj.

**orthoepeia /ər-θə-ˌpɪ-ə-ə/ , n.** 1. Correct or accepted pronunciation; the art of pronouncing words correctly. Cf. cacoepeia. 2. The field of grammar concerned with pronunciation; specif., the study of how a writing or spelling system relates to the pronunciation of a language.

**orthography /ər-θə-ˈgrɒ-fɪ-ə/ , n.** 1. The field of grammar that focuses on letters and spelling; the study of spelling and how letters are combined to represent sounds. 2. The collective methods by which a language is conventionally reduced to its written form. 3. The set of conventions that account for correct spelling.

**orthophony /ər-θə-ˌfɒ-ni-ə/ , n.** Correct pronunciation and articulation.

**otosis /ət-ə-sɪs/ , n.** The alteration or misuse of a word resulting from an
erroneous impression of its sound. • Otosis was originally at work in the misdirecting of home in (what homing pigeons do) as the increasingly widespread but erroneous home in.

2. The mishearing of spoken sounds.

overgeneralization. See generalization.

oxymoron /ok-si-mor-on/. 1. A pairing of contradictory or incongruous words; a paradoxical phrasing, usu. in two words <living death> <clinging aloof>. 2. Rhetoric. A paradox produced by juxtaposing words that seem contradictory <You must be cruel to be kind>. See p. 666.


paradox. 1. A seemingly self-contradictory statement or belief; a seemingly absurd expression <never less alone than when alone>. 2. Rhetoric. A figure of speech used to teach a lesson or evoke an impression by an unexpected or surprising turn of expression. 3. A puzzling fact, observation, or person.

paragone /pa-ra-goh-je/. The addition of a sound or syllable at the end of a word <idea → idear> <unbeknown → unbeknownst>. • This term embraces not just vulgarisms such as once, but also more legitimate variations such as amongst for among. — Also termed epithesis. — paragogic, adj.

paraphrase. A group of sentences in which a single topic is developed; a sequence of structurally related sentences. • A paragraph is traditionally begun on a new line, with a space between the first word from the margin. Ideally, a paragraph is a unified statement of a particular point in the analysis or narrative.

paraphrase, vb. To use one’s own words to express the substance of what another writer or speaker has said (e.g., To paraphrase Shakespeare, no matter what you call a rose, it still smells nice).

paraphrastic. See freudian slip & paraphrase.

paraphrase, /pa-ra-prak-sis/. A moment of faulty memory, esp. as evidenced by a slip of the tongue. — Also termed paraphraxia. Pl. paraphrases.

paraprodsokian /pa-ra-pros-dohk-ee-an/. An unexpected linguistic shift at the end of a sentence, phrase, or passage, esp. one that suddenly changes the reader’s interpretation of the first part. • The device is frequently used for comedic or dramatic effect. Examples:

- “I don’t belong to an organized political party. I’m a Democrat.” (Will Rogers)
- “Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana.” (Groucho Marx)
- “War doesn’t determine who is right—only who is left.” (Anon.)

parasitic vowel. See SVARABHAKTI vowel.

parasyneosis /pa-ra-sin-a-sis/. The misconception of a word that results in a faulty form (as when home in [originally based on what homing pigeons do] becomes, through error, hone in).

parasynethon /pa-ra-sin-tha-tahn/. A derivative word that consists of a root compounded with a particle <bylaws> <downtrodden> <uplifting>.

parataxis /pa-ra-tak-sis/. Rhetoric. The coordination of successive, equal clauses without expressly showing
their syntactic relationship, so that the reader must infer how they are related. <I’m ready; let’s go>. Cf. HYPOSTATAXIS.

— paratactic, adj.

parathesis /pa-rath-ә-sis/. Apposition; the placement of a word or phrase beside another with which it is syntactically parallel <my brother the flutist>. — parathetic /pair-ә-thә-tik/, adj. See apposition.

paregmenon /pa-reg-mә-nahn/, n. Rhetoric. The use of a word in the same construction as another to which the first is cognate <die a death> <the victor’s victory>.

parembole /pa-rem-bә-lee/. Rhetoric. An inserted phrase that modifies or explains the thought of a sentence. • A parembole differs from a parenthesis by having a more integral connection with the context. — Also termed parempiosis.

parenthesis. 1. A word, phrase, clause, or sentence inserted as an explanation or afterthought; an aside inserted into a sentence or paragraph. • In writing, it is usually set off by commas, em dashes, or the curved brackets known as “parentheses” (see sense 2). 2. A punctuation mark that sets off such a word, phrase, clause, or sentence—[( ] as the opening mark and [ )] as the closing one.

paresis /pa-reec-sas or pa-ra-./. See elision.


parison /pa-ri-son/, n. 1. An even balance of clauses, words, syllables, or other elements in a sentence. 2. A clause that balances another, as in an antithesis.

parlance. A manner of speaking or of using words, esp. within a particular social or professional group. • Parlance is usually combined with an adjective such as common, film, legal, medical, military, or vulgar.

parole. Linguistics. The actual use of language by speakers; written or spoken utterance. • Parole depends on the existence of a language and its systematic principles, but is not a system itself. Cf. language.

paronomology /pa-ra-mahl-ә-jeel/, n. Rhetoric. The concession of minor points in a debate as a way of enhancing one’s credibility and strengthening one’s position. — Also termed paromologia.

paronomasia /pa-ra-noh-may-zhal/. Rhetoric. The deliberate and humorous use of the double meanings of words and phrases; esp., a play on words in which the similarity of sound is a prominent characteristic; a pun <The best of all acids is assiduity>. — Also termed paronomy. — paronomastic, adj.

paronym /pa-ra-nim/. 1. A derived word having but a slight change in form from one in another language; esp., a word formed by adapting a foreign word (e.g., civil from Latin civilis, or egalité from French égalité). 2. A word derived from another in the same language (e.g., analytical from analysis, or parasitic from parasite).

3. Homophone. — paronomalous, adj.

paronym /pa-ron-ә-mee/, n. 1. The introduction of a word into a language by borrowing from another language and slightly changing it. 2. The relationship between cognate words with related meanings.

paronomasia.

parothia /pa-reec-zha/, n. 1. Candor and frankness; bold outspokenness. 2. The practice or an instance of seeking permission to be boldly outspoken.

parroty /pa-ra-tree/, n. The mindless repetition of others’ words or sayings; psittacism.

parse, vb. 1. v.t. To determine the parts of speech of and the relationship between (the individual parts of a sentence). 2. v.t. To describe (a word or phrase) by classifying its part of speech, its composition, its inflection, and its relation to other words in the sentence. 3. v.i. (Of a sentence) to meet the standards of good grammar.

parsing. 1. The act or process of separating out the elements of a sentence so that the relationships between them can be analyzed. 2. The grammatical analysis and description of a word, showing what part of speech it is and its relation to other words.

pars pro toto. See synecdoche.

participle phrase. See phrase.

participial preposition. See preposition.

participle. A verb form inflected for perfective aspect (for past participles such as written, sold, or shrunk) or progressive aspect (for present participles such as carrying, flying, or lecturing); esp., a word derived from a verb but having characteristics of both a verb and an adjective. • English participles are the verb forms used with a be-verb <am writing> or a form of have <had written>. A participle functions as an adjective when it modifies a noun or pronoun <walking stick>. — Also termed gerundive. See also progressive aspect under aspect.

dangling participle. A participle that is not properly connected to the sentence’s subject. Seeing is a dangling participle in seeing that there was a traffic jam ahead, the taxi turned left because seeing logically cannot refer to taxi; the taxi’s driver did the seeing. — Also termed dangler, misrelated participle.

fused participle. A gerund used after a noun or noun phrase that would more properly be a possessive adjective. • In The author having full rights to the work means you must ask the author for permission, the participle having is fused with the preceding noun to form the subject the author having. Traditional grammarians prefer The author’s having full rights to the work means . . . . See p. 419.

misrelated participle. See dangling participle.

past participle. A nonfinite verb form ending in -ed, -en, or -t and used in verb phrases <has believed> <have taken> <has wept> to signal a perfective aspect. • Although past participles are often part of a verb phrase, they may also function adjectivally <proven fact> <used books>.

present participle. A nonfinite verb form ending in -ing and used in verb phrases to signal the progressive aspect <be + -ing> <was browsing> <am shopping>. • Although present participles are often part of a verb phrase, they may also function adjectivally <prevaling notions> <unremitting violence>.

particle. A word or wordlike element that cannot be inflected, has little meaning, and serves other functions, usu. as an affix or part of a phrasal verb. In English, particles include prepositions used in phrasal verbs (as in take in, take off, take over, and take up); a few spatial adverbs (such as aback, ahead, aside, away, back, in front); prefixes such as un- (as in unremorseful); and suffixes such as -ness (as in fineness).

partitive /pahr-ta-tiv/, adj. Setting off or referring to a particular part of a whole (e.g., some money) or only some portion of a collection (e.g., most voters). • The so-called partitive genitive indicates the whole of which the head of the construction is a part <a slice of bread> <a piece of pie>.

part of speech. One of a class of words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and so on) that is distinguished by its normal function in a sentence. • Grammarians have traditionally recognized eight parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections. The traditional definitions of these classes are based sometimes on meaning, sometimes on function or
use. Modern linguists have therefore tended to abandon these eight labels in favor of other labels more theoretically "pure." — Also termed word class; lexical category.


pasilaly /pas-i-lal-ee/, n. An international system of speaking; a universal spoken language.

passive voice. The voice that makes the recipient of the verb's action the subject of the verb. • Compare the tree was knocked down by the truck (passive voice: the tree didn't knock but was the recipient of action) with the truck knocked down the tree (active voice: the truck was doing the knocking). See pp. 676–77.

full passive. A passive-voice construction that includes the doer of the action.

truncated passive. A passive-voice construction that omits the doer of the action.

past participle. See participle.

past-perfect tense. See tense.

past tense. See tense.

pathopeia /pa-tha-peer-ee-a/, n. 1. A speaker's or writer's arousing of an audience's or reader's emotions. 2. A passage designed to arouse listeners' or readers' emotions. — Also spelled pathoepia.

patient. Whatever is denoted by the word that is directly affected by the action of a verb (e.g., the object of a transitive verb).

patois /pa-toh-twah/, n. 1. A regional dialect that differs markedly from the standard language. See dialect. Cf. standard English. 2. The jargon of a particular age group, profession, or other discrete and insular group.

patrial /pay-tree-ah/, n. A noun derived from a country's name and denoting an inhabitant of that country <American> <Iraqi>. — patrial, adj.

patter. 1. Glib, rapid talk. 2. Illiterate chatter or gossip.

pedant /ped-ant/, n. Someone who makes an ostentatious display of learning, esp. of superficial erudition. — pedantic, adj.

pedantry /ped-an-tree-ee/, 1. An excessive display of or reverence for learning, usu. characterized by close attention to details, however trivial. 2. An instance of pedantic behavior or a pedantic form of expression. — Also termed pedanticism.

pejoration /pej-ah-ray-shun/. A change in the meaning of a word from one that is positive or neutral to one that is negative or borders on the negative. • For example, notorious once meant "widely known" and implied nothing about reputation, but now it means "infamous." Cf. melioration.

pejorative, n. A linguistic form, such as a word or morpheme, that expresses disparagement. — pejorative, adj.


penult /pen-ahlt/. A word's next-to-last syllable.

perfective aspect. See perfect aspect.

perfect tense. See present-perfect tense under tense.

pericope /pa-ri-keep/, n. An extract or selection from a book, esp. a passage from the Bible. — pericopal /per-i-koh-pal/, adj.

perigia /per-i-ah-jeel-ah/, n. The use of ornate, embellished language to discuss a commonplace thing; pompous, bombastic language. Cf. euphuism; gongorism.

period. 1. The full stop that marks the end of a sentence. 2. A grammatically complete sentence. 3. A paragraph; a series of sentences that make up a unit of thought.

period-dots. See ellipsis (2).

periodic sentence. Rhetoric. A sentence in which a complete thought is not expressed until the main clause and other rhetorical balancing devices are all read. • By using the opening clauses to give context and delay, the speaker slowly builds to a climax.

periphrasis /pa-ri-fris-ee-ee/, 1. Rhetoric. The use of a roundabout expression in place of a direct one; circumlocution <an elongated yellow fruit = banana>. 2. Grammar. A phrase used to express what might otherwise be expressed in one inflected word (e.g., did go = went; more tight = tighter). — periphrastic /pa-ri-fris-tik/, adj. See p. 684.

periphrastic comparative. See comparative.

perissology /per-i-sahl-ee/, n. The use of more words than necessary; superfluity of expression; pleonasm.

perlocution /per-loh-kuh-shun/, n. Speech or writing intended to persuade or convince; language designed to bring about an action not itself constituting that action. Cf. illocution.

perlocutionary, adj. Linguistics. Of or designating an act of speech or writing intended to produce an effect on the audience, such as persuading, convincing, inspiring, scaring, insulting, or motivating. • This word appears most frequently in the term perlocutionary act.

permissive. (Of a modal auxiliary) expressing permission or exhortation (as with may or should). Cf. obligative.

perorate /par-ah-rayt/, vb. 1. To sum up; to conclude. 2. To make a long, elaborate speech in a formal and dignified manner; to harangue grandiloquently. — peroration, n.

persiflage /par-say-flahzh/, n. Banter that is a mixture of frivolity and mockery, sometimes sardonic or contemptuous in tone. Cf. badinage.

person. A characteristic of a noun or pronoun that identifies it as the speaker (first person), the thing spoken to (second person), or the thing spoken of (third person). • In English, I (singular) and we (plural) are the first-person pronouns; you (singular and plural) is the second-person pronoun; and he, she, and it (singular) and they (plural) are the third-person pronouns. See also concord.

personal pronoun. See pronoun.

personification. Rhetoric. The representation of an object, esp. an inanimate one, or an idea as having a personality or human attributes. • Examples:

• Sir Walter Raleigh (1552–1618) referred to flowers as "you pretty daughters of the earth and sun."

• The Pyramids, doting with age, have forgotten the names of their founders. (Thomas Fuller [1608–1661])

• England expects every man to do his duty. (Lord Horatio Nelson [1758–1805])

— Also termed prosopopeia.

perspicacity /per-spuh-kyoo-ee/, n. Clearness of expression or style; freedom from obscurity, ambiguity, and undue complexity; lucidity. — perspicuous /per-spuh-koo-was/, adj.

phatic /fat-ik/, adj. Of, relating to, or involving communication used for polite social interaction rather than to elicit or convey information; characterized by small talk.

phatic exchange. A rudimentary, superficial conversation made only for general purposes of social interaction and not for literal meaning (e.g., Hey. How's it going? Great. And you? Fine, thanks. Nice weather. Yeah. Have a great day!).

philologaster /fi-loh-lay-stur/, n. An inept or blundering philologist.

philology /fi-loh-je/, 1. The study of literature from many points of view, including metaphor, criticism, grammar, etymology, and the like. 2. The study of language apart from its literature. 3. The love of learning and literature.
phoneme /ˈfɔh-ˌnɛm/. The smallest unit of sound in a language. • Phonemes are represented in writing by single letters for many consonants, such as p in pot and rip. See allophone; consonant; morphophonemics.

phonemics /ˈfɔh-ˌnɛˈmɪks/. Linguistics. The study of a language's sound system, focusing on analyzing and classifying the language's phonemes.

phonetic, adj. Representing speech sounds.

phonetics. Linguistics. The study of the properties of speech sounds, how they are made by the human voice, how they are combined with one another, and the acoustic effect that they produce. — phonetician, n.

phonocentrism /ˈfɔh-nə-sen-triz-əm/, n. A bias in favor of speech over writing in linguistic analysis; the view that the spoken language is paramount over the written language. • This view had its most prominent origins in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). — phonocentric, adj.

phonology /ˈfən-ə-lə-je/. Linguistics. The study of the sound structure of a language; specifically, the study of the sounds found in any one language or group of related languages. — phonological, adj.

phonotactics, n. 1. The branch of linguistics that studies the rules for phoneme sequences in a language or in languages generally. 2. The rules themselves.

phrasal /ˈfræl-əl/, adj. Of, relating to, or consisting of a phrase. • The word dates from the mid-19th century. Cf. clausal.

phrasal adjective. See adjective.

phrasal preposition. See preposition.

phrasal verb. See verb.

phrase. A combination of words that make sense but do not make a complete sentence; in modern linguistics, a constituent that consists of a single word (the "head") plus all its modifiers. Cf. clause; word.

adjective phrase. 1. A prepositional phrase that functions as an adjective, qualifying a noun <the ambassador from Brazil>. 2. A phrase with an adjective as its head <My teddy bear is afraid of the dark> (the adjective phrase being afraid of the dark). 3. Loosely, a phrasal adjective. See phrasal adjective under adjective.

adverbial phrase. Two or more words in a sentence jointly having the force of an adverb <They do that work every day> <By the way, he was not found guilty>.

gerundive phrase. A noun phrase with the gerund as its head. — Also termed gerundive phrase.

infinitive phrase. A noun phrase with an infinitive as its head. • An infinitive phrase may be either (1) an infinitive and its accompanying complements or adverbs <to strike a bargain> <to think deeply> or (2) a sequence such as to be tapped, to be tapping, to have been tapped, or to have been tapping.

participial phrase. A phrase consisting of a participle and a modifier or complement and functioning as an adjective. • The phrase may appear before or after the subject. In The monarch butterflies migrating from Mexico look fragile but are quite hardy, the participial phrase migrating from Mexico modifies the subject, monarch butterflies. Likewise, hiding behind the curtains modifies the subject burglar in Hiding behind the curtains, the burglar planned his next move. A participial phrase may also be appositive: The lecture, delivered as a favor to the president, drew an enthusiastic audience.

prepositional phrase. A constituent that consists of a preposition followed by a noun phrase.

verb phrase. A phrase composed of the main verb plus the complement, objects, and adverbs. • In I bought her a new necklace, I is the subject and the other words make up the verb phrase.

phrasemonger. 1. A person who seeks to impress others by coining or using grandiose phrases, usu. to excess. 2. Someone who engages in underhanded sloganeering in a way calculated to mislead. Cf. wordmonger.

pictogram. A character that represents an idea or object independently of words, as with ancient cave paintings. — Also termed pictograph. Cf. logogram; ideogram.

pictograph. See pictogram.

pidgin /ˈpɪd-i̯-nj/. n. A language developed from elements of dissimilar languages (e.g., English and Tagalog) and using a simplified grammatical form so that people without a common language may communicate. • The vocabulary is usually limited. A pidgin language may be local (in the sense that it has elements of the local language), but it is not a native language; it is a product of contact between speakers of different languages. (Cf. creole.) The word pidgin is a corruption of the Chinese word for "business." One of the first recorded pidgins was an amalgam of English and Chinese words arranged according to Chinese syntax and used to conduct trade.

pied-piping, n. The habit or convention of avoiding a terminal preposition by putting it right before the relative or interrogative pronoun that it relates to (or, to illustrate the habit itself, the relative or interrogative pronoun to which it relates). • The term was first used in J.R. Ross's 1967 Ph.D. dissertation at MIT and since has appeared in many other linguistic contexts. The allusion, of course, is to the way charmed rats follow the piper in the fairy tale.

pilcrow /ˈpɪl-kroʊ/. n. A paragraph marker (¶).

pitch, n. The high or low tone of a spoken sound produced by the vibrational frequency of the vocal cords; spoken stress. See intonation.

pithy, adj. Stylistically concentrated in force and energy.

pivot-pun. A pun that implies one meaning with the words preceding it, another with the words following it. • The term originated to denote a device in classical Japanese poetry.

pivot word. 1. A word central to the meaning or syntax of a sentence or paragraph. 2. The word on which a pivot-pun turns. See pivot-pun.

plain English. Straightforward, simple, easy-to-understand English. • Although few people would seriously wish someone a Jubilant Natal Anniversary instead of Happy Birthday, many writers seem to fear that they won't appear intelligent unless they routinely use complex language. In their view, the bigger and more obscure the words, the more convoluted the statement, the better the impact. In fact, writers who express their ideas in plain English tend to be more highly regarded than those who don't. There are four reasons for this. First, clear writing reflects clear thinking. And clear thinking means understanding what you intend to write about. If you don't have a clear idea, your prose will be obscure; so will its meaning. Second, plain English is easy to read and understand quickly. It makes the reader feel smart. Third, plain English reflects a greater intellect because using it requires more
brainwork. Albert Einstein once said that his goal in stating an idea was to make it as simple as possible but no simpler. He also said: “Most of the fundamental ideas of science are essentially simple, and may, as a rule, be expressed in a language comprehensible to everyone.” Yet few achieve that type of expression. Fourth, using plain English marks a writer as a professional whose subject is approachable by all readers, specialists or not. Complication and obscurity often reflect insecurity on the part of the writer or speaker. See pp. 697–98.

**plain infinitive.** See **inFINITIVE.**

**plain language.** 1. A simple, direct style of speech or writing. 2. The expertise involved in preparing documents in clear, accessible language that accurately embodies the intended sense.

**platitude.** A vapid truism; a statement that is dully predictable or insipidly commonplace. — **platitudeous,** adj.

**pleonasm** /plee-ə-naz-am/. **Rhetoric.** The use of more words than necessary to express an idea; a superfluity of words (e.g., continues even today to remain obstinate for remains obstinate). • Although pleonasm may be used for effect, they are frequently produced through ignorance. In would you repeat that again, please? again is unnecessary. And since your ears are permanently attached, ears pierced while you wait! states the obvious. Cf. **tautology; periphrasis.** — **pleonastic,** adj.

**pleonphony** /plee-ə-nof-ə-nee/, n. Vowel epanthema in which the inserted vowel sound is the same as that of the preceding syllable (as when substantive is pronounced /sab-sto-na-tiv/, with a superfluous schwa sound in the penultimate syllable). See **epenthesis.** Cf. **anaptysis.**

**ploce** /ploh-seel/. **Emphatic repetition of a word, esp. with the sense of conveying some special connotation.** Cf. **epizeuxis; paliloogy; symploce.**

**pluperfect tense** /plooor-por-fik/. See **past-perfect tense** under TENSE.

**plural,** n. & adj. The inflectional form of a word denoting more than one person or thing. See pp. 702–06.

**plurale tantum** /ploo-ə-ray-lee tan-tam/, n. A noun that in a particular sense is invariably plural in form <clothes> <riches> <scissors> <thanks>. Cf. **singularare tantum.**

**plurisyllable** /ploor-ə-sil-ə-bal/, n. A line or word of more than one syllable. — **plurisyllabic** /ploor-ə-sil-ə-lab-ik/, adj.

**pointing word.** See WORD.

**poem** /poh-am/. A particular example of the art of poetry; specif., an imaginative composition displaying emotional intensity, insight, and imagination, esp. through imagery, evocative language, and measured and rhythmic words suggestive of music.

**poetaster** /poh-it-as-tar/. A bad poet; an inferior writer of rhymes or verses. Cf. **grammaticaster; logicaster.**

**poetry** /poh-ə-tree/. A type of literary composition characterized by metaphorical words, suggestiveness, quickened emotion, beautiful or dramatic language, and imaginative pleasure in the interpretation of life and nature.

**polygenesis** /pol-ee-jen-a-sis/, n. The theory that there is more than one independent source of languages. Cf. **monogenesis.**

**polyglot** /pol-ee-glot/. A person who speaks and understands more than one language.

**polyphone** /pah-nil-i-fohn/, n. A written character that represents more than one sound (as s in Celtic may be pronounced either as /s/ or as /k/).

**polyptote** /pah-nil-ip-toh-t/, n. (Of a noun or pronoun) having many cases <I–me–mine–my>.

**polyptoton** /pah-nil-ip-toh-tahn/, n. The repetition of a word in a different case or inflection. • This is a species of paregenomen. English literature provides many examples:

  - I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. (1 Corinthians 1:19)
  - With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder. (Shakespeare [1564–1616])
  - And dying rise, and rising with him raise. (John Milton [1608–1674])
  - Love is an irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired. (Robert Frost [1874–1963])
  - A good ad should be like a good sermon: it must not only comfort the afflicted; it also must afflict the comfortable. (Bernice Fitz-Gibbon [1892–1982])

**polysemous** /pah-nil-ee-seem-as/, adj. (Of a word) having more than one sense, usu. many senses (e.g., bunk can mean “a financial institution,” “the earth beside a river,” or “a billboard shot that bounces off the edge of the table”).

**polysemy** /po-lis-ə-mee/, n. A word’s quality of having multiple similar meanings. • For instance, foot may refer to the base or bottom of two different things <We’ll set up camp at the foot of the mountain> <That shoe is too tight for my foot>. — **polysemous,** adj. Cf. **monosemy.**

**polyssyllabic** /pol-ə-sil-ə-bal/, n. A line or word of many syllables, usu. three or more. — **polyssyllabic** /po-lə-sil-ə-lab-ik/, adj.

**polysyndeton** /pol-ə-sen-də-ton/, n. The repetitive use of conjunctions between elements in a sentence, such as words, phrases, or clauses. • This device can make a speaker or writer sound breathless. Example:

  - I said, “Who killed him?” and he said, “I don’t know who killed him but he’s dead all right,” and it was dark and there was water standing in the street and no lights and windows broke and boats all up in the town and trees blown down and everything all blown and I got a skiff and went out and found my boat where I had her inside Mango Bay and she was all right only she was full of water. (Ernest Hemingway [1899–1961])

Cf. **asyndeton.**

**polysynthesis** /pahl-ee-sin-tha-sis/, n. The combination of several words that often go together into one word <insofar> <inasmuch>.

**popularized technicality.** A technical term that has come into widespread use outside the field where it originated, usu. having acquired an extended meaning. • When H.W. Fowler (1858–1933) first coined this term in his 1926 book A Dictionary of Modern English Usage, the phrase acid test was the leading example. In its original scientific context, it referred to using nitric acid to test for gold. It was popularized by President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924), who used it figuratively to mean “a severe or conclusive test” when he stated, “The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will.” Many specialized subjects have contributed popularized technicalities to English, among them law <leading question>, medicine <cancerous>, logic <dilemma>, chess <gambit>, physics <quantum leap>, and sailing <underway>. Often purists object to a popularized technicality when it is new, but they tend to have little say in its linguistic fate.

**portmanteau word** /port-man-toh/, n. See **BLEND.**

**positive,** adj. & n. The ordinary condition of a gradable adjective or adverb; the lowest degree of comparison. • The positive degree does not express a comparison to any other thing <strong—not stronger (comparative) or strongest (superlative)>_. — Also termed **positive degree; absolute degree.** See **adjective; adverb; degree.** Cf. **comparative; superlative.**

**possessive** /po-zes-ə-vi/, n. The case used to show possession, ownership, or close relationship. • In English, most nouns form the possessive by adding ‘s to the singular and irregular plural forms, and an apostrophe alone to regular plural forms. See pp. 712–15.
**second possessive.** A personal pronoun commonly used in a nominal position (mine, yours, his, hers, its, ours, and theirs).

**possessive adjective.** See ADJECTIVE.

**possessive case.** See CASE.

**possessive pronoun.** See PRONOUN.

**postclitic** /pɒst-klɪt-ɪk/, n. An unemphatic word that is accentuated as if it were part of the preceding word (as one in good one or it in Post-it note). Cf. PROCLITIC.

**postmodification.** The placement of a modifier after the word it modifies (such as a man with blue eyes instead of a blue-eyed man).

**postmodififer.** n. A word that qualifies or limits the sense of a preceding word; a postpositive qualifier. See POSTPOSITIVE. — **postmodification, n.**

**postpositive.** n. A modifying particle or word that is placed after the word it modifies. • In he was the man chosen for the job, chosen is a postpositive because it modifies man, clarifies which man is referred to, and comes after the word modified. — Also termed postmodifier. Cf. PREPOSITION. See p. 716.

**postverbal, adj.** Following the verb. — **postverbal, n.**


**precatory** /prɛk-ə-tɔr-ɛ-/ , adj. Expressing a desire that something be done, but in a nonmandatory way. — **precatory, n.**

**preference** /pri-fer-əns/, n. A modifying particle. — **preference, adj.**

**pragmatics** /prəɡˈmætɪks/; Linguistics. The study of how language is used in the context of certain communications, such as the beliefs of the speaker and his or her relationship to the audience.

**prate, vb.** To engage in trivial, empty, or foolish—and often lengthy—talk.

**precatory** /prɛk-ə-tɔr-ɛ-/ , adj. Expressing a desire that something be done, but in a nonmandatory way.<pecatory words in a will>.

**precise** /prɛsɪs/, adj. A person who rigidly and precisely observes established rules, forms, or standards. — Also termed precisionist.

**predicate.** A syntactic unit consisting of a finite verb and all the words modifying it or governed by it, such as are ready to go in the sentence We are ready to go. — Also termed complex predicate.

**compound predicate.** A predicate consisting of two or more verbs connected by and.

**simple predicate.** The verb or verb phrase in a sentence without its objects, modifiers, etc.

**predicate adjective.** See ADJECTIVE.

**predicate nominative.** A predicate noun in the nominative case, such as he /<This is he>/ and I /<It was I who called their attention to that fact/>. — Also termed predicate noun.

**predicative, adj.** Of, relating to, or involving a noun or adjective that follows a linking verb to form a predicative or is contained within a predicative. • In the sentence His mentor called him a failure, yet he became a well-respected businessman, the noun phrase a failure is the predicative object of the linking verb called, and the noun phrase a well-respected businessman is the predicative complement of the linking verb became.

**predicative adjective.** See predicate adjective under ADJECTIVE.

**prefix.** An affix attached to the beginning of a word to modify its meaning. • Prefixes serve many functions. Some, such as im-, in-, and un-, change a word's meaning to its direct opposition <possible–impossible> <comfortable–uncomfortable>. See affix. Cf. suffix; infix.

**prelect** /pri-lek-t/, vb. To lecture or discourse publicly. — **prelection** /pri-lek-ʃən/, n.

**prelinguistics.** The study of biological and physiological aspects of speech. Cf. MICROLINGUISTICS; MACROLINGUISTICS.

**premodification.** See PREPOSITION.

**preoccupation.** See PROLEPSIS (2).

**preposition.** An uninflected word or a phrase that indicates relationships of location, direction, means, agency, etc. between a noun and other words in the sentence. • The preposition's object is usually a noun or pronoun, which is always in the objective case (e.g., in that sounds good to me, the pronoun me is the object of the preposition to, so it is in the objective case). Although the preposition usually appears immediately before its object, it can also follow it (e.g., we have a serious problem to talk about). Prepositions frequently serve as particles in phrasal verbs. See particle & object of a preposition under object. See pp. 723–25.

**complex preposition.** See phrasal preposition.

**compound preposition.** A single-word preposition formed from two or more words <outside> <notwithstanding>.

**deferred preposition.** See terminal preposition.

**participal preposition.** A participle form that functions as a preposition <barring injury, he should win the tournament>.

**phrasal preposition.** Two or more separate words that function as a preposition <in front of> <next to>.

— Also termed complex preposition.

**terminal preposition.** A preposition that appears at the end of a clause because its object has been moved up in the sentence. — Also termed deferred preposition. See pp. 723–24.

**prepositional complement.** See complement.

**prepositional phrase.** See PHRASE.

**prepositive, n.** A modifying particle or word that is placed before the word it modifies. • In the gray squirrel stole the bread, gray is a prepositive because it comes before squirrel, the word it modifies. — Also termed premodifier. See adjective. Cf. POSTPOSITIVE.

**prescriptive grammar.** 1. The field of grammar concerned with guiding users to make the most effective use of language through common rules. • Prescriptive grammarians are concerned with preventing heedless departures from Standard English. 2. A book that lays out such grammar. — Also termed normative grammar. See grammar; standard English. Cf. DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR.

**prescriptive linguistics.** See LINGUISTICS.

**prescriptivism** /pri-skrip-tiv-əm/. An approach to language study that embraces the role of value judgments in deciding what is linguistically effective or ineffective, better or worse, and therefore guides people toward mastering a standard language. Cf. DESCRIPTIVISM.

**present participle.** See PARTICIPLE.

**present-perfect tense.** See TENSE.

**present tense.** See TENSE.

**preterit.** See PARAPHRASE.

**preterition.** See PARAPHRASE.

**preterit tense.** See past tense under TENSE.

**preverbal, adj.** 1. (Of a word or phrase) preceding the verb. Cf. POSTVERBAL. — **preverbal, n.** 2. Preceding the development of speech in an individual or in humankind. 3. Preceding the moment when a statement is formulated in the mind.

**primary verb.** See VERB.

**principal clause.** See independent clause under CLAUSE.

**principal parts of a verb.** The uninflected form of a verb, its past tense, and its past participle. • A verb's complete conjugation can be given if these principal parts are known.

**principal verb.** See main verb under VERB.

**priscian** /prɪsɪ-an/ or /-e-an/, n. A grammarian or student of grammar. • This term is an eponym derived from the 6th-century grammarian Priscian, whose 18-volume Latin grammar influenced European grammarians for centuries. See break PRISCIAN'S HEAD.

**prative** /prɪ-və-tiv/, adj. Showing that something has been lost, negated,
**Glossary of Grammatical, Rhetorical, and Other Language-Related Terms**

or removed; esp. (of a particle or affix), expressing negation or privation. • The prefix a-, from Greek, is called the alpha privative; it is used in such words as amoral and apotactical. An -n- is inserted in the alpha privative for euphony when a vowel sound follows (as in anaerobic).

**procatalipsis** /proh-kat-a-lep-sis/. See prolepsis (2).

**prochronism.** See prolepsis (1).

**proclisis** /proh-kli-sis/, n. The pronunciation of a word or phrase in such a way that an unaccented syllable is combined with an accented word coming after it (as when to day evolved into the one-word form: today). Cf. ENCLISIS.

**proclitic.** Adj. (Of an unaccented word) leaning forward; esp., dependent in pronunciation on a word that follows.

- Among the most prominent examples in English are the articles a and the and monosyllabic prepositions. — proclitic, n. See CLITIC. Cf. ENCLITIC.

**proclitic** /proh-kli-tik/, n. A one-syllable word so closely associated in pronunciation with the word that follows as to have no accent of its own (e.g., an in an inch, for in for research purposes, the in the nation, or to in to compose). Cf. POSTCLITIC.

**prodelision** /prod-i-lih-zhun/. The elision of an initial vowel. Cf. aPHESIS.

**proem** /proh-em/ or -i-em/. A preliminary comment or discourse at the beginning of a speech or piece of writing; a prelude, preamble, or preface.

**pro-form.** A word that substitutes for another, as a pronoun stands in for its noun antecedent. See pro-verb under verb.

**progressive aspect,** n. See ASPECT.

**prolative** /proh-layt-iv/, adj. Serving to extend or complete predication.

**prolegomenon** /proh-li-gom-eh-nan/. An introductory observation or remark; an introduction or preface. Pl. prolegomena.

**prolepsis** /proh-lep-sis/. Rhetoric. 1. A figure of speech that expresses something yet to occur as if it has already occurred, as by using a past participle to modify a noun before the action has been done; an anticipatory reference.

- Through prolepsis, the speaker may represent something as existing before it actually comes into existence <pre-colonial United States>, anticipate the circumstance or act that makes a description applicable <the dry lake they drained>, or link a present condition to a consequence <If you don't turn that music down, I'm calling the police>. — Also termed prochronism. 2. Rhetorical anticipation, as by answering a potential objection before it has been raised, or anticipating and answering a counterargument before it is made; the refutation of possible objections to an argument. "Aha! you say, "that can't be right!" Here's the proof.> In sense 2, cf. HYPOPHORA. — Also termed (in sense 2) procatatlepis; preoccupation. — proleptic, adj.

**proxility** /proh-lik-sit-eel/. 1. Undue length of discourse caused by the use of needless words, wearisome repetition of ideas, or too much detail; tedious verbosity. 2. Indulgence in intolerably long and wordy discussions. — prolix /proh-lik-zhun/. A prefatory statement or explanation; esp., an evocative introduction spoken by an actor at the beginning of a play or film.

**prolusion** /proh-luh-zhun/. An essay written in preparation for a more elaborate treatise, esp. as a test of the writer's prowess.

**promotion.** In transformational grammar, the translation of words from an embedded clause into a main sentence.

**pronominal,** adj. Of, relating to, or being a pronoun.

**pronominal adjective.** See ADJECTIVE; adjective pronoun under pronoun.

**pronoun.** A word used as a substitute for a noun or, sometimes, another pronoun. • The definition isn't entirely satisfactory, since it does not easily apply to undoubted pronouns such as I, you, and the relative who. But it is traditional. See DEMONSTRATIVE. Cf. ANTECEDENT. See p. 734.

**adjective pronoun.** A pronoun that functions as a noun modifier. • Other than who, none, and personal pronouns, all pronouns may serve as adjectives <what book> <those apples>. — Also termed pronominal adjective.

**compound indefinite pronoun.** An indefinite pronoun that includes an element such as -body (anybody, everybody, nobody, somebody), -thing (anything, everything, something), or one/-one (anyone, everyone, no one, someone) <Nobody said a word> <The blast was heard by everyone nearby>.

**compound personal pronoun.** A personal pronoun form with the suffix -self (singular) or -selves (plural) (e.g., myself, ourselves, itself).

**compound relative pronoun.** A relative pronoun formed with who, whom, which, or what plus the suffix -ever <Whoever committed the crime will be found out> <I will give the award to whomever I please>.

**deictic pronoun.** See demonstrative pronoun.

**demonstrative pronoun.** A pronoun that points to, instead of defining or describing, the object to which it refers; thus <this> <that> <you>. • The demonstrative pronouns are this, that (singular) and these, those (plural). Also termed deictic pronoun.

**distributive pronoun.** An indefinite pronoun that separates the objects referred to from others referred to nearby. • The distributive pronouns are each, either, and neither.

**indefinite pronoun.** A pronoun that generally or indefinitely represents an object already identified or not needing specific identification. • Indefinite pronouns include another, any, both, each, either, neither, none, one, other, some, and such. <From all the options you can select only one> <Play another from your repertoire>.

**intensive pronoun.** A pronoun with the suffix -self (singular) or -selves (plural), used in apposition to its referent, that adds emphasis <I myself made the cake from scratch> <You must take the blame yourselves>.

**interrogative pronoun.** A pronoun that introduces or asks a question; a pronoun used to elicit the identity of an unknown noun or noun phrase. • The interrogative pronouns are who (nominative; objective whom and possessive whose), what, and which <Who did the talking?> <To whom am I speaking?> <Which is the right way?>.

**personal pronoun.** A pronoun that refers to a particular person or thing and changes form to indicate person, number, gender, and case. • This chart lists the personal pronouns and the forms they take in different cases:

- **Sing**
  Subjective: I, you, he, she, it
  Objective: me, you, him, her, it
  Possessive: my, mine, your, yours, his, hers, its
- **Plural**
  Subjective: we, you, they
  Objective: us, you, them
  Possessive: our, ours, your, yours, their, theirs

**possessive pronoun.** A type of pronoun used esp. as a limiting adjective to qualify a noun and denote possession. • The possessive pronouns include mine, ours, yours, his, hers, its, and theirs. See also ABSOLUTE FORM.

**reciprocal pronoun.** A singular pronoun that refers to a plural subject <The buildings are close to each other> <The family members are all fond of one another>. • The only reciprocal pronouns in English are each other and one another.
**reflexive pronoun.** A pronoun formed with the suffix -self (singular) or -selves (plural) and used to reflect the action of the verb and refer to the subject <She drove herself to work> <They created trouble for themselves>.

**relative pronoun.** A pronoun that can link dependent and independent clauses <I will develop whichever idea is the most popular> or join a clause with its antecedent <The boy who delivered our newspaper has moved away>. • The relative pronouns are who, whom, that, and which. The compounds whoever, whichever, and whichever are also relative pronouns. Who and whoever refer to the subject of a clause or sentence; whom and whomever refer to the objects of a verb, a verbal, or a preposition.

**universal pronoun.** A pronoun that represents all-inclusive noun phrases (such as each, all, and compounds consisting of every plus one, body, or thing). • Grammatically, universal pronouns (apart from all) are singular, even though the meaning is plural.

**pronunciation** /prә-nan-see-ә-шәn/. The manner or act of articulating words. See pp. 736–38.

**proper adjective.** See ADJECTIVE.

**proper diphthong.** See DIPHONG.

**proper name.** See proper noun under NOUN.

**proper noun.** See NOUN.

**proposition.** 1. A measure or scheme proposed or presented to others for consideration, acceptance, or adoption. 2. The assertion of a judgment, with subject and predicate, as in All men are mortal or No men are perfect. 3. The part of a discourse in which the basic argument or theme is announced.

**prop word.** See EXPLETIVE.

**prosaism** /proh-zay-iz-ә-m/. An expression, phrase, or literary style that is dull and unimaginative. — prosaic /proh-zay-ik/, adj. — prosaist, n.

**prose** /prohzi/. Spoken or written language without metrical structure, rhythm, or other characteristics of poetry; language in its ordinary form.

**prosify** /proh-zи-ә-t/, vb. To turn (poetry) into prose.

**prosopiosis** /proh-stә-a-pee-sis/, n. An ellipsis at the beginning of a grammatical structure <Thank you> (the subject I being habitually omitted through ellipsis). • Prosopiosis is especially common in the informal writing found in e-mail, journal entries, and the like <Went to a movie. Liked it. Thought that Meg Ryan was delightful>.

**prosody** /proh-sә-a-dee/. 1. The intonations and rhythms of spoken language. 2. The study of those intonations and rhythms. 3. The study of poetic meters and their use. — prosodic, adj.

**prosopopoeia** /proh-sәh-pә-ә-ә-sәl/. See PERSONIFICATION.

**prosthesis.** See PROSTHESIS.

**prosy** /proh-zee/, adj. 1. Having the nature of prose. 2. Commonplace and tiresome; dull and wearisome; prosaic. — prosiness, n.

**prosyllogism** /proh-silә-a-jiz-әm/. A syllogism whose conclusion forms the premise of another syllogism. See SYLLOGISM. Cf. EPISYLLOGISM.

**protasis** /prah-tә-sis/. In a conditional sentence, the clause that lays down the condition. • It typically begins with the word if or unless, but it may also be introduced by although, though, or despite. — Also termed conditional clause; condition. Cf. APODOsis.

**protext.** The part of a document or writing that immediately precedes the part under consideration; the preceding context.

**prothesis** /prә-thә-sis/. See PROTHESIS. • By this process, an etw became a newt. — Also termed prothesis. Cf. METANALYSIS. — prothetic /proh-thә-ә-tik/, adj.

**protreptic** /proh.tep-тиc/, n. Hortatory writing designed to persuade or to teach. — protreptic, adj.

**provection** /proh-vek-ә-shәn/. The transfer of a final consonant of one word to the beginning of the next, as when (historically) an etw became a newt and a napron became an apron. See PROTESIS; METANALYSIS.

**pro-verb.** See VERB.

**provincialism.** A nonstandard word or expression peculiar to a region or outlying district; a word or phrase typifying a regional dialect. See DIALECT.

**psellism** /sil-iz-ә-m/. Defective prosody; the addition of an extra sound or syllable at the beginning of a word <splatter-besplatter>. • By this process, an etw became a newt. — Also termed PROSIS. Cf. METANALYSIS. — prothetic /proh-thә-tik/, adj.

**psyllactic** /silә-a-әm/. The thoughtless, parrot-like repetition of other people's ideas and words without any personal understanding of or appreciation for what one is saying; PARROTRY.

**psychobabble.** 1. Language loaded with terms from psychology and psychotherapy, esp. those improperly used by laypeople. 2. Meaningless psychological jargon, esp. terms from popular rather than mainstream psychology. • In either sense, this term is highly pejorative. It emerged in the popular culture when it appeared in the title of R.D. Rosen's 1977 book, Psychobabble: Fast Talk and Quick Cure in the Era of Feeling.

**psycholinguisitics.** See LINGUISTICS.

**pun.** See PARONOMASIA.

**punctual aspect.** See momentaneous aspect under ASPECT.

**punctuation.** 1. The system of marking sentences to help readers understand their structure and the relationship between their parts. 2. The marks used in that system. See pp. 746–54.

**pure infinitive.** See INFINITIVE.

**purism.** 1. The view that linguistic changes should be halted or undone; the attitude that change should not occur in a language. • In its classic form, purism, among other things, promotes strict adherence to the rules of grammar and speech and bars neologisms and borrowed foreign words from the language. In practice, self-described "purists" are often ill informed about what actually constitutes good usage. 2. The view that a language should be made up only of homegrown words, not words borrowed from other languages. — purist, n. — puristic, adj.

**purple prose.** A highly ornate, brilliantly colored passage in a literary composition. • The phrase derives from the Latin phrase purpurae pansus, which appears in the Ars Poetica of Horace (68–65 b.c.).


**qualification.** A word that modifies or intensifies an adjective or adverb <rather> <very>. See MODIFIER (1).

**qualitative adjective.** See ADJECTIVE.

**quantitative adjective.** See ADJECTIVE.

**Queen's English.** See KING'S ENGLISH.

**question.** An interrogative sentence or clause; a sentence that seeks to elicit a question. • An interrogative sentence or clause that reports a question or asks it indirectly <She asked me where the convenience store is>; esp., a dependent clause or a sentence containing a dependent clause that expresses an implied question. • In the sentence Tell me who you are, the question is implied by who you are. If asked directly, the sentence would be Tell me, who are you?

**quibble.** n. 1. A play on words; a pun. 2. A shifty evasion of a point in argument or discourse; esp., a trivial distinction introduced as a red herring.

**quinquiesyllable** /kwәn-ki-wә-silә-a-bal/, n. A line or word of five syllables. — quinquiesilabic /kwәn-ki-wә-si-lә-ibik/, adj.
### Glossary of Grammatical, Rhetorical, and Other Language-Related Terms

**quodlibet** /kwod-li-bet/. A subtle, debatable point.

**quotation.** One or more words taken from another person's writing or speech and repeated verbatim (e.g., *a quotation from Shakespeare*).

**recipient noun.** See NOUN.

**reciprocal, adj.** Indicating that an action, process, or relationship is mutual (e.g., *Paul and Diane have a reciprocal relationship: Paul likes Diane and Diane likes Paul*).

**reciprocal pronoun.** See PRONOUN.

**reduplicated.** A type of language, esp. in a range of formal–informal, register, /ri-dupli-kát/.

**reduplication.** The formation of a double-barreled word or phrase by having the second part repeat some of the first part, as in *flim-flam, helter-skelter, namby-pamby, okey-dokey, shilly-shally, and willy-nilly*.

**referent.** A person or thing referred to; specif., the physical entity or abstract concept represented by a spoken or written symbol. • Exactly what a referent denotes depends on the context in which it appears. For instance, *sun* may refer to the gaseous celestial body that provides heat and light to our planet <orbiting the sun> or just to the heat and light <playing outdoors in the sun>.

**reflexive, adj.** Indicating that a verb's action reflects back on the subject or agent.

**reflexive, n.** 1. A part of speech used for emphasis by repetition. • A reflexive often immediately follows the subject, but it may also follow the verb <I myself believe she lied> <She completed the survey herself>. 2. Any construction in which two words or noun phrases are understood to have the same referent. See INTENSIFIER; INTENSIVE.

**reflexive pronoun.** See PRONOUN.

**regimen** /ré-jé-im/. n. One word's governing another; the relation that one word in a sentence has to another one that depends on it.

**register, n.** 1. A type of language, esp. in a range of formal–informal, appropriate to a certain social setting. 2. *Phonetics.* The range of tones made by a voice.

**regular, adj.** Conforming to a grammatical norm or standard.

**regular verb.** See VERB.

**relative adjective.** See ADJECTIVE.

**relative adverb.** See conju nctive adverb under ADVERB.

**relative clause.** See CLAUSE.

**relative pronoun.** See PRONOUN.

**remote relative.** A relative pronoun that is separated from the noun to which it refers by several intervening words. • A remote relative is typically ambiguous <the doctrine that nations are sovereign entities not to be interfered with by outside forces, which . . . > (where which might refer to doctrine, nations, entities, or forces—but probably either doctrine or forces). Remote relatives often cause misuses. See pp. 784–86.

**remplissage** /rahn-plah-zh/. n. Literary padding: the act or practice of filling out paragraphs and even pages with matter of little value.

**reported speech.** A person's indirectly quoted words, as in *Sharon told us we had to arrive before 6 pm,* meaning that Sharon said, *"You must arrive before 6 pm."* — Also termed indirect speech; oratio obliqua. See indirect discourse under DISCOURSE.

**restrictive, adj.** (Of the modifier of a noun or phrase) adding information that more positively identifies the referent. • For example, in *The tents that are on aisle 3 are on sale,* the clause that are on aisle 3 is restrictive because it identifies which tents are on sale—tents on other aisles may not be similar. Similarly, in *The senator–songwriter Orrin Hatch will perform,* the name Orrin Hatch specifically identifies which senator–songwriter is being referred to, so it is a restrictive appositive. Restrictive modifiers are never set off from the rest of the sentence by commas. Cf. NONRESTRICTIVE.

**restrictive relative clause.** See clause.

**restrained object.** See OBJECT.

**retronym.** A word or phrase invented to denote what was originally a genus term but has now become just one species in a larger genus (e.g., *solid-core door* came to describe what all old doors used to be until the advent of the *hollow-core door*). See p. 794.

**rigmarole** /rig-ma-röl/. A rambling, unintelligible, or unduly elaborate speech or writing, often painfully long; a succession of confused, nonsensical, or disjointed statements. • Also termed *rigmarole* /rig-ma-röl/.

**rhetoric** /ri-tör/.

**rhetorical question.** *Rhetoric.* A question that is asked for effect only, and not for an answer; a question that is intended to remain unanswered because the answer is self-evident.

**rhetorical, adj.** • Usually the speaker is making a point and doesn't want a response, or the answer is obvious and can be left unsaid. The use of an unbroken series of rhetorical questions is called *eperothesis* or *erotesis.* See ERITOSIS.

**rhotacism** /roh-tuk-ism/. 1. The overuse of the letter *r* in speaking or writing: a disruption in pronouncing *r* as *l* /in words such as bigger, father, rather, and sir/. • Compared to BR, AME is highly rhotic (see, e.g., *among* the main entries in this book) /bursar, primer, tartar/.

**right-branching sentence.** A complicated sentence that has most of its complexity—the conditions, exceptions, etc.—after the principal verb; one that has a majority of its constituents on the right side of the tree diagram. Cf. LEFT-BRANCHING SENTENCE.

**rodemontade.** /rod-ah-man-tayd/. The rant of a blustering braggart or demagogue.

**root.** The most basic part of a word, from which another word or words can be formed or derived; the form of a word to which affixes are attached. • The root or inflectional stem of a word constitutes the most meaningful part of an English word. — Also termed base; theme. See ETYMON; SYNTHETIC LANGUAGE.

**run-on sentence.** A sentence in which two or more main clauses are used together without punctuation or a
conjunction between them. • For example, Cyndi spoke highly of her new assistant she hired him last week. The run-on can be corrected by making two sentences <Cyndi spoke highly of her new assistant. She hired him last week> or by recasting and inserting an appropriate conjunction. — Also termed comma splice. See pp. 802–03.

sandhi /san-deel/, n. [Sanskrit “a placing together”]. The change of the sound of a morpheme in a specific context (e.g., the in the woman vs. the elderly woman).

sans serif. A style of typeface in which the letters do not have any projections. Sans serif type is considered more legible than serif type in headlines and short passages, but not in extended text. Cf. serif.

Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. The doctrine that the structure of one’s native tongue partly determines how one experiences reality and understands the world. • The hypothesis was first posited by Edward Sapir (1884–1939) in 1929 and was elaborated by his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941) in books and articles. The names were coupled as Sapir–Whorf in learned journals beginning in the 1950s.

sarcasm. Sharp, ironic, or humorous language intended to mock a person, thing, or situation by using words to show that the speaker intends the opposite meaning. • Sarcasm is more easily expressed in speech than in writing. In speech, vocal intonations help to convey the speaker’s real meaning when making a statement such as, “Well, isn’t that special?” when something isn’t. Sarcasm is more difficult to express in writing because there are few visual and no aural cues to the speaker’s meaning. In informal writing, people sometimes use emphatic fonts or capitalization, emoticons, or special characters to convey sarcasm. But since some of these devices are used for other purposes, such as expressing sincerity or excitement, misinterpretations are common. Cf. hyperbole; irony; litotes.

scansion /skən-shan/. The act of dividing lines of verse to show its metrical parts, according to the rules of quantity and accent.

sceiss onomatoton. See synonymia.

schriftsprache /shrift-sprahk-. The written form of a standard language; literary language.

schwa. A neutral vowel sound, spelled with various letters, such as the a in alone and the e in system. • In pronunciation systems, it is symbolized by an inverted, backward e: a.

scred. 1. A prolonged tirade or harangue. 2. Any writing that is being referred to dysphemistically.

scurrility /skər-ril-i-teel/. 1. The character or quality of being indecent or vulgar; vulgarity of language. 2. That which is foul, obscene, low, and vile.

second person. See person.

second possessive. See possessive.

semantic, adj. Of, relating to, or involving the meaning of words.

semantics. The study of the ways in which languages (or a particular language) systematically structure meaning, esp. in words and in sentences; specif., the branch of linguistics dealing with the meaning of words, phrases, and clauses, together with the origins of and shifts of meaning. — Also termed semasiology. See linguistics. Cf. general semantics.

semasiology /sa-may-see-ah-jeel/, n. See semantics.

seneme. The meaning of a morpheme; the smallest possible unit of meaning.

semivowel. A sound that functions as a consonant but has the resonance of a vowel. • The most common are w <water> and y <yellow>. Cf. consonant; vowel.

sentence. A minimum complete utterance; a grammatical and rhetorical device for expressing relationships among the elements of an idea segment, which the writer or speaker wants to separate and present as a unit, and that the reader or listener can accept as capable of standing alone. • The old idea that a sentence is “a group of words expressing a complete thought” has been widely discredited—even though it contains a good deal of truth. But it is true that many single words can be sentences, as C.T. Onions (1873–1965) observed: “Many single words or self-contained groups of words, of any size, may perform the work of a sentence; e.g., Speaking; Thanks; Down!; Sh!; Out with it!; Farewell; Goodbye; What?; Murder!; Nonsense!; Splendid! Yes and no are long-established sentence-words; they are equivalent to sentences; e.g. Will you come?—Yes. I will come.”3 The grammarian James Slesd (1914–2003) wrote aptly that “no useful definition can be framed to include all and only the things [that] are often called sentences.”4

cleft sentence. In transformational grammar, a two-clause sentence made from a single clause in order to emphasize a specific element of the clause, so that the resulting sentence begins with it is or another be-verb <It is peanuts that we want> (resulting from the clauses We want peanuts and It is . . .). — Also termed cleft construction.

complex sentence. A sentence that has an independent clause and one or more dependent clauses joined by a subordinating conjunction <I don’t know whether it will rain today>. compound–complex sentence. A sentence that consists of at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause <Either the cat goes or I go, whether you like it or not> <I don’t know if he’ll be allowed to watch the football game, but he hasn’t finished those chores that he was assigned>.

compound sentence. A sentence that has at least two coordinate independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction <I told him to go away, so he left> <The cat goes or I go>. See coordinating conjunction under conjunction.

conditional sentence. A sentence that states a condition and the consequence or outcome of that condition’s occurring. • Example: If we lose this game, we’ll be excluded from the tournament. The condition does not have to be stated before the consequence: <We’ll be late unless we take a shortcut>.

declarative sentence. A sentence that makes a statement or assertion <The day was long> <It’s wise not to fret about what cannot be changed>. — Often shortened to declarative.

exclamatory sentence. A sentence that expresses surprise or other strong emotion. — Also termed exclamative sentence; exclamative.

imperative sentence. A sentence that constitutes a command, order, or firm request <Get your gear and leave> <March down to the bank and tell the manager what today>. — Often shortened to imperative.

interrogative sentence. A sentence that asks a question <Why did you agree on that price?>. — Often shortened to interrogative.

simple sentence. A sentence consisting of only one independent clause and no dependent clauses <I called him> <I saw him only yesterday>.

sentence adverb. See adverb.


\footnotetext{C.T. Onions, Modern English Syntax 1 (rev. R.D.H. Miller 1971).}

\footnotetext{James Slesd, A Short Introduction to English Grammar 246 (1959).}
separative coordinating conjunction. See disjunctive conjunction under conjunction.

sequence of tenses. The fixed pattern by which the tense of one verbal or the form of one verb phrase demands that another verbal or verb phrase be of a particular tense or form. <When she arrived, I left> (the past-tense arrived demanding the past-tense left) <As I peruse books, I mark them> (the present-tense peruse demanding the present-tense mark). See p. 896.

serif, n. A style of typeface in which the letters have slight finishing strokes, such as “feet.” The serifs enhance the readability of significant blocks of text. Cf. sans serif. — serifed, adj.


set phrase. A group of words in an arrangement fixed by long-standing usage. • Proverbs, catchphrases, and idioms are types of set phrases. — Also termed set expression. See cliché; idiom. See p. 820.

sesysyllable /seks-i-sil-a-bal/, n. A line or word of six syllables. — sesysyllabic /seks-i-sil-a-bik/, adj.

sibilant. A hissing or hushing sound, as in /s/, /z/, or /zh/. — sibilance, n.

simile. An explicit comparison of two usu. quite different things, signaled by the use of a word such as like or as <like a gentle breeze> <as brave as a lion>. • Examples: • Tall men, like tall houses, are usually ill

simple, adj. 1. Made up of a single grammatical element. 2. Having no modifiers, complements, or other elements.

simple adverb. See adverb.

simple conjunction. See conjunction.

simple infinitive. See infinitive.

simple predicate. See predicate.

simple sentence. See sentence.

simple subject. See subject.

simple tense. See tense.

simplex, See simplex sentence.

singular, n. The form of a word that denotes or refers to one person or thing. See concord. Cf. plural.

singulare tantum /sing-gyoo-lair-ce tan-tum/, n. A noun that is invariably singular in form. • This term usually applies to mass nouns. Cf. plural

tantum. slang. Nonstandard language that has any two of these four characteristics: (1) it is informal, significantly lower in status than Standard English; (2) it first arises in the language of the street or popular culture; (3) it is more or less unacceptable in formal or polite settings; and (4) it displaces a conventional term with one that is vivid and may even be taboo. • Slang changes very quickly in English and is often used within groups, particularly small or close ones, to help keep the group together and strengthen ties. See dialect; idiom. — slangy, adj. See pp. 835–36.

sloganeering. The use of rallying cries or attention-getting phrases in an attempt to convince, persuade, or bias people. — sloganeer, vb.

sociolinguistics. See linguistics.

solecism /sole-siz-om or soh-la-siz-om/. An ungrammatical combination of words, noncompliance with the rules of syntax, or a deviation from standard usage. • The word solecism derives from the name of the ancient Greek colony of Soloi, in what is now called Cyprus. The original settlers spoke Attic Greek, but because the colony was far from Greece and infrequently visited, the language gradually drifted and became a local dialect. Greek travelers who stopped in Soloi considered the dialect a corrupt and substandard form of Greek. They coined the word soleikismos to describe it. The word was adopted into Latin as soleicium, then passed into French as solecisme, and finally appeared in the English form, solecism, in the 16th century. • Soliloquy /so-li-lil-ah-gee/, 1. A dis-course uttered to oneself; a monologue. 2. In drama (esp. the works of Shakespeare), a monologue representing a character’s unsought thoughts for the audience’s benefit. — soliloquize, vb.

sonant. See voiced.

specialization. The narrowing of a word’s meaning over time. • For example, meat derives from Old English mete, meaning “food” (still reflected in the term nutmeat), but through specialization it came to refer to the flesh of animals as food. — Also termed narrowing. Cf. generalization.

speech community. A defined group, esp. regionally or socially, identified by a shared spoken language or dialect. • A community can be as small as a few people to as large as a whole

nation or supranational group, such as a Welsh-speaking community in Patagonia.

speechcraft. 1. Skill in public speaking. 2. A knowledge of or skill in grammatical speech.

spelling pronunciation. The pronunciation of a word according to its spelling, such as says with a long-a sound, or often as /awf-tan/. See pronunciation.

split infinitive. See infinitive.

Spoonerism. A phrase in which the initial consonants of two words are swapped, usu. by accident, to create an amusing expression. • Spoonerisms are named for the Reverend W.A. Spooner (1844–1930), a don of New College, Oxford. He is reputed to have inadvertently uttered statements such as “The Lord is a shoving lepord,” and “It is kisstomy to cuss the bride.” But one can make Spoonerisms deliberately as a device to belittle or amuse. For instance, W.H. Auden [1907–1973], who had a low opinion of the poets Shelley and Keats, purposefully referred to them as “Kelly and Sheets.” And Shel Silverstein (1930–1999) wrote an entire book of poetry, Runny Babbit: A Billy Sook [2005 [published posthumously]], filled with Spoonerisms.

sprachbund /sprahk-buunt/. 1. A linguistic community made up of speakers of mutually intelligible dia-lects and linguistic families having a common set of linguistic features as the result of geographic proximity. 2. The linguistic evolution that results in this type of community.

sprachgefühl /sprahk-goo-fyuul/. 1. Language-feeling; an intuitive grasp of the genius and idiom of a given language. 2. The character of a language.

squib. 1. A short satirical speech or writing; a pithy lampoon. 2. Any brief notice written about some person or thing, as in a newspaper or blog.

stammbaum /shtam-bowm/. A family tree of languages, such as Indo-European languages.

standard, adj. (Of usage) speaking and writing that is widely taught and learned as the correct form.

Standard English. The substantially uniform type of English spoken and written by educated people. • It lacks regional and other variations that are considered ungrammatical or non-standard. It is widely used in the media and by authority figures, and it is sometimes called “the prestige dialect.” Cf. argot; dialect; jargon; non-standard English. See pp. 858–59.

stanz[a] /stanz-ah/. In poetry, a number of lines grouped in a scheme of meter...
and sequence—a scheme usu. corresponding to other line groups within the same poem. — stanzaic /sta.nz-ik/, adj.

statement. A sentence that expresses an assertion (as opposed to an exclamation, a question, or a command); a sentence to which the most common response is continuing attention.

stem. 1. The part of a word that remains unchanged when it is inflected. 2. A word that contains a root and one or more derivational suffixes but no inflectional suffixes <annoyance> <artist> <artistic>.

stigmeology /stig-mee-ahl-jee/, n. The art of punctuation.

stichometry /sti-kom-e-tree/, 1. In paleography, the measurement of books or manuscripts by means of lines (or stichs). 2. An appendix or list stating the number of lines in a book or manuscript. — stichometric /sti-kome-trik/, adj.

stop. 1. A punctuation mark. 2. A consonant sound made with complete obstruction of the breath stream.

stress. See accent (2).

strong verb. See verb.

strophe /stroh-fee/, n. 1. In classical poetry, a stanza repeated one or more times in an ode or by a dramatic chorus. 2. Loosely, any stanza or rhymed group of lines in a poem. — strophic /stroh-fik/, adj.

structural ambiguity. See ambiguity.

structural linguistics. See linguistics.

stylistics. Linguistics. The study of linguistic variation, often with special attention to the most conscious and complex uses of language in literature.

subclause. See dependent clause under clause.

subject. The noun or noun phrase about which something is said in the predicate of a simple sentence; esp., the doer of the sentence’s action or the person or thing that is in the state expressed by the predicate.

complete subject. The simple subject together with all its modifiers.

compound subject. A subject that consists of two or more nouns or noun phrases connected by a conjunction.

simple subject. The particular noun or noun phrase about which something is said in the predicate.

subject complement. See complement.

subjective. See nominative.

subjective case. See nominative case under case.

subject noun clause. See noun clause.

subject-verb agreement. The requirement that the subject and the verb of a clause must match in person and number. See pp. 866–68.

subjunct. In some grammatical systems, an adverb that affects the force of a verb, an adjective, or another adverb, usu. either by softening the statement <fairly> <rather> <relatively> or by strengthening it <extremely> <very> <so>. Cf. ADJECTIVE; CONJUNCT; DISJUNCT.

subjunctive /sab-jon-gik-tiv/, adj. (Of a verb) expressing a condition that is uncertain or contrary to fact (e.g., if I were you), including doubt, wishfulness, possibility, demand, and the like (e.g., the crowd demanded that she be heard). See p. 869.

subjunctive mood. See mood.

subordinate, adj. Having an order or rank inferior to something else; lesser in degree or importance <a subordinate clause>. Cf. COORDINATE.

subordinate clause. See dependent clause under clause.

subordinating conjunction. See conjunction.

subordination. The joining of words or word groups with dependent rank to other elements of the sentence.

subordinator. See subordinating conjunction under conjunction.

subsequent. The word to which an interrogative relative pronoun refers when it follows the pronoun. • Consider Whose car is that? The mayor’s. • Included in the term are nouns <Mammals are a class of vertebrates>, noun-equivalents <To err is human>, and pronouns. — substan
tival /sab-stan-tiv/, adj.

substitution. A sound change produced by replacing a vowel or consonant with another.

succinct /sak-sinkt/. Verbally compact; concise.

suffix. A particle attached to the end of a word to modify its meaning or change it into a different word class. • Some suffixes are widely used, such as -ly, which changes an adjective to an adverb <quick–quickly>. But others are rarely seen. For instance, to make child plural, the suffix -ren is needed. See AFFIX. Cf. INFIX; PREFIX.

suffixoid /saf-ik-soyd/, n. A suffix-like ending that is not truly a suffix at all (such as the -er in badger, hammer, and shyster).

superlative, adj. & n. The form of an adjective or adverb used to compare at least three things and show that one has a quality above or below the others. • For example, best is the superlative of good; most refreshingly is the superlative of refreshingly. — Also termed superlative degree. See adjective; adverb; degree. Cf. comparative; positive.

double superlative. A nonstandard construction such as most best or most highest. Cf. double comparative under comparative.

periphrastic superlative. A superlative adjective or adverb that changes degree by taking most or least, esp. when a one-word form ending in -est is available.

superlative degree. See superlative.

superordinate clause. See independent clause under clause.

surd /surd/, n. An unvoiced consonant, such as f, k, p, s, or t. See unvoiced.

surface structure. In transformational grammar, the set of semantic and syntactic relationships among the parts of a sentence as actually written or spoken. Cf. DEEP STRUCTURE.

suspensive hyphen. A hyphen used to connect a series of compound modifiers with the same base term <a five- to seven-year term>.

svarahakti vowel /svahr-a-bahk-tee/, n. [Sanskrit “vowel separation”] A vowel sound inserted through epenthesis. — Often shortened to svarahakti. — Also termed parastric vowel.

see epenthesis; anaptyxis.

syllabification. The act or method of forming syllables or dividing words into syllables. — Also termed syllabification.

syllable. A phonological unit consisting of one or more sounds, including a vowel sound.

closed syllable. A syllable that ends with a consonant, as both syllables do in hip-hop.

open syllable. A syllable that ends with a vowel (such as both syllables in oboe).

syllepsis /si-lep-sis/. 1. Grammar. The use of a word to modify or syntactically govern two or more other words when it agrees with only one of them in number, voice, gender, and so on. 2. zeugma.

syllogism. A logical argument composed of usu. three propositions from which one (the conclusion) is inferred from the others (the major and minor premises). • Each of the premises has a term in common with the conclusion. The major premise is stated first and contains the major term or predicate of the conclusion (usually the principle involved). The minor premise contains the minor term or subject of the conclusion (usually the fact involved). The major premise is general, and the minor is particular. Here are two classic syllogisms:
Cf. enthymeme. — *sylogistic* /sil-ə-jis-tik/, adj. syntemple /sin-plə-see/. Rhetoric. The repetition of one word at the beginning and of another at the end of two successive clauses <Spring clothes with leaves the trees; spring leads back the birds of song to the trees>.

+ Synemple combines anaphora and epistrophe. See anaphora; epistrophe. Cf. plocce.

**synechicsis** /si-ner-a-sis or si-neer-a-sis/. The drawing together or union in one syllable of two vowels that are normally not sounded together, esp., the coalescence of two sounds into a diphthong. • Through synaeresis, the local pronunciation of Louisville, Kentucky, becomes /looo-val/. And the Arabic *al-Qaedah* /ah-l kah-ee-dah/ becomes, in English, /al-kt-da/ or /al kay-da/. — Also spelled syneresis.

+ Also termed synizesis. See syncope; synaloepha.

**synaesthesia** /sin-es-thee-zha/, n. The association of a particular sound or group of sounds with a particular meaning (as with the *fl*- in *flame*, *flare*, and *flicker*). Cf. onomatopoeia.

**synaloepha** /si-nee-lo-fa/. The contraction of a syllable by blending of two vowels in adjacent syllables into one syllable, esp. by suppressing a vowel or diphthong at the end of a word when the next word also begins with a vowel or diphthong. • For example, the preferred pronunciation of *extraordinary* is /ek-stror-di-neer-e/ (in five syllables, not six), blending the sounds of the *a* in *extra* and the *o* in *ordinary*. Synaeresis and crasis are types of synaloepha. — Also spelled synaloepha. See crasis; synaesthesia.

**synchonic** /sin-krah-nik/, adj. Of, relating to, or involving language as it exists at a specific time. • A synchonic method of linguistic study isolates the present state of a language and tries to study this without the possibility of any preconceived notions suggested by a knowledge of the language's history. Cf. diachronic.

**synchysis** /sin-ka-sis/. A verbal disruption; the confusion of words in a sentence, so that the meaning is obscure.

syncope /sin-ka-pee/. The loss or elision of one or more letters or sounds, esp. a vowel or syllable, from the middle of a word or phrase <nee> <Broso>. • Among everyday examples in Standard English are *chocolate* /chawk-lət/, *diaper* /di-par/, *groceries* /groh-reez/, *vaccine* /vak-yoom/, and vegetable *vejet-ta-bal*. The second word in *San Francisco* becomes, in slang (outside the Bay Area of California), *Frisco*. For a more learned example, the Greek word *apoptheigm* (= a terse aphorism or maxim) became *apothegm* in medieval Latin—and only when Samuel Johnson expressed a preference for the original Greek spelling did the longer form come into any real currency in English. But the shorter form is standard. — Also termed *synopopion*. See synaesthesia; haplophonym; hyphaeresis. — *synco-pal*, adj. — *syncope*, vb.


**synetic** /sin-det-ik/, adj. 1. Used to join or connect; copulative; connective. 2. Joined by a conjunctive word or phrase.

**synetdon** /sin-di-tahn/, n. The use of a conjunction to join elements in a sentence.

• This term dates only from the mid-20th century. Cf. asyndeton; polysyndeton.

**synecdoche** /si-neck-da-kee/. A metaphor by which a part of something refers to the whole of it, or the whole for a part <thou sacred head> <flesh and blood>. • Hence wheels can refer to a car, threads to a suit, blades to ice skates, and breaking bread to having a meal. — Also termed *pars pro toto*.

**syneresis**. See synaesthesia.

**synesis** /sin-ə-sis/. A construction in which the elements are governed not by the rules of syntax but by the sense of the passage; esp., the construction to a suit, blades to ice skates, and breaking bread to having a meal. — Also termed *pars pro toto*.

**synhodos** /si-nek-da-kee/. A metaphor by which a part of something refers to the whole of it, or the whole for a part <thou sacred head> <flesh and blood>. • Hence wheels can refer to a car, threads to a suit, blades to ice skates, and breaking bread to having a meal. — Also termed *pars pro toto*.

**synhodos** /si-nek-da-kee/. A metaphor by which a part of something refers to the whole of it, or the whole for a part <thou sacred head> <flesh and blood>. • Hence wheels can refer to a car, threads to a suit, blades to ice skates, and breaking bread to having a meal. — Also termed *pars pro toto*.

**synthesis** /sin-ə-sis/. A construction in which the elements are governed not by the rules of syntax but by the sense of the passage; esp., the construction to a suit, blades to ice skates, and breaking bread to having a meal. — Also termed *pars pro toto*.

**synhodos** /si-nek-da-kee/. A metaphor by which a part of something refers to the whole of it, or the whole for a part <thou sacred head> <flesh and blood>. • Hence wheels can refer to a car, threads to a suit, blades to ice skates, and breaking bread to having a meal. — Also termed *pars pro toto*.
subject) and the class of units that can fill it. — tagmemic, adj. — tagmeme, n.
tag question. An interrogative attached to the end of a declarative statement "It's a good book, isn't it?". — Also termed confirmatory clause.
tapinosis /tap-i-noh-sis/, n. The debasement of the dignity of something or someone by referring to it as something much less dignified than it is (as by calling the Mississippi River a streamlet or the Supreme Court of the United States a bunch of judges). The columnist Molly Ivins (1944–2007) consistently used tapinosis; throughout the two terms of President George W. Bush, she referred to him in her columns as W. Cf. dysphemism.
taradiddle /ta-ri did-әl/, n. 1. A fb; a minor falsehood. 2. Pretentious nonsense. — Also spelled *tarradiddle.
tatpurusha /tat-puur-ә-shә/, n. [San-skrit "his servant"] A compound word in which the first element (usu. an attributive noun) qualifies the second, while the second (the head) determines the part of speech <book-case> <year-book>.
tautegorical /taw-ta-gor-i-kal/, adj. Expressing an idea in the same style but in different words.
tautology /tau-tol-ә-je/, 1. Repetition of something in words that are nearly synonymous and do not add anything <Many people are out of work when unemployment is high> <free gift>. 2. Rhetoric. Repetition of an idea in a different word, phrase, or sentence <with malice toward none, with charity for all (Lincoln, second inaugural address)>.
3. Logic. A statement that must be true for all possibilities or by virtue of its logical form. Cf. pleonasm. — tautologize, vb.
telestich /ta-les-티k/ or /tel-as-티k/, n. Prosody. A poem in which the last letters of each line, when taken in order, spell a word or words. Cf. acrostic.
tenor. 1. Linguistics. The social roles and relationships between the participants in a channel of communication. 2. Semiotics. In a metaphor, the literal, primary subject. — For instance: "Experience is a good school, but the fees are high" (Heinrich Heine [1797–1856]). In this case, the primary subject of experience is expressed in terms of the secondary subject of school. Typically, a metaphor expresses an abstraction in terms of a more well-defined model. Cf. vehicle.
tense. A verb's quality that shows the time in which an act, state, or condition occurs or occurred; the correspondence between a verb form and the concept of time. Cf. aspect; mood; voice. See pp. 895–97.
complex tense. A tense combined with the perfect or the progressive aspect.
future-perfect tense. The tense denoting an act, state, or condition that will be completed before another specified future time or future action <I will have finished my degree before the end of summer>. This term is borrowed from Latin grammar to apply to verb phrases such as will have said, will have been said, and will have been saying.
future tense. The tense denoting an act, state, or condition that will occur <I will go tomorrow>. Modern grammarians tend to define tense inflectionally—and therefore to limit the description of English to the present and past tenses—but it is conventional to speak of such constructions as will make, will be made, and will be making as being in the future tense.

historical present tense. The use of present tense when referring to past events (or sometimes absent people) to add immediacy and drama to a narrative or discussion. This tense is typically used in colloquial or nonstandard English. In writing, it is used only for narration, usually fictional. It is not used for formal writing. Examples:

• So this guy walks in and looks at me like I'm a freak or something.
• I'm just about to leave, when the lights suddenly go out.
• When he has Jack say, "I don't go looking suddenly go out.
• I'm a freak or something.

This phrase is biblical: see Matthew 5:18. See jot.

post-perfect tense. The tense denoting that an act, state, or condition was completed before another specified past time or past action <had begun to apologize, but she hung up the phone>. — Verb phrases such as had had, had been called, and had been calling are in past-perfect tense. — Also termed pluperfect tense.
past tense. A tense signaling an action or even a state that occurred at some previous time. The past tense may signal the instantaneous past <Brad broke his leg> or the durational past <Ms. Williams tried for several years to get appointed as an ambassador>.
— Also termed preterit (tense).
perfect tense. See present-perfect tense.
pluperfect tense. See past-perfect tense.
present-perfect tense. The tense denoting an act, state, or condition that occurred at an unspecified time before now <We have gone there many times>. — Also termed perfect tense.
present tense. A tense signaling that an action, event, or state is timeless or progressive <Life is hard> <The dogs are waiting>.
preterit tense. See past tense.
simple tense. A tense with no aspect: present, past, or future.
terminal preposition. See preposition.
tetrasyllable. See quadrisyllable.
theme. See base.
thesis. 1. A proposition to be developed, proved, and maintained against attack; the point of a discussion. 2. A theme for a composition; a statement of the central idea of an argument or writing. 3. A dissertation of a specified length written to satisfy the requirements of a university degree, esp. a master's degree.
third person. See person.
tilde /til-da/. A diacritical mark (~) indicating that an n takes a palatalized sound, as in senior. Tildes are common in Spanish but are not used in American English. In written British English, the tilde character, typeset in the middle of a line and called a swing-dash, can substitute for words describing activities the reader can imagine. See diacritical mark.
time. The indicator of when an action occurred in relation to the occurrence of the utterance itself: past, present, or future.
title /tit-әl/, n. 1. The dot over the letter i. 2. A punctuation mark. 3. Diacritical mark. — Sense 3 is the earliest, dating from the 14th century. The phrase jot or tittle dates from the early 16th century. The phrase is biblical: see Matthew 5:18. See jot.
tmesis /tme-sis or mee-sis/. A separation of the parts of a compound word by one or more inserted words <what condition soever>. — For example, in George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion (1913), Eliza Doolittle says abso-bloom- mini-lutely. — Also termed diacope /di-a-kә-ә/. See p. 913.
Tom Swift. A sentence in which a verb or adverb in the clause following a sentence of reported speech produces a pun related to that sentence. — Tom Swift is a fictional character, created by Edward L. Stratemeyer (1862–1930) (using the pseudonym Victor Appleton), who is the hero of a series of adventure books. Almost everything Tom says includes a qualifying adverb, as in Tom added eagerly or Tom said jokingly. Tom Swifties
Glossary of Grammatical, Rhetorical, and Other Language-Related Terms

trisyllable /trɪsɪˈlɑːbl/ or trɪ-sɪˈlɑːbl/, n. A word of three syllables. — trisyllabic /trɪsɪˈlɑːbɪk/, adj.

triumvīrum /trɪˈvɪr-ee-əm/, n. In medieval times, three of the seven liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, and logic.

tropō /tɾɒp-/p/, n. Rhetoric. 1. The use of a word in a meaning different from its normal one, as when one thing is called another (metaphor), the name of part of something denotes the whole (synecdoche), or something is called by the name of something else with which it is closely associated (metonymy). • In this strict sense, the two categories of tropes are (1) metaphors, and (2) simple tropes—namely, synecdoche and metonymy. See metaphor; metonymy; synecdoche. 2. Loosely, any figure of speech; figurative language generally. truncated passive. See passive voice; voice.

tu quoque /tu kwoʊ-ˌkweɪ/, n. [Latin “you are another!”] Rhetoric. A retort in which one counteraccuses the adversary of the same offense of which one is accused.

turgōd /tɔr-ˈjɪd-/ adj. Pompously affected; bombastically swollen. — turgiditiy /tɔr-ˈjɪ-di-ə-ti/, n. Pretentious but silly language in which the speaker or writer affects superior knowledge or wisdom; fustian. — twaddle, vb. typeface. A design of type used in printing. In general, typefaces are either serif or sans serif. U. The language used by well-educated people in the upper social classes. • This term was coined in 1954 by British linguist Alan Ross (1907–1980), who applied it to the distinctive vocabularies and pronunciations in England. Cf. non-U. ultima /ʌl-ˈti-mə/, n. A word’s last syllable.

umlaut /ʊmˈlaut/ or oom-ˈlaut/. 1. A vowel mutation in some languages, such as German, caused by the partial assimilation of the vowel to an adjacent sound (usually the following vowel or semivowel). • A diacritical mark consisting of two dots (¨) placed over a vowel to signal that the marked vowel has a modified sound. • Umlauts are often used in German words and names <Schäfer> but omitted in naturalized English equivalents, which may add an e after the formerly marked vowel <Schaefer>. Only three letters take an umlaut: a, o, and u. The mark is identical to a diaeresis in German; except for the combination au (pronounced /əʊ/), an umlaut never appears over a vowel that is adjacent to another vowel. See diacritical mark; mutation. Cf. diaeresis.

uncountable noun. See mass noun under noun.

undecidable. Having no inflections. — Also termed indeclinable. Cf. declinable.

understatement. The expression of an idea that is deliberately made to seem less important than it actually is. • Typically, the degree, number, or significance involved is purposely diminished, often for the sake of irony or of politeness.

unfinished comparative. See dangling comparative under COMPARATIVE.

unit modifier. See phrasal adjective under adjective.

universal pronoun. See PRONOUN.

unmarked infinitive. See bare infinitive under INFINITIVE.

unvoiced. Adj. (Of a spoken sound) produced without vibration of the vocal cords. — Also termed surd; voiceless.

usage. 1. Collectively, the linguistic customs of some group of speakers, such as all native speakers <common usage>, dialectal speakers <nonstandard usage>, literary writers <literary usage>, the best writers and speakers <proper usage>, etc. 2. A particular linguistic custom of this kind.

variant, n. A different form of a linguistic unit, such as an alternative spelling of a noun.

variorum /va-ree-ər-əm/, n. 1. An edition of a publication containing different readings of the original text. 2. A text or edition of a publication with notes added by various critics or commentators.

vehicle. Semiotics. 1. In a metaphor, a figurative secondary subject that follows the primary subject. See TENOR. 2. The form that a sign takes, such as sound or appearance.

verb. A word that shows the performance or occurrence of an action or the existence of a condition or a state of being, such as an emotion.

action verb. A verb that expresses the action of the subject <She moved the chair>.

auxiliary verb. A verb that is joined with another verb to help express voice, mood, tense, person, or some other quality. • For example, will is an auxiliary expressing future tense in She will serve as a Senate intern this summer. Auxiliaries may be modal (can, will, may, ought, must,
and shall in the present tense; could, would, might, ought, must, and should in the past tense). Or they may be nonmodal (do, have, be, and get). — Often shortened to auxiliary. — Also termed helping verb.

be-verb. Any form of the verb to be—namely, am, are, be, been, being, is, was, and were—whether used as an auxiliary verb or as a main verb.

catenative verb /kat-ə-nə-tiv/. A transitive verb that can take a verbal as its object <1 like to write> <1 like writing>.

copular verb; copulative verb. See linking verb.

defective verb. A verb that lacks at least one of the typical forms of conjugation; esp., an auxiliary verb.

ditransitive prepositional verb. A verb that takes both a direct and an indirect object, the direct object requiring an introductory preposition <The boss assured her employees of their job security> <My father recommended John Green for the position>.

ditransitive verb. A verb that takes both a direct and an indirect object (e.g., gave in the sentence I gave her a book). Cf. monotransitive verb.

do-verb. Any form of the verb to do—namely, did, do, does, doing, and done—whether used as an auxiliary verb or as a main verb.

equational verb. See linking verb.

ergative verb. A verb that can be used transitively or intransitively. • With a transitive use, the subject performs the action of the verb; with an intransitive use, the subject receives the action of the verb. For example, to melt can be intransitive <The butter melted> or transitive <The sun melted the butter>. See p. 344.

factitive verb. A transitive verb having both a direct object and an object complement, the two of which are closely linked <They called him Joe> <I consider that theory preposterous>. • The most common factitive verbs are appoint, call, choose, consider, designate, elect, find, imagine, judge, keep, label, make, name, prove, and think.

finite verb. A verb whose form shows that it is limited in number, person, and tense <1 go, she goes, they went>.

finite verb functions as the verb element in a clause and must agree in person and number with the subject of the clause.

helping verb. See auxiliary verb.

infinitive verb. See infinitive.

intransitive verb. A verb that does not require an object to complete the thought; a verb that can stand alone in the predicate. • Intransitive verbs (e.g., arrive, differ, glow, lie) do not have a passive form.

irregular verb. A verb whose past tense or past participle isn't formed according to a predictable pattern. • Irregular verbs don't take a simple -d or -ed ending; they may undergo simple vowel changes <drink–drank–drunk> or change more extensively <go–went–gone> <hide–hid–hidden>. — Also termed strong verb. Cf. regular verb. See pp. 529–31.

light verb. A verb with relatively little semantic content in a given context (e.g., take in the phrasal verb take up or make in the phrasal verb make love).

linking verb. A verb that connects a subject to the complement. • For example, in dinner smells good, smells links the subject with the adjective describing it. Among the common linking verbs are be-verbs, appear <She appeared confident>, become <They became incensed>, feel <It feels goofy>, go <The milk went sour>, grow <Some of them grew impatient>, prove <It proved impossible>, remain <They remained steadfast>, seem <He seemed happy>, smell <It smells rancid>, taste <It tastes bitter>, wax <She waxed eloquent>. — Also termed connecting verb; copula; copular verb; copulative verb; equational verb.

main verb. The most important verb in a sentence, the one that is necessary to make the sentence complete. • Though sometimes combined with subordinate verbs, the main verb expresses the key idea. It is combined with an auxiliary verb to indicate mood, tense, or voice. — Also termed principal verb. See also progressive aspect under ASPECT.

modal verb. An auxiliary verb that conveys the mood or mode of the action expressed in the main verb. • Modal verbs are typically used to express possibility, intention, obligation, or necessity <1 can do that> <1 would have done that, if you had told me to do it>. — Also termed modal auxiliary.

monotransitive verb. A verb that takes only one object in a construction, as in the mountainers reached the summit. Cf. ditransitive verb.

nonfinite verb. A verb form that has no tense, person, or singular or plural form, and is not limited by inflection. • Nonfinite verbs are never the main verb in a clause. They are infinitives <Do you want to buy a new couch?>, bare infinitives <Should we run today?>, and present and past participles <The water is running> <The program has ended>. All verbs except auxiliaries have nonfinite forms.

phrasal verb. 1. A verb-adverb or verb–particle combo that functions as a verb <put up with> <stand for>. 2. An idiomatic transitive verb phrase consisting of a verb and a particle (and distinguished, in this sense, from verb plus a preposition [which may be intransitive], such as make out or show up). See p. 694.

primary verb. The first verb in a sentence, and the only verb that is affected by the subject. The primary verb can be a main verb (e.g., drive, run, think) or an auxiliary verb (e.g., be, have, do).

principal verb. See main verb.

pro-verb. A verb used to stand in for a previously stated predicate; specif., a word or phrase that substitutes for a verb or predicate to avoid repetition when referring to things or details already mentioned. • Verbs that take a bare infinitive, such as be, have, do, and most of the auxiliary verbs can function as pro-verbs. The first predicate may be the main verb in a complex sentence (e.g., in Behave as I do, the pro-verb do in the dependent clause stands in for the main verb behave); the first predicate in a compound sentence (e.g., in He won't tell you, but I will, the pro-verb will stands for the predicate of the first clause, will tell you); or the predicate from a previous sentence (e.g., in the exchange Have you washed the car yet? Yes, I did, the pro-verb did stands in for the predicate of the first sentence, have washed the car). Further examples:

- Why can't he do it? — He can [do it], but he won't [do it] for free.
- I've finished my homework, and so have my friends [finished their homework].
- Inga avoided looking at it, and so did we [avoid looking at it].
- Who's been borrowing my clothes without asking? — Mike has [been borrowing them]. (Alternatively, Mike has been or Mike's been doing it would mean the same thing as Mike has.)

regular verb. A verb whose past tense and past participle are formed predictably according to a rule, such as by appending -ed, -d, or -t. — Also termed weak verb. Cf. irregular verb.

strong verb. A verb that is inflected (1) by internal vowel change, but not by affixation, (2) by no change at all, or (3) by radically changing in the past-tense and past-participial forms, which are not predictable
from the root. • For example, the root verbs *begin* and *drink* might suggest that strong verbs with an *i* take an *a* in the past tense and an *a* in the participle (e.g., *sing–sang–sung*, *stink–stank–stunk*). But the pattern doesn’t apply universally (e.g., *bring–brought–brought*). Some strong verbs do not change at all (e.g., *cast–cast–cast*). And a few verbs, such as *be* and *go*, change radically (i.e., *be–was–been, go–went–gone*). Only about 165 verbs currently used in English are strong verbs.

Some would say that the preceding paragraph is a discourse on irregular verbs, and that strong verbs are instead a subset of irregular verbs. That distinction goes back to the German philologist and folklorist Jakob Grimm (1785–1863), who coined the terms *stark* (“strong”) and *schwach* (“weak”). Following Grimm’s definitions to the letter, linguists who favor a third classification restrict the strong label to verbs whose vowels change in declension (e.g., *swim–swam–swum*) and exclude the ones that don’t change their form (e.g., *quit–quit–quit*) or that take a *-t* rather than an *-ed* ending (e.g., *sleep–slept–slept*). But the distinction is too fine (“inconvenient,” the OED put it) for most grammarians, who continue to accept the approach of W2 and use strong and irregular as synonyms. To them the idea of a “weak irregular verb” is fallacious.

**transitive verb**. A verb that requires an object to express a complete thought; the verb indicating what action the subject exerts on the object.

**weak verb**. See regular verb.

**verbal**. n. 1. A nonfinite verb (e.g., a gerund, infinitive, present participle, or past participle)—so called because it does not carry a tense marker or signal person, number, or mood, and may never appear as the sole item in a verb phrase. • As a nonfinite verb, a verbal makes no assertion. 2. In some grammatical systems, a word or phrase that occupies a position typically occupied by a verb. — Also termed *verbid*.

**verbalist**. Someone who coins, criticizes, or otherwise deals with words. — Also termed *verbian*.

**verbalism** /var-ˈbәl-ɪz-əm/. adv. In the very same words; word for word. — *verbilim*, adj.

**verbiage** /var-ˈbi-ә-aj/. Words that have little or no content and are therefore considered unnecessary; superfluous wording. — Often misspelled and mispronounced *verbage*.

**verbicide.** 1. The killing of a word; esp., the deliberate depreciation or distortion of a word’s meaning or sense. 2. Someone who kills a word, esp. by deliberately distorting its meaning. — *verbicidal*, adj.

**verbiculate**. The coinage and promotion of new words.

**verbid**. See *verbal*.

**verbify** /var-ˈbә-fә-ɪ/-fɪ/, vb. To make (another part of speech) into a verb; to press into service as a verb.

**verbigerate** /ver-ˈbi-gәr-әt/, vb. To repeat words or phrases involuntarily and uncontrollably. See *palilalia*. — *verbigeration*, n.

**verbivore** /ver-ˈbi-vәr/, n. Someone who devours words; a relisher of words.

**verbomania** /var-ˈboh-ә-nee-ә-ә/. A passion or mania for or obsession with words, sometimes leading to abnormal talkativeness or a psychotic flow of speech. — *verbomanic*, n. — *verbomanical* /ver-ˈboh-mә-nә-ɪ-kәl/, adj.

**verbose**, adj. Using or containing too many words; wearisomely or intolerably wordy. — *verbosity*, n.

**verb phrase**. See *phrase*.

**vernacular**. 1. The language or dialect native to a particular region or country. 2. An individual’s native language. — *vernacular*, vb.

**verse**. 1. In poetry, a single metrical line consisting of a number of feet, according to a definite scheme. 2. A specified type of metrical or nearly metrical composition, as distinguished by type <blank verse> <free verse>. 3. Any metrical composition, as distinguished from prose. 4. In prose, a succession of words constituting a short division of text, as in the Bible.

**vocal** /vo-ˈkәl/. 1. A word or phrase, esp. when regarded merely for its sound. 2. A vocal sound, as of a musical note.

**vocabulary**. 1. The aggregate of words used in a work, in the works of a particular author, or in some other collection. 2. The body of words known to an individual speaker of a language, or used in a language. 3. A portion of a language’s body of words, used for particular purposes <business vocabulary>. 4. An alphabetical listing of words, as for a dictionary.

**vocative**, adj. Of, relating to, or involving the act of calling or addressing directly; esp., in some synthetic languages, of, relating to, or involving the form and syntactic relation of a noun, pronoun, or adjective used as for, or with the name of the person addressed. — *vocative*, n.

**voice**. The quality by which a transitive verb denotes an action performed either by the subject (active voice) or on the subject of the clause (passive voice). • The test is whether the subject performs or receives the action of the verb. Cf. *aspect*; *mood*; *tense*. — *active voice*. The voice that shows that the sentence’s subject is the actor. • For example, *Jack drives an old car* is in active voice because *Jack* is both the subject and the actor. Cf. *passive voice*.

**passive voice**. See *passive voice*.

**truncated passive voice**. Passive voice that does not retain the prepositional phrase of agency <The car was driven (omitting *by Jack*)>.

**voiced**, adj. (Of a spoken sound) produced with resonance in the vocal cords, such as *b, d, g, v, or z*. — Also termed *sonant*.

**voiceless**. See *unvoiced*.

**volubility** /vo-lә-ˈbi-lә-tәt/. adj. Of, relating to, or involving a lack of culture on the part of its user. — *volubility*, n.

**vowel**. 1. A speech sound produced without blocking the breath channel. 2. A letter that represents such a sound. • Five letters—*a, e, i, o, and u*—are normally classified as vowels, but these are used to represent a multitude of sounds. Diphthongs, such as *au, oo, and ow*, also represent vowel sounds. The letter *y* behaves as a vowel when it takes on the sound of *i* or *e*. Cf. *consonant*; *semivowel*.

**vowel sound**. A speech sound produced without blocking the breath channel.

**vulgarity**. 1. Lack of refinement in conduct or speech; coarseness. 2. Something (usu. an act or expression) that is offensive or obscene; profanity. — *vulgar*, adj.

**weak verb**. See *regular verb* under VERB.

**weasel word**. An equivocal word that diminishes the force or meaning of a concept being expressed; esp., an intensive such as *clearly* or *obviously*., which, while intended to strengthen a statement, actually has the effect of weakening it by making its content more questionable. See pp. 955–56.

**Wellerism**. A punning simile in which words are humorously attributed to
someone or something.

- The name derives from the fictional character Sam Weller, Mr. Pickwick's witty servant in Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–1837). See Tom Swift'y.

  - “We'll have to rehearse that,” said the undertaker as the coffin fell out of the car.
  - “It all comes back to me now,” said the captain as he spat into the wind.
  - “That's the spirit,” said the medium, as the table began to rise.
  - “We are not what we seem,” as the needle said to the thread.

**whiz deletion.** The reduction of a relative clause by omitting a relative pronoun plus a be-verb. Example: *My brother, a professional flutist and flute teacher, frequently performs in Asia.*

- The phrase *who is* (hence “whiz”) has been elided after *My brother.*


**word.** A minimum free linguistic form, consisting of one or more morphemes; a human vocal habit that has, or may have, the effect of evoking some idea in someone else's mind.

- If the definition seems a little opaque, take comfort in the observation of Richard Grant White (1822–1885): “What is a word? Everyone knows. The most ignorant child, if it can speak, needs no definition of word.”

  More than a century later, the noted British linguist Randolph Quirk (1920–) expressed a similar idea: “Words come to us so naturally that it takes a serious effort of imagination to realize what miraculous devices they are. Like so many other things that are basic and elemental in our lives, we take them for granted, and we are apt to be surprised to find how hard it is to say exactly what a word is.”

  - Cf. clause; phrase.

  - **compound word.** A word that is composed of two or more other words (<doorknob> or a word plus an affix <biodiversity>). See compound.

  - **function word.** A word whose main role is to assist in the structure of a sentence.*

  - **pointing word.** A word that points at something or someone either because it has a demonstrative quality (<this>, <that>, <these>, <or those>) or because it is a pronoun that requires an antecedent. — Also termed *deictic term.* See antecedent.

**portmanteau word.** See blend.

**word-blindness.** See alexia.

**word class.** See part of speech.

**word formation.** See morphology.

**word-hoard.** See word-stock.

**wordmonger.** Someone who deals with words enthusiastically but discreditably, as by showing extreme pedantry or by propagandizing through slick quibbling or dishonest imputations.

- Cf. phrasemonger.

**word-order.** The sequence in which words can or typically do appear in a sentence.

- Because English is an analytic language, word-order is more important to English grammar than the other basic grammatical devices: inflection and function words.

**wordplay.** An instance of verbal wit; a jocular use of language.

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1Richard Grant White, *Words and Their Uses, Past and Present* 199 (1870).


**word-stock.** 1. The vocabulary possessed by an individual, whether copious or exiguous. 2. The vocabulary of a given language, however vast. — Also termed *word-hoard.*

**yes–no question.** A question that calls for an answer in the simple affirmative or negative.

**zero.** The absence of an overt change in form where one might be expected or implied.

**zero article.** See article.

**zero form.** An unchanged form of a word or an unexpressed part of a construction.

- Grammarians sometimes use zero forms to account for exceptions to rules. For example, if the rule is that all English nouns have plurals by adding some variety of the plural ending to the proper base, then we must recognize a zero ending for words that don't change their form from the singular when used in a plural sense, such as *trot* (<Many trout were in the stream>).

- If the rule is that all relative clauses are introduced by relative pronouns, then a zero relative appears in a sentence when the pronoun is elided (<The putter you used needs a new grip>.

**zeugma.** /zy̞gˈma/. 1. Grammar. A grammatical construction in which a word applies to two things but matches only one of them in number, gender, or some idiomatic quality <Either you or I am wrong> <waging war and peace>. Cf. antanaclasis. 2. Rhetoric. The use of a word in the same grammatical relation to two nearby words, one having a metaphorical sense and the other a literal sense <I lost my wallet and my temper>. Cf. syllepsis. — **zeugmatic, adj.** See p. 982.

**zombie noun.** See noun.
What follows is a chronological list of more than 500 books making up the corpus of literature on English usage. Some are dictionaries of usage; others are discursive treatments of the subject; still others have usage glossaries within them. Even though some of the books have gone through multiple editions, only the date of each one’s first appearance is given. (The one exception is H.W. Fowler’s *Modern English Usage.*) For those even vaguely familiar with the corpus, it’s instructive to see the books arranged chronologically.

Omitted from the list are histories of the English language, pure grammar texts and rhetorics, and the general run of books about writing well—the most helpful of which appear in the Select Bibliography (pp. 1049–51).

### A TIMELINE OF BOOKS ON USAGE

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<td>Girard, Gabriel</td>
<td><em>A New Guide to Eloquence; Being a Treatise of the Proper Distinctions to Be Observed Between Words Reckoned Synonymous.</em> London: James Pritchard.</td>
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<td>1786</td>
<td>Tooke, John Horne</td>
<td><em>Epea Pterenta, or the Diversions of Parley.</em> London: J. Johnson.</td>
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<td>1798</td>
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<td><em>A Letter to the Governors, Instructors and Trustees of the Universities and Other Seminaries of Learning, in the United States, on the Errors of English Grammar.</em> N.Y.: George F. Hopkins.</td>
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<td>1842</td>
<td>Hildreth, Ezekiel</td>
<td><em>Logopolis, or, City of Words: Containing a Development of the Science, Grammar, Syntax, Logic and Rhetoric of the English Language.</em> Pittsburgh: A. Jaynes.</td>
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<td>1852</td>
<td>Gwynne, Parry</td>
<td><em>A Word to the Wise; Or, Hints on the Current Improperities of Expression in Writing and Speaking.</em> London: Grant &amp; Griffith.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>Anon.</td>
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